Mind Games

by capriciouslouis

Summary

Harry Styles was just a normal teenage boy, a normal teenage boy who had a happy life and was quite content to live it the way nature had intended: completely normally, with no weird happenings or crazy adventures. Yet some things, it would seem, are destined to be, and it would appear that Harry’s fate was to be abducted by insane strangers intent on experimenting on him, and their four other hand-picked victims. Harry sometimes feels so alone, even when his best friends are only a few metres away - and he can’t seem to help but be afraid, because there are so very few things left in his life for him to control…
Chapter 1

Harry Styles awoke to a migraine that felt like his head had been run over by a bus, a mouth that tasted like sand and a steady, dull ache in his shoulders that continued right through his arms – unsurprising, really, seeing as they were chained to the wall above his head.

It took him three pathetic attempts to swallow, his brittle throat paining him with every gulp as he shifted awkwardly around, trying to understand what had happened. Chains, of all things? Chains? He didn’t even know you could get chains any more. Yet there he was, sat on a lumpy ledge of rock with his back pressed harshly against a stone wall, with horrible angles of uneven stone poking into his skin that he couldn’t seem to get away from. The whole room was dimly lit, shadows lurking in the corners, and he wasted several precious seconds struggling, as if by sheer defiance he could break free of his bonds and save his screaming arms from the monotonous throbbing that pulsed through them second by second.

His stomach rumbled with hunger pangs so fierce that he was almost afraid his stomach would rip open and spill its contents over the dirty floor – if there was anything left to spill. Groaning, Harry clumsily shook his head to toss his dark brown curls out of his green eyes, and rattled the chains that held him with a resigned misery.

He was confused and in pain, and terrified. A low, embarrassing whine slipped through his teeth before he could stop it, and Harry shook himself as if he could shake off the aches and the bruises, and the awful headache that wouldn’t leave him alone. Suffocating darkness pressed in on him from every direction, and he closed his eyes quickly, trying to ignore it. He wasn’t afraid of the dark, but being alone in a strange place, tied up and in a darkened room with no idea of how you had got there – that was enough to unsettle anyone.

It was all so confusing that his head was spinning. Gritting his teeth, Harry swallowed painfully once again and tried to focus. How had he come from walking down the street on a warm evening in his quiet hometown of Holmes Chapel, to being trapped in a strange room? Sick with hunger, he sniffed hard, not wanting to be reduced to tears but frightened enough that he might give in and start crying. Perhaps it was shameful for an eighteen year old boy to be so intimidated by shadows and silence, but not every eighteen year old boy was abducted – if that was what had happened – so he hoped he’d be excused for the slip. Fighting the degrading tears, Harry bit his lip hard and rammed his shoulder-blade into a particularly sharp piece of stone, the pain making him gasp. It was a good distraction, and it helped him to ignore the threatening hysteria he could feel welling up in his chest. Crying would be like admitting that he was scared, and if there was one thing Harry valued, it was his pride; he would never let anybody see that he was frightened, and he especially wouldn’t give that vindictive pleasure to his captors, whoever they might be.

The next thing he thought of was whether he was injured, because other than the aches and pains, his splitting headache and a few bruises, he was pretty sure he was okay. Harry did a quick inventory of his various body parts, twitching his fingers, wriggling his toes, bending his knees – then he shuffled forwards as far as the chains would allow and stood up. A rushing waterfall of pins and needles shot through his legs, and he yelped and almost fell over as his thick, sleepy limbs reluctantly awoke, needling him viciously as a punishment for staying in one stiff position for so long. Not that he had any idea how long he had been there. Sitting down again, he kicked his legs to loosen them up and then started staring blankly at the opposite wall, tracing the shapes of the rocks with his eyes and squinting through the darkness.

After a while, Harry started wondering blankly what would kill him first: boredom or starvation.
This pessimistic thought had only just occurred to him when a gentle cough made him flinch, and he
gasped in shock and cringed against the wall as if that soft noise might attack him. His head jerked
towards the source of the sound – and to his shock, a pair of wide, interested, but wary dark blue
eyes were staring back at him.

“Hello,” the owner of those eyes said.

He was a boy who looked a few years older than Harry, although not as tall – there was an awful lot
of Harry to go around; he was very long and stretched, whereas this stranger was more lithe and
 compact. By the look of his un-brushed, feathery brown hair, the dark circles underneath his big
eyes, the unnatural way his cheekbones stuck out, his dirty, crumpled clothes, and the mess of
painful sores on the wrists that, like Harry’s, were chained to the wall above his head, he’d been
there for a fair bit longer. Harry felt his cheeks start burning at the thought that this stranger had seen
him whimpering like a small child, and he ducked his head in humiliation before he started
wondering how the other boy’s voice was not as dry and cracked as his own was, and how, if he had
been there for so much longer, the rumblings of his stomach weren’t louder than small earthquakes.
In response to the thought, Harry’s own stomach gurgled rebelliously, and he clenched the muscles
of his abdomen to try and shut it up.

It took him a few seconds of swallowing before he managed a croaky “Hi” in return. Harry coughed
weakly a couple of times to try and clear his throat, watched sympathetically by the stranger who had
just spoken so clearly and without effort.

“I’m Louis,” the boy told him without waiting to be asked.

“I’m Harry. Harry Styles.”

“Pleased to meet you, Harry Styles. I’d shake your hand, but…” Louis smiled ruefully up at his
bound hands, one of which was bandaged, and waggled his fingers in a small wave, his chains
clinking.

“I don’t understand,” Harry forced out, “where are we?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I’ve been here for about three days now; please excuse me if I don’t
shut up at any point in the foreseeable future. I like to talk, and I’ve had pretty much no human
interaction in all that time apart from the thugs who come in and feed me every so often, and they
aren’t really up for a chat. I might talk your ear off; just a warning.”

Stunned by the amount of words that Louis could get out in such a short amount of time stunned
Harry, leaving him blinking as he struggled to process them. “I don’t…what thugs? I don’t
understand what’s happening! Why are we tied up?”

“Let’s start from the beginning, and I’ll tell you what I know – which isn’t much, admittedly, but
let’s compare notes.” Louis licked his lips. “How did they get you?”

“What –” It took Harry a few seconds to work out what Louis meant. Forcing his mind back through
the last few hours of his hazy memory, he concentrated very hard, and eventually worked out pretty
much what had happened. “I was tying my shoelace,” he said quietly, “and some moron came up to
me and bopped me on the head.”

Louis chuckled and then quickly straightened his expression. “Sorry,” he apologized, “I’m just
admiring your vocabulary. ’Bopped’. I’ll have to use that sometime.” He smiled wryly, and then
continued, “I was just casually walking down the street when somebody sneaked up on me and got
me from behind. All credit to them; I didn’t see – or hear – it coming. They just punched me in the
head, knocked me out cold, and I woke up…wherever we are.”

“So…we’ve been abducted? But why?”

“I don’t want to scare you,” Louis said gently, “but…I think they’re experimenting on us.”

“What? That’s ridiculous!”

“It’s the only conclusion I can think of. They’re pumping us up to the eyeballs with experimental drugs.”

“Are you one of those conspiracy theorists? This sounds like something out of a bad science fiction movie. Do you have any proof, or was that just the first idea you could think of?”

“Move your arm,” Louis told him.

Harry frowned, jerking his right shoulder obediently to jar his arm – and then he felt an uncomfortable tugging sensation in the back of his hand. Looking up, he spotted a needle poking into the skin, connected to a clear plastic tube taped to his arm that trailed all the way down and was looped around a hook in the floor, where it disappeared into the stonework, presumably attached to some kind of medical equipment somewhere.

“Every few hours,” said Louis grimly, “they come in and inject something into the tubes. I’ve got one as well.”

The thought that someone might be using him as a human guinea-pig made Harry feel sick. “No,” he insisted, “it can’t be. They can’t experiment on us! Are you out of your mind? It’s illegal! I bet we’re sick or something, that’s what it is. It’s…I don’t know, IV fluid, or something.”

Louis tutted sympathetically. “Since when has IV fluid been luminous purple?”

Swallowing, Harry spared another glance to the tube, and saw that the liquid inside it was indeed a bright, faintly glowing lilac colour.

“I don’t know what’s going on here,” Louis muttered, “but it isn’t good. Besides, they keep taking me out for health checks, looking at my blood pressure and all that. They’re monitoring our life signs, taking readings…it makes sense, in a twisted way. We’re part of some massive illegal drug-testing programme.”

“I know what’s happened!” Harry interrupted. “We’re mental!”

Louis raised an eyebrow.

“I had a bunch of exams and stuff going on; I was really anxious all the time,” Harry rambled on desperately, “my mind must have snapped from the stress. I’m hallucinating.”

“Well you might be crazy, but I’m not mad.” Louis paused, and grinned. “Well, I am, but not in that way. Just in a random, cool kind of way.”

“You’re probably not real!” Harry announced dramatically, “I’m dreaming you up inside my head!”

“Well, in that case, congratulations on your vivid imagination, because you’ve convinced that I’m real, too,” Louis said dryly. “I know it’s hard to accept, but this is really happening.”

“How do you know?”
“Because I punched someone, and my hand didn’t seem to like it,” Louis muttered.

“Why did you hit him?”

“It was the first time he tried sticking a needle in me, and I wasn’t having any of it. I whacked him right in the nose.”

“How hard?”

Louis spared a glance for his gauze-wrapped right hand and his mouth quirked upwards in a grim smile. “Very.”

“Good,” Harry said darkly.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching each other. Harry was reluctant to admit that Louis was a hallucination, or that he was mad, but he was ten times as reluctant to agree to the insane idea that they were part of some kind of freaky experiment to test a weird, glowing purple drug. Wary in case Louis suddenly went mad and started trying to attack him, Harry watched him cautiously out of the corner of his eye.

“It must be a windup,” he decided instantly. “It’s, like…one of those daft TV show pranks, or something. Are you a TV presenter?”

“Hardly. Besides, I think this is way beyond the parameters of a reality-TV windup. Even if they had the budget, they’d never be allowed to whack people over the head and chain them to a wall; they’d be sued before they could blink.” Louis gave him a sympathetic look; if they had been any closer, Harry knew that he would be patting him on the back for reassurance. “You’re grasping at straws, Harry.”

“Better than than to say that we’re being stabbed with needles and turned into mutants.”

“Mutants.” Louis sniffed dismissively.

“Well, what else would you call us? If they are filling us with chemicals, anything could happen.”

“This may seem like a sci-fi movie, Harry, but I really doubt that. Now I see why you won’t believe me. You’ve stolen all your theories from comic books and bad movies. I’m not talking clichéd-mutations kind of drugs, I mean, like…cancer drugs, or something.”

“If it was anti-cancer drugs, I wouldn’t mind so much. If I knew it was a worthwhile cause…I’d do it. They wouldn’t have to punch me. It would have been nice if they’d asked.”

“Well, who knows what it is? Anything that glows purple is unhealthy in my book.”

Harry sighed and rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes.

It was all happening far too quickly. Harry was confused, his head spinning. He didn’t want to accept that Louis was mad – he seemed perfectly sane – yet the idea that his ludicrous story might be right was far worse. Experimental drugs that were going to do god knows what to his body? The idea was horrific. Yet…it all seemed completely far-fetched. Harry knew he couldn’t have thought of a story like that, so it couldn’t have been him who was mad, and if Louis could have thought of a story like that on the spot, then all credit to him – the tale, however unlikely, coincided perfectly with the facts which had been proved to Harry. He would expect to have seen outward signs that there was something weird going on in Louis’ brain, but Louis was not only perfectly calm and reasonable, but had also accepted that Harry would not believe his story and had attempted to bring
him round to the idea by introducing the facts to him one at a time – not something that a delusional man would have thought of.

Louis had not spoken for a few minutes, leaving Harry to muse quietly for a while. He appreciated the lack of noise; his head was hurting so much that it felt like it might explode and spatter his brains all over the stone walls. He wondered if it was a side-effect of the glowing purple liquid that was steadily trickling into his bloodstream.

“You look like you’ve been stabbed,” Louis said quietly.

“My head is killing me, and it feels like I haven’t eaten for a week,” Harry snapped. He took a slow, deep breath. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I think you have reason to be a bit moody. They’ll be here in about ten minutes with food and fluids, by my reckoning. As for the headache, that could be something to do with being whacked over the head by some massive guy with a love of violence. I don’t think it’s the drugs, Harry.”

Relieved, Harry blew upwards, ruffling his hair. “You’re sure? I’m not going to grow an extra head or something?” When had he gotten so sarcastic? He didn’t recognise the sharp tone of his weak voice.

“Well, I haven’t grown one yet, and they’ve been filling me with Ribena for a lot longer than you,” Louis answered mildly.

The Ribena jibe made Harry roll his eyes; if Ribena was luminous, then yes, it was definitely Ribena.

“Where are you from?” asked Harry.

“Why do you want to know?”

“If we’re going to end up as freaks of society together, we might as well be friends. I’m just finding out a bit about your background, I guess. Besides, it’s better than sitting here in silence.”

“I suppose you’re right…I’m from Doncaster. You?”

“Holmes Chapel.”

Louis made a small noise in the back of his throat. “Weird place to go looking for someone to kidnap, that. It’s not a very big place, is it? What are the chances…?”

“Yeah, it’s weird…I always wanted excitement, but this wasn’t quite what I had in mind.”

“Not the first thing you think of, is it? Being attacked and filled with drugs…” Louis tutted. “Talk about cheesy.”

“People would pay good money to watch a movie about this, you know.”

“If we ever get out of here, we’ll sell our life story to the papers,” Louis said dryly. “We’ll be billionaires.”

“I won’t ask you to shake on it.” Harry grinned and rolled his eyes. “But yeah, okay. You’ve got yourself a deal.”
As Louis had predicted, only a short time passed before Harry met one of their captors for the first time. They had both been slumped desolately against the wall, Harry with his eyes closed in defeat, Louis wallowing in his own boredom – when suddenly there was a loud groan of rusty hinges, and a door Harry hadn’t been able to see opened, spilling pale, wan light into the room. Squinting at a vague, dark silhouette in the doorway, he glared at the stranger and wished their head would explode, unlikely as it was.

Without saying a word, the man walked over to Harry, a grey woollen hat pulled down to his eyebrows and clad head to foot in dark, murky colours, and appraised him for a few seconds. Then, he unfastened the ties from Harry’s arms and forced him to his feet. Twisting in panic, Harry tried to drag himself away, but he was being roughly held in a grip too tight for him to manoeuvre.

“It’s okay!” Louis said quickly. “Harry, it’s okay! They’re just going to check you over –”

Before Louis could get any more words out, Harry was wrenched viciously towards the door, and he yelped as the man hauled him across the room without so much as a glance at his agonized expression. Unceremoniously bundled down a labyrinth of long corridors, Harry ended up being forced down onto a stool in a small, drab little grey room while the stranger uninterestedly took several medical readings, checking his blood pressure, heart-rate and temperature. Then, he started physically examining Harry’s body, lightly feeling his arms and legs with a disregard that was almost insulting, his expression apathetic as if he was performing some kind of monotonous chore. Long fingers insensitively probing his abdomen made Harry flinch in discomfort, and, outraged, he crossly swatted the insensitive hand away. Ignoring the protest, the man continued pressing on Harry’s stomach, until Harry furiously lashed out and kicked him on the shin, so hard that he hurt himself at the same time, and had to grit his teeth against the throbbing. His only gratification was a short hiss; after that one small lapse, the stranger slapped him harshly across the face, jerking his head to the side and leaving a ghostly white handprint on Harry’s cheek as the rest of his face flamed bright red with humiliation and anger. After that, he thought better of the idea, and merely expressed his disgust with a steady commentary of disgusting insults and foul words that taxed his imagination to the limit. If the stranger was impressed by Harry’s extensive vocabulary, he did not show it.

After the degrading prodding was over and done with, Harry found blood samples being taken, his blood pressure measured, and various other medical procedures. He was weighed, his height was recorded, and he was x-rayed for reasons that mystified him. Then, he was politely given a pencil and a neat little questionnaire to fill in that made enquiries about his age, background, medical history and a record of all past sexual activity. Harry flushed from his ears downwards, and snapped the pencil in half in a display of mindless defiance that was all he could think of to do under the circumstances, and he got an odd sense of satisfaction from it. Expressionless, the man patiently replaced the broken pencil, and Harry broke that one as well. They repeated the process several times, until, losing his temper, the aggressor viciously whacked Harry over the head with the flat of his hand so that his vision blurred and there was a fierce ringing in his ears. After that, Harry sulkily filled out the questionnaire in silence, scowling all the while. He briefly considered making it all up, but when it occurred to him that his very mild peanut allergy could possibly have an effect on the drugs they were giving him, he grumpily wrote the correct information in each box.

Once he’d completed the paper, he was given a bland, boring meal on a tray that had allocated each of the food groups into a neat square, and he was so hungry that he ate it all, forgetting to roll his eyes at the protein, fibre, carbohydrates and other recommended features of a balanced diet that he had been presented with. The chef obviously religiously followed the national nutritional guidelines.
He was also presented with two large glasses of water, which he drank eagerly. After that, he was shoved into a toilet cubicle. Eventually, he came sullenly back out and complained that he had a headache, and for his trouble was given a plastic cup filled with pills, and he slammed them back like they were some kind of energy drink. He was led back to the darkened room by way of a corridor completely different from the first, and the change confused him; he’d been planning to memorize the route so he would know vaguely where he was going. Presumably the change was intentional, to prevent him from doing just that.

Understandably, Harry wasn’t best keen on the idea of being restrained again, so he fought violently as the chains were once again moved towards his wrists. He had the advantage of surprise, but not the experience, strength or momentum to make much of a difference; he raked desperately at the hands and face of the man who held him, kicked as hard as he could, and squirmed and wrestled all the while, yelling his head off in protest, but all he got was another stunning blow as a reward, and then the man calmly finished adjusting his chains but making them slightly tighter than before – a punishment for his rebellion. Within seconds, Harry’s arms were shrieking in protest at the slight extra stretch where his hands were fastened to the wall just half an inch higher; he had to stand up slightly so that he could reach, and that of course triggered a dull pain in his legs after a few moments of standing so awkwardly.

Next, the man reached for Louis, releasing him from his bonds, and Harry heard a sigh of relief as Louis lowered his arms and stretched several times, rejoicing in the freedom of movement. A pang of envy twisted Harry’s stomach as he watched. Concernedly casting a glance at the younger boy, Louis bit his lip anxiously as he meekly allowed himself to be guided from the room with a hand at his back to push him forwards. The door slammed closed, keys chinked in the lock, and then everything was still, and Harry was alone.

He missed the sound of breathing a few metres away, the life force that Louis excluded, the reassurance of a nearby face, another tormented human suffering by his side. Perhaps he was exaggerating, but he felt he had a right to be aggrieved. Already he was lonely, pining for this stranger he barely knew; his light in the darkness, almost. It was barely comprehensible to him how Louis could have survived on his own with nobody to speak to, and no sound other than ones that he himself was making. Harry thought that, in that position, he would have gone crazy. Already there was a twinge of unease flaring in his stomach, and if he had been able to reach his hands, he would have been biting his nails.

His face was burning on the left side from the aftermath of the slap, and although the pills were starting to kick in, his headache was still at the front of his mind, screaming for his attention despite how fiercely determined he was to ignore it. A question swam into his head, making him bite his lip in thought: why hadn’t Louis fought? Unless he was afraid to, in case he got a punch out of it – although he didn’t seem like the easily frightened type, and from his injured hand, he’d clearly struck a blow before. Had he thought better of it? Harry resolved to ask him once he came back.

Curiosity was an emotion Harry was very familiar with; he liked to understand things, and mysteries, no matter how inconsequential, irritated him like an unscratched itch until he had solved them. Trying to shift into a position that would be less uncomfortable for his aching arms, he thought very hard about the situation. Louis’ wrists were raw and shiny, chafed by the shackles that held him up, which would indicate that he had been trying to escape from them. Such a rebellion was not the mark of a coward. Yet Louis had thus far made no open attempt at mutiny; on the contrary, he had been complacent, obedient, and unhesitatingly done as was expected of him. That was an unexplained occurrence that he wanted to understand, and he wouldn’t rest until he had wrapped his head around it.

Next, he started considering how he might escape. If he and Louis were both freed simultaneously,
they might have a chance to overpower their jailer – Louis was skinny and wiry, but he had an impressive pair of biceps on him, and Harry wasn’t exactly a lightweight; he was confident he could hold his own in a fight – but clearly that eventuality had been taken into consideration. If it were possible to find a weapon to fight with, then that would be another opportunity, but he hadn’t even been given proper cutlery to eat his nutritionally-approved meal with; he doubted that even a trained assassin could have done much damage with a plastic fork, and a trained assassin he was not. He might be able to take his opponent by surprise and tackle him, but in the unlikely event that he could knock a muscled, fifteen-stone man unconscious and restrain him, he doubted that the man was working alone. Harry didn’t fancy running into a bunch of angry guys who wanted to knock the living daylights out of him for attacking their friend, and it was inevitable that he would, if he tried to escape straight away. Truthfully, he hadn’t the faintest idea where he was going, and he doubted that Louis had a much better clue.

It felt wrong to not even make an attempt to get away, but what else could he do? He needed to have a better idea of the routine, the layout of the place, and the sort of people he was dealing with before he even considered it – and, of course, when he thought of something, he would have to fill Louis in. Leaving him behind wasn’t even an option.

Unless he was an informant, intent on discovering Harry’s take on the situation and reporting to his bosses right that second.

In the same moment as he came up with the thought, Harry dismissed it. It made no sense for Louis to be a spy; he had arrived first, for starters, and he doubted that any informant, no matter how devoted, would consent to dangling by the wrists from a stone wall for three days in order to get realistic-looking blisters before he attempted to squeeze information from a boy who knew nothing about what was going on.

Harry looked grimly at his fettered wrists, his mouth twisting in the shadow of a wry smile. There had been a time when his arms would have been intertwined with dozens of coloured threads, beads and various other forms of bracelet, but he was pretty certain that when he escaped – he refused to let himself think ‘if’ – he would never want anything around his wrist ever again. With a frown, he tugged experimentally on the restraints, testing them, and then started throwing all of his weight against them over and over again, relentlessly trying to free himself. It would make no difference; he couldn’t break through metal, but knowing that he was at least trying to do something made him feel a little better about the situation. He battered against the cold iron links for almost twenty minutes, until his wrists started to glow bright pink, and he thought of the painful blisters on Louis’ arms and quickly stopped; he didn’t want a similar injury.

That was when he spared a glance of hatred at the plastic tube taped to his arm. The thin magenta fluid seeping steadily into the back of his hand was a violent purple colour; it was as if someone had taken Barney the dinosaur, from that old kid’s TV show, liquidised him, and then poured him into a tube and injected him into Harry’s hand. Harry’s stomach twisted angrily at the sight. What right did anybody have to drip untested and possibly dangerous drugs into his body? He was determined to get rid of it, frightened of what it could be.

Turning his head awkwardly, Harry rested his chin on his shoulder and started reaching for the clear tube with his teeth. It took him several attempts, but eventually, on his sixth try, when his neck was aching and he had been about to give up, his teeth closed carefully around the plastic. He wanted to cheer in triumph, but he couldn’t risk letting it fall from his mouth, so he allowed himself nothing more than a low hiss through his teeth and a silent yell of exultation inside his head. Gently, so that the tube wouldn’t break and spray luminous purple mush into his mouth, he steadied the grip of his teeth on it and gave it a hesitant tug. Then a harder one. He moaned quietly in disgust at the feel of the needle sliding around in his hand, and prayed that it wouldn’t snap; he wanted to pull it out, not
have half of it still poking into his skin where he couldn’t reach it. Losing his temper, Harry growled and viciously yanked at the tube, and then it flew out of his skin and he tossed it to the ground, where it fell to the dirty stonework in loose coils, like a sleeping boa constrictor, but ten times thinner.

His yelp in response was delayed; he didn’t feel the first ripple of pain until a few seconds after the needle had clattered to the floor, when a sharp twinge speared the back of his hand like he’d been stabbed with a thorn. A whining, pathetic noise fell from his open mouth and he gasped in shock, realizing that he’d made himself bleed as a splash of blood lazily started to trickle down his hand and drip lethargically down his fingers.

Clenching his fingers to make sure he hadn’t damaged anything, Harry allowed himself a grim smile. He’d defied his captors once again; even though they would soon connect the tubes and needles to him again, he’d slowed the process of whatever experiment they were doing, and that was cause enough for celebration. His fingers flexed as he enjoyed his moment of victory, and he wondered if he would have the opportunity to spit in his captor’s face as he was hooked back up to the equipment – and whether it would be worth the blow he would receive in return.

After only a few moments of thought, he decided that yes, it would.

Pleased by his ingenuity in disconnecting the drug needle, he stretched as far away from the wall as he could, tapping the spiralling lengths of tube on the ground before him with the toe of one dirty black converse sneaker. He managed to pin it to the floor and somehow drag it closer to him; when it was close enough, he stamped viciously on it for a few minutes, grinding it against the ground with a perverse satisfaction at the vandalism. Shards of plastic glistened on the floor, and he wondered if he perhaps should have saved the tubing, tried to conceal it – then perhaps he could have strangled the stranger with it. The idea was sickeningly pleasing; Harry was not a violent person, but he made exceptions for cold and merciless kidnappers.

Glancing around the room, he took in barren stone walls, dirty floors and copious amounts of cobwebs with his nose turned up in disdain. It was like a typical scene from a medieval dungeon in a period drama from TV – except it was real life, and not something staged. Unless…

Could Louis be wearing prosthetics?

He doubted that even Hollywood could have such an elaborately created set of plastic blisters, which oozed clear, sticky fluid onto the manacles and showed no sign of slipping from the skin like any silicone wound might have done. The fact that Harry had seen some of them scab over in the space of their few hours together spoke for itself: Louis wasn’t lying about his injuries, at least.

There was very little that Harry could prove him to be lying about. He was beginning to grudgingly accept Louis’ insane theory about drug testing, because everything made sense, and he was definitely being filled with some odd substance that he’d never encountered before. It was definitely real; the pain in Harry’s hand and the blood rapidly drying and cracking on his fingers could vouch for that. He winced as another stab of discomfort pulsed through his knuckles, and he kicked the wall in frustration, wishing he had something to bite so that he wouldn’t embarrass himself by groaning when Louis came back. Seeming weak was an indignity that he couldn’t bear – he was younger, but he was terrified of seeming pathetic in front of the seemingly unafraid Louis, whose blue eyes had remained fairly reasonable and calm in the face of everything, even discussing his own abduction and the likely event that they were slowly being poisoned with experimental drugs.

If Louis was indeed telling the truth – which, as far as Harry could tell, he was – then Harry had an asset far more valuable than the element of surprise, any amount of strength or any experience with fighting that he could have possessed: he had an ally.
Just then, the door flew open once more, and Louis was bundled back in by the man, who had an expression of strained endurance on his face. Louis’ smile was a little too wide, his eyes touched with a kind of manic desperation as he babbled madly at the nameless stranger, his tone so innocently irritating that Harry understood exactly why the guy looked close to ripping his own ears off.

“– I mean, I really like your hat, you know? That’s what I’m saying. It’s a cool hat, you should really tell me where you got it. I mean, it’s stylish, but it’s got this kind of simplistic edge to it. I want a hat like that. Although I probably shouldn’t get one because if I had one of those hats, I’d end up with hat hair, and you won’t give me a hairbrush so that’d just be a mess. But you should tell me anyway, I have a friend who would totally suit that hat, so yeah, I really want to know where you got it.” The words were spilling from Louis’ lips so rapidly that Harry was surprised he didn’t stumble or falter; the stream of one-sided conversation rambled on without a pause.

The man made no verbal acknowledgment that he was irritated, but he slammed Louis’ back against the stone with perhaps more force than was strictly necessary, and as he started refastening the shackles, he viciously twisted Louis’ arms above his head into an uncomfortable position before he locked the chains back together. A tiny hitch in Louis’ breathing was the only indication that he had noticed; he continued talking cheerfully.

“Hey, Harry!” he said brightly, like he’d only just noticed that Harry was there. “This is Jeff. His name isn’t really Jeff, but I asked if I could call him Jeff and he didn’t say no, so I took that as a yes! Listen, Jeff, you don’t say much, do you? Are you shy? There’s no need to be; we’re all friends here. You tied us up, we got a sort-of-tour of your base…you can talk to us. Unless you’re mute. Are you mute? I can help with that; I know this speech therapist who specializes in exactly this kind of –”

Without saying a word, the man clamped a large hand over Louis’ mouth, and stared levelly at him. He said nothing, but his dull grey eyes conveyed a clear message: shut up.

Louis fell silent.

Not-Jeff turned to Harry, and then his gaze travelled downwards and he spotted the tubing on the floor. Stepping forwards, he examined Harry’s hand, made a small noise of irritation, then knelt and picked up the battered tube. Cradling it in his arms like a baby, he headed for the door, and when it closed behind him, the room was thrown into darkness once again.

“Are you okay?” Louis asked quietly. “…Your hand is bleeding.”

“I’m fine. I ripped the needle out with my teeth, but it didn’t want to come out. I think it took half of my hand with it.”

Louis sucked in a breath sympathetically. “Ouch.”

“I’m fine,” Harry repeated, smiling painfully. He swallowed. “Enjoying yourself? You were doing an excellent job of winding him up.”

Louis sighed. “It was fun while it lasted.”

They said nothing for a moment or so.

“Did he make you fill out a questionnaire?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you lie?”
“No.”

“I did, at first, but he made me fill it out again, and in light of recent events, and our theory..well, I figured I’d best be truthful.”

The door opened, and Not-Jeff came strolling back in, a fresh tube, bag of purple fluid, and thicker needle in his hands. Roughly grabbing Harry, he jerked him forwards and jabbed the needle harshly into his still bleeding hand, making Harry hiss in pain, and then he fed the tubing down the back of Harry’s shirt, taping it to his back so that there was no way Harry could get to it. Then, he attached the fluid bag to the tube and shoved it into a little alcove underneath Harry’s chair. While these laborious tasks were carried out, Harry was by no means quiet: he subjected the stranger to as much vicious abuse as he was capable of, relentlessly pouring out insults punctuated with some of the filthiest words in the English language, and the odd rude phrase from various other languages that he had learnt over the years. Despite the loud outpouring of insults, the man ignored him and, as soon as he had finished making the amendments, he turned and started to walk away without so much as a scowl at the curly hair boy who was yelling at him.

Outraged at the lack of impact his insults were having, Harry lost his temper, and he ended up shouting at the man’s rapidly retreating back, “Go to hell, you sodding toe-sucker!”

Louis spluttered with laughter as the door closed, and, aggravated, Harry turned and scowled at him.

“Don’t laugh at me!”

“Sorry,” Louis said amusedly. “I just…” he choked. “It was just… ‘sodding toe-sucker’?”

Despite his annoyance, Harry smiled, and the noise he made was caught between a laugh and an embarrassed cough. “Well, it wasn’t one of my better insults.”

“Are you kidding? It was genius!” Louis contradicted with admiration, mentally filing it away under his list of insults to use later on. “I’ll have to quote you on that.”

Harry huffed and blew upwards, ruffling his curls away from his forehead. “I was just…irritated.”

“You’re funny when you’re annoyed. This may sound mad, but…” Louis stopped. “Never mind, forget it.”

“What?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Tell me. Please?”

Louis hesitated. “I know we don’t really know each other, but…already I feel like we’re great friends. Is that mad?”

“No, of course it isn’t.”

“You’re really brave, you know, standing up to him like that.”

“I’m not. I’m just giving him a piece of my mind. Besides, you’re winding him up as well.”

“Getting on his nerves is one thing; openly defying him in every way you can is another thing entirely. I don’t know if you’re fearless, or just an idiot – but I know I respect you for it.” Louis shook his head with a small smile. “You’re a good guy, Harry.”
Harry closed his eyes and sighed heavily, leaning against the wall – but as he tried to relax and hoped that sleep might give him a few hours’ escape, he played those words over and over in his mind, hoping that they would lull him to sleep somehow. Strangely, he found solitude in the kindness of them, and that peacefulness relaxed him like nothing else could have.

You’re a good guy, Harry.

You’re a good guy.
Chapter 3

Harry hadn’t spoken to Louis for several hours, not because he was angry with him, but because he was starving, and when Harry was hungry he became irritable and prone to fits of bad temper that caused him to snap at anyone in sight. Not wanting to risk saying something in anger that he would regret later on, he had chosen to stay silent. Beside him, Louis was staring glassy-eyed at the wall opposite them, his eyes flickering up and down without seeing anything, and it would have been almost creepy if Harry had really been paying attention. As it was, he only caught sight of Louis in his peripheral vision.

He had fallen to counting the seconds to pass the time, and something in the monotonous chore had distracted him for a while – but his hunger pangs had returned in force, and every minute or so his concentration was thrown by a distracting gurgle from his insides, which he was powerless to stop. Louis was also suffering; the quieter rumble of his stomach passed through the room occasionally, but they didn’t set Harry’s teeth on edge the way his own complaining gut did.

When a particularly loud sound from deep in the pit of his abdomen caused him to lose count for the eight time, Harry growled furiously and shook himself, hard. Their meal was long overdue, and even Louis was starting to shift restlessly, not bothering to try and coax Harry out of his filthy mood, because he was busy wrestling with his own.

There was a low thump, and the familiar door opened with a creak. If Harry had been able to stand up, he would have done; instead, he jerked his head and leaned further forwards to stare at the figure in the doorway.

“It’s about time!” he said furiously.

Without responding, the first, familiar man stepped backwards over the threshold, not looking round. Facing him was another stranger, dressed from head to toe in navy, with a bushy greying ginger moustache on his upper lip that drooped limply over his mouth like a dead fox’s tail. Between them, they were supporting the body of a blond teenage boy, who was unconscious and slack-jawed, his mouth hanging open and limbs dangling loosely. He was shorter than Louis, and good-looking, and his sleeping face looked friendly and strangely innocent. Clearly he was heavier than he looked; the two men were struggling to lift him, and they breathed heavily with diamonds of sweat beading on their foreheads as they staggered across the room and started to fasten him to the wall in an identical fashion to Harry and Louis, cuffing his wrists, chaining them above his head, and propping him up against the stonework. Interested but horrified, Harry and Louis stared at him pityingly, wondering when he would wake up, where he had been snatched from, what his story was…Harry’s curiosity was barely overshadowed by his pity.

Once the blond was secured to the wall, Harry and Louis were released and frogmarched down the corridor at top speed, and steered into the same room as before, but opposite sides so that they couldn’t communicate. Another dull, unbelievably balanced meal was served, and Harry wolfed it down so quickly that he almost choked on it, closely followed by Louis. He wasn’t sure which of them was hungrier, but he had a very large mouth, as he would freely admit, and so he managed to eat quicker.

As they ate, Harry tried to communicate with Louis across the room, but there was a limit to how much you could convey by raising your eyebrows and frowning, so much of the meaning of their conversation was lost. Still, there was something reassuring at the attempt to speak to each other, and it seemed to lessen the prickling on the back of Harry’s neck at the feel of the moustached stranger staring intently at his back.
Determined to be back in their own room when the blond boy awoke, so that they could attempt to explain things to him and so that he wouldn’t feel so terrified – an experience which Louis had already had the misfortune of going through, and hated the idea of anyone else enduring – they ate so quickly that it was surprising they didn’t choke. Impatiently rushing through the standard blood tests and quick health checks, for once, Harry was perfectly behaved without even a hint at trying to be disruptive.

Not-Jeff seemed suspicious of Harry’s sudden switch from rebellion to complacency, but his companion took no notice of his obvious unease, leading Louis back towards the darkened room and leaving Not-Jeff to escort Harry. Together, they manoeuvred the two boys into their places and once again restrained them, although thankfully Harry’s once painful chains were slackened, presumably in recompense for his good behaviour. Thankfully, the blond boy was still unconscious, slumped against the wall, his head lolling at an awkward angle with his hands pinned above his head, and Harry was relieved that he hadn’t awoken on his own. Eventually, after checking that the three of them were definitely secure, the two men calmly walked out in silence. Their lack of communication even through glances sent a chill through Harry; there was something eerie about the way the two men didn’t seem to interact with each other at all, and their stark, bland expressions were somewhat creepy. The relief as the two men left the room was so thick that Harry could almost taste it; the air filled with his and Louis’ thankful sighs.

Then, they diverted their attentions to the sleeping boy opposite them.

His motionless face was blank, so that it was hard to tell how old he was. He wore a bright red polo shirt with the collar twisted oddly, tan chinos, and dirty white Supras, which almost seemed to glow dimly in the darkness. There was something cute about the way his mouth hung so widely open, and Harry looked at the wisps of blond hair falling across his forehead with a strange, sad pity. Long eyelashes curled delicately on his flushed cheeks, and there was a small, bluish-green bruise blossoming on one cheekbone. A cheeky twist to his open mouth hinted that he was constantly on the brink of laughter, and as his chest rose and fell, Harry thought wistfully that in a place like this, there would be no reason for the boy to laugh at all. In sleep, he was unrestrained and careless, showing a vulnerable, sweet side that was rare to see in people; usually, if it was there, they hid it, even in sleep. This boy had nothing to hide. He looked strangely innocent and childlike, sleeping peacefully, and Harry hated the thought of the boy awakening to such a hostile and unfriendly place, with only two well-meaning strangers to try and console him.

“They did it to someone else,” Harry murmured sadly. “They snatched someone else off the street and tied him up in a dark room with a bunch of strangers and no explanation…how many people are they going to abduct?”

Louis made a face. “As many as it takes until they get the result they’re looking for – or until they kill one of us.”

The very thought of that was malevolent enough to make Harry shudder. He tossed his hair out of his eyes and wet his lips nervously.

“Let’s wake him up,” Louis said briskly.

Harry was appalled. “We can’t do that! Look at him. He looks so peaceful. Let him sleep for a little while. He won’t want to wake up in a place like this.”

“He has to wake up some time,” Louis pointed out, “it may as well be now. If we leave him for a few hours, his legs will have gone to sleep, and you know how that feels – it’s like rolling round in stinging nettles. The sooner we wake him up, the better.”
“But look at him!” Harry stared helplessly at the boy. “Just…just look.”

For a moment or so, Louis looked, taking in the sleepy vulnerability of the unconscious boy in front of him. Then, he opened his mouth widely, clearly acknowledging Harry’s argument and disregarding it all in the same moment, and yelled across the room obnoxiously loudly,

“Hey, you! Kid! Wake up!”

The boy stirred in his sleep and whimpered quietly, turning his head with so that the metal links of the chains clinked together. A faint frown creased his forehead and the corner of his mouth twitched downwards in a grimace.

“Louis!” Harry protested in horror. “Shut up!”

“Oh, Harry, you know me.” Louis flashed a bright grin in Harry’s direction. “Me, shut up? Even for a second? As if!” Raising his voice, he turned back to the blond. “Oi! You! Wake up and smell the coffee, sunshine!”

The boy jerked, and the back of his head crashed against the wall. A cry tore its way from his mouth and his eyes flew open as he twitched into a sitting position, trying to pull his arms down to his sides and realizing in shock that they were fastened above his head. His eyes flew open, and Harry blinked at them, captivated – blue was far too crude a word for eyes like those. Cobalt, turquoise, cerulean and sapphire swirled together in the depths of those wide, frightened irises. A weak little noise slipped from the boy’s mouth, almost pathetic in its faint, animalistic simplicity; the sound of fear.

“Where am I?” he asked desperately, and then he burst into tears.

Aghast, Louis scrabbled backwards against the wall in horror, his own blue eyes wide with shock. Tears were something he was uncomfortable with; the sight of this stranger, who was only a year or so younger than he was, crying his eyes out because of him, made him feel awfully guilty. Turning pleadingly to Harry for help, he stared in shock, and Harry sighed heavily, irritated that he would have to try and comfort the crying boy when he had told Louis not to waken him.

“Hey!” he said quickly. “Don’t. Don’t do that.”

Fearfully staring at him, the boy repeated in a terrified, high-pitched voice “Where am I?” His tone was tinged with a hint of hysteria.

Louis’ mouth twisted with regret at the reaction he’d inspired in the stranger. “Okay, mate, calm down.”

“But where the hell am I?” the boy yelped. “Why am I tied up? Who are you people? What the hell is going on?” He struggled violently, chains rattling as he fought against the restraints. Tears spurted down his face as he writhed in panic.

“Whoa!” Harry said immediately, “listen, that isn’t helping anyone. Stop it for a second, yeah?”

“What’s going on?” the boy wailed again, moisture dripping from the corners of his eyes and rolling messily down his face.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked kindly.

“Niall,” sobbed the stranger. He had a soft, friendly Irish accent; it was barely discernible, thickened by his tears, but it was there.
“Right, Niall,” continued Louis, “how about we do you a deal? You calm down, okay, and talk to us – and we’ll tell you everything we know.”

It took a few moments of swallowing before Niall took a deep breath and bravely nodded, tilting his head to dry his eyes on his shoulder.

“Okay then,” Louis said. “I’m Louis, and that charming fellow over there is Harry Styles.”

Harry gave Niall a shining example of the famous grin that had sent dozens of girls at Holmes Chapel Comprehensive School weak at the knees, and waggled his long fingers in a clumsy little wave, his chains tinkling as he moved. Taking a deep, calming breath, Niall nodded tightly, and he managed a very forced smile in return.

“How old are you?” Louis enquired.

Niall looked slightly defensive as he replied “Eighteen.”

“Hmmm,” Harry mused. “Same age as me…but you’re older, aren’t you, Lou?”

“Yeah, I’m twenty…so age can’t be that crucial…” Louis nibbled his lip thoughtfully. “Whereabouts are you from?”

For the first time, Niall stopped looking bewildered and said a little sarcastically, “Ireland.”

“Obviously,” Louis said patiently, “but where in Ireland?”

“Mullingar.”

“Never heard of it.”

Niall’s mouth twisted wryly. “Yeah, well, it’s not very well known. Not much happens in Mullingar. There’s been some debate over whether it even belongs on the map.”

“That’s interesting,” Harry commented. “Mullingar…why would they go all the way to Ireland just for the purpose of randomly snatching someone off the street?”

Blinking at him, Niall replied in surprise, “They didn’t take me from Mullingar! I was on a trip to London, with college.”

“How did they get you?” asked Louis.

“I was walking down the street,” Niall answered dreamily, staring at the ceiling, “in South London somewhere. I was eating a burger. Some guy came running up to me and asked me the time, and I looked at my watch – and boom! They stabbed a huge needle into my arm. That’s the last thing I remember.”

Louis made a thoughtful noise. “That makes a change from bashing people over the head.”

“I don’t get it,” Harry said. “First Doncaster, then Holmes Chapel, then London…it’s as if they’re just picking people randomly wherever they can find them.”

“Perhaps they are,” said Louis softly.

“Whoa, whoa, hold on a second – who’s they? I’ve answered your questions, now will you please tell me what’s happening?” Niall demanded.
Harry and Louis then took it in turns to recite every detail they knew of the confusing happenings they had found themselves involved with – and, surprisingly, Niall was far more accepting than they could have hoped. After he had swallowed the story of the drug trial with minimal scepticism, tolerated the idea that they were being experimented on with only a cursory look at the medical apparatus he was hooked up to, and resigned himself to the concept of strangers filling their blood with untested substances with very few attempts at denial, Harry was left to wonder whether the boy was gullible, stupid or just humouring them – and he came to the conclusion that if Niall truly had accepted their story, he must have been some kind of conspiracy-theory fanatic who revelled in such mad tales.

Thankfully, Niall didn’t attempt to blame them for his predicament; he was friendly and reasonable, and despite getting a little teary-eyed when he talked about his family back home in Ireland, overall he was rational and admirably calm. Clearly he was an emotional guy, and he inspired a protective kind of reaction in the other two boys, who wanted to pat him on the back and cheer him up. They resorted to comforting him in the best way they could: telling filthy, immature jokes that grew dirtier and more childish with each passing minute, until the sound of Niall’s laugh bounced off the walls, boosting all of their moods. Something about the blond’s presence had lifted their spirits, and Harry’s previous moody sulking had vanished. There was no point languishing and feeling stupidly sorry for himself – it was far more fun to have a bit of a ‘craic’, as Niall put it, with two guys he didn’t know. Somehow, being locked up with them in that way gave him an odd sense of closeness to them that he’d never had with any of his other friends. He’d never imagined that, within mere hours, he could form such a seemingly instant friendship with a pair of total strangers. It gave him a warm feeling deep in his stomach.

Despite the friendly banter, teasing, and casual conversations, the fact was that they were still bound and restrained, and when their voices wore out and turned husky, the chatter died. They ended up sat morosely watching the floor again, the smile fading from Niall’s face, replaced with a deathly silence that didn’t come naturally to him. Louis’ expression was dismal, and Harry’s face became irritable. Devoid of any distractions, all three boys sat and drowned in their own misery.
Awakening to a stiff neck, an empty stomach and the uncomfortable feeling of having spent the whole night sleeping with a piece of rock jabbing into his shoulder-blade, Harry found himself being quickly unfastened and manhandled across the room, dizzy and disorientated. It took him a few seconds to process his surroundings before he figured out where he was, and a cursory glance at Niall and Louis, who looked wide awake and had lost the ravenous look that they had been wearing for the hour or so before he had fallen asleep, caused Harry to conclude that he had been left for last. Presumably he was expected to be the most troublesome. They had overestimated him; tired and wobbly, he was in no fit state to fight them, and collapsed into the chair they offered him with a wave of relief so strong that he almost laughed at it.

Things were a little different that time: they gave Harry some sort of fitness test, making him run on a treadmill (which he was reasonably good at) then getting him to do sit-ups (he managed thirty before collapsing in a breathless heap). Every triumph and failure was noted on a little chart, and they measured his change in heart-rate after each test, each time seeming dissatisfied. Harry couldn’t understand it; his scores weren’t that awful. He considered that they might be testing steroids on him, and came to the conclusion that if they were, they needed to work on that, because the drugs obviously weren’t improving his performance sports’ wise. He had always been quite able-bodied, but he was no athlete.

After that, they tested his reaction times, which Harry was unable to comment on, as he had no idea what scores were considered good in that department. Still, their practically unreadable expressions seemed far more pleased, so he guessed that he had done fairly well. Then, he was given a piece of paper and given a test to do, entirely composed of maths and physics questions. Bewildered and annoyed, Harry did his best, but despite his best efforts, even that wasn’t very good, and he would freely admit it. He soon came to the conclusion that they had no idea what they were looking for, and no idea how the drugs would affect him – which made him angry. Why would they test something if they didn’t know what it was supposed to do?

When he had completed as much of the quiz as he could, to his relief, they allowed him to have a shower – and it felt ridiculously good to wash his limp curls and clear some of the grit and dried blood from his skin. Unfortunately, when he had finished towelling himself dry and had emerged from the cubicle, he had to put the same grimy, unwashed clothes back on, rendering the wash somewhat useless. Still, with his hair rapidly drying into its usual chocolate brown splendour, and his dirty face clean, he at least felt refreshed.

Lunch (or breakfast, it was hard to tell) was fruit; a mixture of grapes, apples, bananas and something that was either a plum or a very oddly shaped blackberry, and then he was given wholemeal bread and a thin slice of ham. He drank four glasses of water and then complained bitterly that it wasn’t something more interesting. His criticism was ignored, as usual, and then he was left to walk up and down the room several times to stretch his legs, grumbling all the while and asking long lists of questions that remained unanswered. In order to be as annoying as possible, he often repeated his queries in an irritatingly innocent voice, copying Louis to an extent, insisted upon calling the men Jeff and Ian, and kept up a stream of chatter that would have tried the patience of a saint. Throughout Harry’s one-sided conversations, the two men stayed impassive, disregarding his questions, ignoring his attempts at engaging them, and appearing uninterested in any subject that he brought up in a bid to catch their interest. It was exhausting, trying so valiantly to speak to two men who seemed not even to talk to each other, but Harry was nothing if not determined, and he kept at it. He had to give credit to Louis for keeping it up for so long; he soon grew bored, and only the knowledge that he was being incredibly annoying managed to keep him from giving up.
When they grew so tired of his insistent babbling that they couldn’t stand it any longer, he was escorted back down the corridor and bundled into the darkened room once again, and wrapped up like a parcel in wires and tubes and chains – and that was when Harry discovered that in his absence, they had been busy, and clearly there were more people around than those two men, because two newcomers were tied up and chained to the wall on either side of Niall, and neither of them looked best impressed with the situation.

“Hey!” said the guy to Niall’s left. He had hair so black that it was the colour of midnight, or the pupils of his wide, pretty brown eyes. He was one of those people who was effortlessly good looking and knew it, but he didn’t look conceited enough to be obnoxious about it. It was hard to tell when he was sat against the wall, but Harry was pretty sure he was tall, and he was definitely skinny. His sleeve was torn, showing off a tattoo on his wrist, and Harry admired it through the darkness. “Tell us what’s going on!” he snapped.

Taking as much notice of the boy as if he was a part of the wall, the men finished checking Harry’s bonds, then wordlessly left. The boy swore violently after them and rattled the chains as hard as he could, as if that would make a difference.

“There’s no point in trying to get anything out of them,” Harry said sympathetically. “Believe me, we’ve tried.”

The boy’s head snapped towards him and those brown eyes speared him with a fierce gaze. “Who are you?”

“I’m Harry, that’s Louis, and he’s Niall,” Harry explained. “You?”

“Zayn,” was the terse reply.

“Liam,” the other newcomer inserted.

“What the hell is going on here?” Zayn demanded angrily. “One minute I was walking down the street, and some guy asked me to take a survey – and then he whacked me in the face with his clipboard!”

The other four winced sympathetically and Harry sucked in a breath.

“Then I woke up here,” Zayn continued dramatically. “Someone care to explain?”

“If only we could,” Louis said wearily. He turned to Liam. “What about you? How did they get you?”

“I was out running, and a bloke stopped me and told me his sister had been hurt. He led me down this alleyway, and then I got a punch in the head and…well, you guys know the rest.” Liam scowled.

“Where’re you boys from?” Niall asked.

“Bradford.”

“Wolverhampton.”

“The mystery deepens,” Louis declared. “It really is random.”

“What’s random?” Zayn demanded.
“Who they choose,” Harry said, sounding far more cryptic than he’d intended. “Where they snatch us from.”

“Stop speaking in riddles,” Zayn ordered, “and explain.”

“We’ve all been abducted so those creepy guys can experiment on us,” Niall said cheerfully.

Liam and Zayn stared at him like he was some kind of alien. After quickly checking that the drugs hadn’t caused him to turn into one, Harry took a deep breath and began attempting to explain everything – hardly an easy task.

It took a long time to try and persuade Liam and Zayn, and by the end of it they were all looking at Harry as if he was insane – giving him some hope that perhaps he was. The stares they were sending in his direction indicated that they feared for his sanity, and would have locked him up in a mental institute if they’d had the power. He thought he saw Liam shift worriedly away from him as far as his chains would allow, and Zayn allowed a nervous glance towards the door as if by looking at it, he would be able to reach it. Harry understood their concerns: hadn’t he had similar fears about the state of Louis’ mental health?

“It could all be a hallucination?” he suggested hopefully.

Louis snorted. “You wish. I’ve told you before, Harry, we’re not insane. Besides, you really think you could dream up someone who looks like that guy?” He jerked his head at Zayn.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” demanded Zayn defensively. Harry knew that if there had been a reflective surface within reach, he would have been staring into it.

Louis smiled wryly. “You look like a model. No offence. Seriously, unless our boy Harry likes checking out teenage girl magazines, I can’t think of how he could imagine someone who looks like you. Come on. The hair, the eyes…you’re just one of those guys, aren’t you? The girls go wild for your type.”

Zayn looked pleased. “Really?” He started preening proudly.

Harry rolled his eyes. “You may have a point.”

“I don’t get it,” Liam said in frustration, “what exactly are they supposed to be testing on us?”

This question was met with several vague sounds which indicated that nobody had a clue.

“You’ve been here the longest,” Harry reminded Louis, “you ought to be the expert.”

“All I know is what I’ve told you,” Louis promised, “You’ve heard my take on the subject, and my theory, but I can’t be specific, I’m afraid.”

“We should run tests!” interrupted Niall excitedly, “on the fluid!”

Zayn rolled his eyes at the suggestion, and Liam shook his head. Harry sighed heavily while Louis kindly reminded him “We’re tied up, Niall, and we have no equipment. How do you suppose we test it?”

“Oh.” Niall slumped against the wall in defeat. He suddenly perked up, azure eyes bright with renewed enthusiasm. “Let’s get rid of it! We can pull the needles out and –”

“Harry already tried,” said Louis patiently. “It didn’t work so well…show them, Harry.”
Turning his hand, Harry displayed the large, cracked scab stretching from his knuckles to the top of his wrist, with the larger, thicker needle firmly attached to his skin. Noises of disgust, sympathy and horror accompanied the action, as Niall squeaked in shock, Zayn shook his head pityingly, and Liam just looked appalled.

“How long have you guys been here?” Liam asked worriedly.

Harry, Niall and Louis exchanged perplexed glances.

“I reckon I was here for about three days before Harry showed up,” Louis said, giving Harry a fond smile. “How long have you been here, curly? About two days?”

“I think so. Niall joined us yesterday. So that means they first started stealing people five days ago…it feels like forever. I don’t understand what they’re looking for! They must be pretty impatient for results.”

“What are they even looking for?” Niall wondered.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t have a clue. They gave me a fitness test, a blood test, an x-ray, and a lovely impossible physics quiz – do any of those things have any kind of link? Because I can’t see it.”

“That’s what they did to me!” Niall cried excitedly. “It was weird.” He shook his head in bemusement.

“This is all so stupid!” Zayn said furiously. “Nobody knows what’s going on, other than that it’s twisted. We’ve been abducted by some random guys for no apparent reason. We’re just five guys from unrelated places and we’ve been thrown together – we don’t even know each other! This is totally screwed up.”

“Life is totally screwed up,” Louis said dreamily.

All four of the other boys stopped to stare at him as if he was some kind of genius, just for coming out with that extremely random but true statement in the middle of a rant about how awful their situation was.

“Lou,” said Harry in amazement, “that’s the first time since I’ve met you that I think you’ve actually said something meaningful.”

Blinking at him, Louis widened his eyes. “I know…oh good lord, WHAT HAVE THESE DRUGS DONE TO ME? WHAT?”

Harry grinned and shook his head fondly. “If they’ve made you intelligent, god help the rest of us.”
Harry never thought that he could become irritated by just the sound of breathing, but it would appear that he had reached that low point. The four other boys dangling by the wrists in the same room as him inhaled and exhaled, as they had been doing for the past however many hours – but it suddenly seemed unbearably loud. The soft whoosh of air entering and leaving their lungs made him grit his teeth, ready to scream. Uninterrupted, the noise filled the air, poisoning the silence that Harry craved, tainting the room, and he wanted to scream at them all to shut up, but he couldn’t exactly ask them to stop breathing, could he? Not without sounding like a twat. It was stupid and petty, how much the tiny, simple sounds aggravated him, but truly, he thought that if he had to listen to the gentle, calm breathing of the four other occupants of the room for just one more minute, he might go insane.

Opposite him, Zayn was staring morosely at the ceiling, nibbling his lip so hard that it was bleeding slightly, and little scarlet beads were forming on his mouth. Harry considered mentioning it to him, then decided against it. Not far from Zayn, Niall was looking blankly into space and mouthing something, possibly song lyrics, although Harry couldn’t see properly in the dim light, so whatever he was whispering to himself was lost in the darkness. Liam was tapping the wall with his fingertips, seeming to find some kind of dull comfort in the pointless, repetitive motion. Louis was flexing his fingers over and over, presumably trying to reawaken them, with a grimace plastered on his face. Harry’s eyes were drawn to the movement of those long fingers as they contracted and stretched, and he watched them with a numb kind of boredom that made the uninteresting action fascinating.

As he observed, Harry spotted the air ripple slightly between Louis’ fingers, and he frowned slightly, craning his neck for a better look. Watching closely, Harry spotted a tiny, translucent bubble the size of a tennis ball blossom into existence above Louis’ head, swirling in the air between his open hands. The bubble was tinged with pale blue and a slight lilac tint, and it looked to have hundreds of minute electrical currents running through it, like veins. It was faint, it was small, and as he stared blankly at it, it dissipated, and Louis continued stretching his hands as if nothing had happened.

Harry yelped in shock and scrabbled backwards against the wall.

All four heads in the room turned to stare curiously at him, and found him gaping at Louis’ hands, which, sensing Harry’s gaze, froze.

“What’s up, Harry?” Liam asked.

If Harry could have done, he would have pointed. Instead, he jerked his head at Louis in shock and stared at him. “You – but – I – how?”

Louis blinked in confusion. “What?”

“How did you do that?” Harry demanded.

“What?”

“That – that thing you did. The ball, or whatever it was. How did you do it?”

“Harry, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Do it again!” Harry ordered.

“Do what again?”
"You…you don’t…?" Harry swallowed. Was he losing his mind? "Do that thing again, with your fingers."

Looking worriedly at him, Louis twisted his fingers above his head, loosening and then tightening them. Harry focused intently on the space between his hands, watching with fierce concentration. For a minute or so nothing happened, and Harry was given some very odd and concerned looks, but he didn’t divert his attention. Just when even Harry was about to give up, the air wrinkled and folded, and a faintly lit orb shimmered in the space between Louis’ fingers, roughly the size and shape of a ping-pong ball, with elements of lilac and pale blue running through it in delicate spiderwebs of colour. This time, Harry was not alone: Niall squeaked and Liam cried out in shock at the sight. Louis instantly jerked his head upwards, but whatever he had been doing suddenly faltered, and the apparition disappeared.

"See?" Harry demanded.

"What the hell was it?" Niall asked.

"I don’t know," Harry said thoughtfully. "Do it again, Lou."

Clearly confused, Louis bent his fingers inwards once again, staring up at them. It only took a few seconds that time before he summoned another bubble in the empty space above his head, this one the size of a basketball, and it twinkled with the lights that pulsed through it, looking eerily ethereal as the faint glow it gave off illuminated all five of their faces with a pale purple light. This one had barely formed before it winked out of existence, and the light faded, plunging them all into darkness once again. Louis gave his hands an appalled look and clenched them into fists so that it couldn’t happen again.

"What was it?" Niall repeated.

"Again!" commanded Harry.

"No."

"What? Are you mad? Do it again!"

"No! We might well be mad; don’t you get it? These drugs could be hallucinogenic! By tolerating these hallucinations, we might be playing right into someone’s hands!"

"You’re nuts. After all this time you’ve spent convincing me that we’re sane, now you want to take it all back?"

"We’re not seeing what we think we’re seeing! Have you ever seen anything like that before in your entire life? We’re crazy."

"If we’re crazy, there’s no going back, is there? Do it again!"

"I don’t want to."

"Do it," Harry growled.

Unwillingly, Louis concentrated hard, closing his eyes for a moment or so, and then once again the space above his head seemed to squeeze, pulsing violently as if it was being grabbed by a giant, invisible hand. His face turned pink, and then red, contorting with the force of his focus, and then yet another translucent ball of nothingness bloomed between his long fingers, pretty shades of violet and aquamarine playing dreamily through the surface of it. Holding it steady, Louis stared at it in utter
horror, while the other boys regarded the spectre with awe and fascination, Harry especially. Pale lilac light illuminating his white face, Harry gaped enviously at the shape, wishing that he had the ability to conjure something like that. If it had been within his capabilities, he would have been summoning sphere after sphere and hurling them around the room to see what he could do with them, manipulating them to the extent of the powers that he would then possess. It would be something to do, at least; something to play with. The idea hadn’t crossed Louis’ mind; he didn’t disperse the orb, but he didn’t attempt to interact with it either. He just stared at it.

“Can you make it bigger?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Louis said.

He started pulling his hands apart, trying to stretch the sphere slightly, but, like a soap bubble, it glistened and then noiselessly popped, vanishing into empty air with no trace.

“Have another go,” ordered Harry.

“I don’t think I want to.”

“Louis! Don’t you get it? This is amazing! Do it again, I want to see how you do it.”

Pouting, Louis once again splayed his fingers, but this time, instead of attempting to pull the air inwards, he pushed at it. Before their eyes, a large, shimmering purplish-blue orb the size of a wrecking ball manifested in thin air, hovering in the centre of the room and humming softly as it bobbed slightly up and down. It looked less substantial than the others, wavering slightly, and Louis was frowning hard as though it took more effort to keep it in place, but as they watched it hanging suspended in mid air, nobody was more shocked than Louis himself.

The only one who wasn’t staring at the bubble was Liam, whose attentions were firmly directed at Louis. He was struggling to understand the depth of Harry and Louis’ friendship. They had known each other longer than the rest of them had, so it was understandable that they would be closer than the others were – but in the space of a few days they had established a friendship that for most people would have been years in the making. They were almost frighteningly close; they had private conversations consisting of only nods and grimaces; they sometimes finished each other’s sentences; they knew each other better than they knew themselves. Liam had seen Louis watching protectively over Harry as he slept, in an almost paternal way. He was astounded by the way that Louis would bend over backwards to make Harry happy. Louis wasn’t a weak-willed person – far from it; he was one of the most obstinate people Liam had met – but Liam got the feeling that Louis would do anything Harry asked of him with almost no hesitation whatsoever.

“Throw something at it,” Zayn said suddenly.

They all turned away from the orb to stare at him, except for Louis, who was concentrating on not letting it dissipate. Without breaking his focus, he said “What good would that do? It’d only break.”

“Maybe,” agreed Zayn. “Maybe not.”

Scrambling excitedly at the wall behind him, he made a small cry of triumph as a piece of stone snapped and broke off in his hand. His fingers closed around it, and he allowed himself a small grin before he pulled his hand back and started aiming towards the bubble. It wasn’t easy to throw accurately with his hands tied above his head, but with a flick of his wrist, Zayn launched his tiny missile at the sphere that Louis was fighting so hard to maintain.

His aim was perfect, miraculously, and the piece of rock collided head on with the bubble. It looked
so fragile and insubstantial that they all expected it to pop on impact – but, surprisingly, it did nothing of the sort. As the bit of stone hit the surface of the orb, it stretched, flexing inwards slightly to accommodate the impact – then, it sprang back, and the chunk of rock ricocheted off the surface of Louis’ orb and pinged up to the ceiling, where it hit the roof and then was knocked straight back down, shattering on the floor.

They all stared numbly at the perfectly intact bubble.

“It’s a shield bubble!” Zayn cried delightedly.

“Nah,” Liam disagreed. “It’s a force field.”

They all blinked at him.

“What?” Louis said weakly.

“It’s a force field. This is great! You can protect us if those guys turn nasty!”

“If it was a force field, surely it would be around me, not in front of me.”

“Maybe it will be, when you learn how to control it better.”

“But how am I doing it?” Louis cried in frustration.

“You don’t think I would have mentioned something like that?”

“How should I know? It’s a bit weird, isn’t it? Maybe you didn’t want us thinking you were a freak.”

“Harry, I swear, this has never happened before,” Louis insisted shakily.

“Look!” Niall yelped. “The fluid bag! Look!”

Four heads jerked to stare at the transparent bag that was hooked up to Louis’ tube, including Louis’ own as he abandoned the bubble and left it to vanish into oblivion once again. The once slow-moving purple liquid was bright, pumpkin orange, and bubbling fiercely, like lava.

“What on earth…” Liam asked weakly.

“It’s the drugs,” Louis whispered. “The drugs did this. They made me do it.”

“Is it going to happen to us, next?” Harry wondered hopefully.

“Wouldn’t it have happened already?” questioned Niall.

“Louis’ been here longer than any of us. Maybe it just happened to him first. Maybe we can do it too!”

Harry started experimenting, snapping his palms over and over again, trying to conjure up a bubble the way Louis had. Copying his attempts, Niall contorted his face in concentration, rapidly turning purple as he forcefully opened and closed his fists. Liam stretched his fingers out as far as they would go, while Zayn wiggled his fingers like a street magician and tried to make a sphere appear in front of him.

After about twenty minutes, they had to admit defeat, something that Harry in particular accepted with very bad grace. Scowling, he glared at the floor, furious. He’d so wanted to be able to do it too.
Why should Louis get something when he didn’t? It was immature of him to be jealous, but he couldn’t help his feelings.

Liam was about to speak again when all of a sudden, the door burst open and the two strangers came rushing in, showing emotion for the first time since any of the boys had first encountered them. They looked excited, rushing over to Louis and eagerly conversing in whispers over his fluid bag so quietly that they could barely hear each other, let alone allow the boys to eavesdrop. Unfastening Louis’ restraints, they delightedly ushered him from the room, chatting breathlessly with bright eyes, clearly thrilled.

“How did they know?” Niall asked fearfully, looking around worriedly for hidden cameras.

“They’ve probably got some kind of monitoring equipment hooked up to us,” Harry mused.

“This is amazing!” Zayn cried, interrupting their speculation. “Don’t you get it? Those sphere things are hard, and things bounce off them. He could whack those guys over the head with them when they release one of us, and then we could escape!”

“He wouldn’t,” Harry said immediately.

“What?”

“I know Louis. He’d never hurt anybody, no matter who they were.”

“He would if he had to. There’s nobody on this earth who couldn’t strike a blow if they needed to, if someone they cared about was in danger…even if they wouldn’t do it for themselves, they’d do it for someone else. He’d probably do it for you.” Zayn eyed Harry accusingly.

“Me? Why me?”

“He’s like your best mate, or something. He cares about you. He’d do anything you asked.”

“I hardly know him!”

“You’re closer to him than you are with any of us, and you haven’t known him for much longer.”

“I couldn’t ask him to hurt someone!”

“Would you rather ask him that, or be stuck here forever?” Zayn demanded.

Harry fell silent, because of course, he knew the answer to that.

“Just think about it,” Zayn continued eagerly. “We could escape from this dump! Next time they unfastened one of us, Louis could whack them over the head with one of his bubble things –”

“Force fields,” Liam corrected.

Zayn rolled his eyes. “Right. Louis could whack them over the head with one of his force fields, and then put one around all of us whenever any of the guys try to get us! Then we could…I don’t know, break down the door with one of them or something –”

“Whoa, whoa, hang on!” Niall interrupted. “Look, this is great, but if we rush into things, who’s to say that it won’t all go wrong? Shouldn’t we give Lou a chance to get a handle on this thing first?”

“That,” Harry said, “is the best plan I’ve heard all day.”
“And what if he doesn’t have *time* to get a handle on things?” Zayn snapped. “What if they take his powers away and stop him from doing it?”

That suggestion was met with an appalled silence as the three other boys stared at him in horror at the very thought. In the space of the last forty minutes or so, their only hope of survival had seemingly become dependent on the unreliable, shaky force fields that Louis had just learned to make and had very little knowledge of manipulating.

“They wouldn’t do that,” Harry said weakly. “They only put this stuff into us to make that happen; why would they undo it?”

“We might just be lab rats. Now they’ve got the information they need, they’ll get rid of us. Kill us off, probably; we know too much.”

“Shut up, Zayn,” Liam ordered, seeing Niall’s pale, frightened face. “That’s not helping.”

“Maybe,” Harry said fiercely, “we should wait until Louis comes back instead of trying to make all the decisions for him? Isn’t having our freedom taken away the worst part about being in this place? Now that he’s got a little bit of that back, do you really want to take it away from him?”

Zayn looked at him, then looked away and swallowed. Liam met his gaze levelly, thinking once again that Harry and Louis really were two of the closest mates he’d ever met, and if he ever had a friend one day who was half as good a mate to him as Harry was to Louis, he’d be unbelievably lucky. Niall just nodded at Harry’s suggestion with a small smile, like he approved of the plan. Leaning back with a look on his face which clearly said he would accept no discussion of the matter, Harry glared at the other boys – not waiting for them to argue, but waiting for them to realize that he wouldn’t give them the opportunity.

Zayn admitted defeat by sighing and turning his face against the wall, settling down as comfortably as could be expected with a row of stones poking into your back. Niall closed his eyes, and they all sneaked envious glances at him, knowing that he would be asleep in seconds; Niall could fall asleep anywhere and at any time; it was a talent of his. Liam just started watching the ceiling like it was a flat-screen TV, his brown eyes flickering along the cracks as if it was the most fascinating thing he’d seen all day. Harry wriggled into a more relaxed position, sniffed, and then sat back to wait for Louis. He didn’t know how long he would be waiting wide-eyed in the darkness for the other boy to return, but waiting was something that Harry was good at. His talent for it had only increased during the last few days.

Harry Styles waited.
Chapter 6

Patience seemed to be a virtue which Harry possessed in far more abundance than the others who shared the small, darkened room with him – while he was still sat watching the door and waiting for Louis to be returned safely to them, Niall, for one, was asleep. His eyes were closed, a peaceful expression on his face with his head lolling forward, chin resting on his chest, pale and tired looking, but he would wake up refreshed, and that was the main thing. The slow, steady rise and fall of his chest made him look like any other sleeping teenage boy – apart from the cuffs restraining his hands, of course. Zayn was whispering under his breath; singing quietly, his voice low and melodic enough not to cause irritation. Harry didn’t recognize the song, but it sounded like some kind of lullaby; it could have been what had soothed Niall to sleep. It was reassuring enough to tempt Harry into closing his eyes, but determined to be there for Louis, he held his eyes firmly open. Chains clinked repetitively as Liam bobbed up and down, doing some form of exercise that was hard to make out in the darkness. Squats? Harry couldn’t quite see.

The room was by no means silent, but somehow Harry preferred the sounds of movement, muttering and snoring to the emptiness of a quiet room. He had loathed just having to listen to breathing; the sound of endurance. When it had been just him and Louis, either they had slept, or they had talked quietly, complaining about their situation, finding out about each others’ pasts, or just…talking. Wallowing in misery wasn’t good for either of them; they both knew that, and instead of allowing each other to sit and mope – but far more often, he had been glad of the company. The other boys, however, seemed not to appreciate the effort. Zayn, especially, was not averse to snapping when caught in a bad mood, and the cheerful stream of chatter seemed to get on his nerves. Therefore Louis had stopped randomly breaking into conversation whenever the silence got to be unbearable, and Harry missed it.

He counted the breaths he took for a few minutes, then started keeping score of how many times Liam lost count of the amount of squats he had done, which was discernible from his huffs of irritation every time he had to start over. Why Liam was choosing to exercise at a time like this was mystifying to Harry, but to each their own: everyone had their own method of dealing with stress. Apparently, Niall’s was sleeping. Liam’s appeared to be exercising, and Zayn’s was…well, being Zayn.

Harry wasn’t sure what his own technique was. He liked to think, to run over things in his mind and consider them from every angle until he felt that he understood every aspect of them – but he wasn’t certain whether that counted, or whether it was just classed as being a control freak. He definitely liked to know where he stood, but he didn’t really know if he could consider that as a stress-reliever. It was more something that he did from habit rather than to alleviate tension. What was Louis’ preferred distraction, he wondered? Chattering to people so that he irritated them beyond belief, and calming them down again was his way of relaxing? Unlikely. Immediately, Harry resolved to find out: he hated not knowing things. He would be keeping an eye on Louis until he had figured out the mystery.

Then there was a familiar aching creak that made him wince, and caused Niall to stir in his sleep, Zayn to falter in his quiet singing and Liam not only to lose count of his squats, but to lose his balance and almost fall over, ending up swearing and supported by the cuffs on his wrists. Jerkin upright, Liam glared at the door as it opened, and Louis was ushered back into the room by the two suddenly pleased strangers.
They locked Louis back up again with a rattle of chains, and then spared cursory glances for the rest of the boys. For some reason they took especial interest in Harry, rudely shining a little torch into his eyes, checking his temperature and lightly kneading his fluid bag as if expecting it to react as Louis’ had. The purple fluid pouring into Louis was no longer bubbling, but it was still a violent shade of orange. Harry’s, however had stayed stubbornly violet, much to the strangers’ disappointment. Eventually, after quickly examining Zayn, Liam and the sleeping Niall, they once again withdrew, slamming the door with unnecessary force – so loudly that the slamming echo caused Niall to jolt awake with a small yelp of shock.

“What the – hey, Louis!” Niall’s face lit up in greeting and he waggled his fingers in a brave attempt at a wave. “How long have you been there?”

“All of two seconds,” Louis said dryly, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “Hi, guys.”

“They didn’t take your power away?” Zayn demanded worriedly.

Louis rolled his eyes. “What do you think?”

To demonstrate, he flexed his fingers once again, and a neat violet-tinted sphere the size of a beach ball appeared between his fingers. Louis gave it a satisfied glance, then tossed it across the room, where it hit the wall, bounced off, and then dispersed in mid air as he let his hands slacken again.

“Cool,” Niall breathed.

“What did they do to you?” Liam asked, clearly not impressed enough by a pretty purple ball to be distracted from his questioning.

“Tests, tests, and more tests. As per usual. Blood tests, an MRI scan, x-rays, blood pressure…a urine sample; that was fun…” Louis snorted. “The works.”

“Do they know about…” Liam gestured vaguely to indicate the force fields.

Looking away, Louis focused on conjuring up another orb, and his voice was detached as he absently continued the conversation whilst summoning an average-sized bubble between his fingertips. “Oh, yes. I don’t think they knew at first, but they started throwing things at me – presumably in the hope that I’d defend myself.” His tone was halfway between outrage and incredulity; he couldn’t decide whether to be annoyed at the extremities of the testing, or impressed by the ingenuity of the strangers. “I didn’t mean to do it, but one moment they were chucking a massive shoe at me, and the next minute, I did this.” He concentrated intently, and then the air convulsed, and a dome-shaped force field formed around him, starting at the wall his back was pressed against, and arching out in front of him to create a semi-circle area that was protected from anything that could be thrown at it, a seemingly impenetrable barrier.

Impressed, the other boys looked excitedly at the apparition. Louis seemed almost smug as he stretched his fingers, and the sphere expanded slightly in response.

“ Weird, isn’t it? I never knew I could do it. It’s strange how much you figure out when things are being lobbed at your face. I didn’t fancy being whacked in the face with a size 12 shoe, so I…did this.” Louis shrugged and studied his protective bubble for a few seconds longer. “It’s pretty effective, if I do say so myself.”

“Can nothing break through it?” Harry asked.

“If anything can, they’ve yet to find it. They tried everything. Popping it, punching it, compressing it, throwing things at it, dumping stuff on top of it to weigh it down…so far, nothing even came close to
damaging it. Didn’t even dent the sides.” Louis couldn’t help but be proud.

Harry was watching him closely – Louis, not his force field – so he was the only one to spot the exertion on Louis’ face; the beads of sweat popping up on his creased forehead. The effort it was taking to maintain such a large and substantial bubble was taking its toll. He looked ready to collapse, and yet he was determinedly keeping it in place, seeming pleased with the impression he was making.

“Give it a rest now, Lou, yeah?” he suggested gently.

“What? You were the one who kept telling me to do it!”

“Yeah, but over-exerting yourself isn’t going to help anyone. Don’t over-do it. Just relax for a second, okay?”

Louis huffed grumpily, but he allowed the bubble to shimmer and fade into nothingness. He wiped his glistening forehead on his shoulder and took a few deep, slow breaths to try and rest for a moment or so. The other boys watched eagerly, waiting for him to recover. Harry’s expression was unreadable, and intentionally so; secretly, he was as impatient as the others to see more, but he wasn’t about to let his own curiosity overshadow Louis’ wellbeing.

“Did you find out anything?” Harry asked, trying to take Louis’ attention elsewhere so that he wouldn’t be so determined to start tiring himself out again so quickly. “Like…why they want us?”

A grim frown appeared on Louis’ face. “Unfortunately.”

“Well?”

“It would appear,” Louis said very slowly and reluctantly, which worried Harry, “that they want to… use us. For something. They want us all to develop some kind of abilities, and then, erm…sell our services, shall we say.”

Harry blinked. “I’m sorry, what?”

“They want to auction us off,” Louis explained patiently. “So that whoever buys us can use our powers to their advantage. Basically, we’re like pawns: these people don’t want to risk getting these drugs tested on them, so they’ve hired a couple of thugs to kidnap some unsuspecting victims off the streets, turn them into superhuman lackeys, and then sell them to the highest bidder. Who will then make us do stuff that’s illegal, immoral, and probably dangerous.”

“What?” Niall yelped. “That’s like slave trading! That can’t be legal!”

“None of this is legal,” Louis said dryly. “That would just be the tip of the iceberg.”

“How do you know all this?” Zayn demanded.

His mouth twisting in a wry smile, Louis said “Let’s just say that those guys are way more talkative than we give them credit for.”

“Clearly, if they let all that slip,” Liam muttered.

“But none of us are any use to them,” Harry said, “except for Louis.”

“It’ll come,” Louis said confidently. “You just wait. It’ll be as easy as breathing soon enough; you’ll see.”
“What does it feel like?” Harry asked enviously.

Louis tilted his head mischievously to one side. “Catch!” With a quick twitch of his fingers, a golf-ball sized orb had bloomed in the space above his head, and fast as lightning, he had tossed it across the room, where it landed with a light *thunk* in Harry’s hands.

Stunned, Harry gripped it, expecting it to pop and deflate at his touch – but to his surprise, the surface was cool to the touch and showed no signs of giving way, no matter how hard he squeezed it. The texture of it was like nothing he’d ever experienced before; it was something like glass, but more flexible, dipping inwards when he pummelled it hard enough but not allowing him to break through it. If he had been able to create a ball out of water, he imagined it would feel similar to that. Fascinated, he gently contracted his fingers around it, amazed by the complexity of something that looked so simple.

Predictably, Niall started clamouring for one as well. “Me too, me too,” he begged.

Louis instantly twisted his hands, but the weak, pulsing bubble the size of a football was too hastily constructed, too fragile, and when he attempted to throw it, it barely made it halfway across the room before it collapsed in on itself and vanished. Scowling, Louis attempted another, but the framework of it flickered in the air for less than a second before it was gone again. He hissed impatiently.


It took a few more seconds of careful breathing and controlled stretching of his fingers, but then Louis was ready, and a sphere the size of a small tennis ball was clutched in Niall’s hand. Amazed, he curled his fingers around it, squeezing it like a stress ball, and was surprised by how little it seemed to give in his grip. His fingertips explored the surface of the orb, and he watched it, fixated on the shimmering colours sliding through its surface.

Naturally, Liam and Zayn weren’t going to be left out, and it was with practised ease that Louis summoned another two bubbles and launched them into their waiting hands. He seemed pleased with his accomplishment as Liam turned the slippery force field over and over in his fingers, as if expecting it to fall out of his hands. Zayn simply held on tightly to the thing he cupped in his hands above his head, as if it were some kind of precious jewel. Bored, Louis started lobbing sphere after sphere across the room, bouncing them off the walls and grinning like a child as the others had to duck to avoid the flying orbs shooting in every direction.

“They’ve made a massive mistake,” Liam said, shaking his head. “They picked you to pioneer superpowers on, and to sell for slave labour?” He looked amused.

“What’s wrong with *me*?” Louis asked defensively.

“Most people who got the power of force fields would be testing their limitations – seeing how big they could make them; that sort of thing. Whereas you’re…” Liam shook his head again. “You’re playing *catch* with them.”

Louis shrugged as he flicked another force field into the corner. “I’m bored. Besides, this is helping me to get to grips with it.”

Harry was chewing his lip worriedly. “Are you okay, Lou? Shouldn’t you be taking another rest right now?”

“I’m fine, Harry, honest. This is child’s play compared to what I was doing before. Quite literally.” Louis chuckled at Liam, who unwillingly looked amused. “Believe me, there’s a massive difference
between having to create massive barriers to deflect lumps of metal falling on your head, and making a couple of silly force fields to use as bouncy balls.” As if to prove a point, he effortlessly threw one at Harry, where it hit him on the head and bounced off.

“Ow,” Harry complained good-naturedly, but it hadn’t really hurt, and he couldn’t help but smile slightly at Louis’ childish behaviour.

“Did they take any measurements?” Zayn asked, ever the practical one.

“They tried. According to their readings, they can easily get the diameter of every force field I create, but not the weight or the mass. They’ve attempted to get the temperature but apparently it doesn’t have one. They can’t work out what it’s made of because they can’t puncture it to get a sample. It has no electrical charge or magnetic field, and no density.”

“But it has a temperature!” Harry protested. “I can feel it! It’s cold.”

“Their machines didn’t seem to agree with your opinion.”

As Louis turned to begin elaborating on the many tests that the strangers had been attempting on his force fields, Harry did a few tests of his own with the limited resources he had at his disposal: his own senses. He could feel the coolness of the sphere in his hands; he lowered it slightly and examined it in detail, looking at every tiny element of it. He attempted to smell it, but it had no odour. Holding it next to his ear, he discovered that it emitted a faint, barely discernible humming which required very keen ears to hear. Then he tried tasting it, and found that it was giving off tiny, infinitesimally small vibrations which tickled his tongue and buzzed in the roof of his mouth like he had a mouthful of wasps, feeling so unpleasant that he quickly pulled his tongue back into his mouth and abandoned the attempt. His skin crawled; he couldn’t shake off the feeling that thousands of insects were flying around in his mouth. Once again, he squeezed it to try and work out how strong it was, which hurt his fingers; it had hardened in his grasp, and he could feel it quivering slightly. He decided to drop it; the sensation was unnerving, like he was holding some kind of animal in his hand. It almost seemed to be breathing.

“Hey, Harry, are you okay?” asked Louis.

He forced a smile. “Yeah. Just…don’t try to lick them, okay? They buzz.” He tossed the orb away and it flickered and vanished before it hit the floor.

That odd statement was met with amusement, disgust and curiosity, as the other boys stared at him and wondered how he could possibly have worked that out.

“I take it you tried,” Niall said.

“Obviously. Not a good idea. They buzz,” he repeated disgustedly.


“Like anyone else would.” Louis rolled his eyes. “I think you have issues, Harold.”

“Boredom is a terrible thing.” Harry wrinkled his nose. “I won’t repeat the mistake.”

“Make sure you don’t. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t lick them. They’re a part of me. So don’t lick me, Styles, or I’ll buzz your tongue!” Louis chuckled at the oddness of the words.
“Stop crying, Niall!”

It took a lot for easy-going Louis to lose his temper, but since Niall had started up a spontaneous crying fit about forty-five minutes ago and been sobbing uncontrollably ever since, everybody’s patience was starting to wear down. Even for Liam, who had an impressive amount of tolerance for the Irish boy. Harry had been the first to snap; unable to put his hands over his ears, he had started humming loudly to block out the sound, and the combination of tuneless humming and Niall’s insistent wailing was enough to drive one insane. Zayn’s face was blank, but the expression was forced, and the half deranged sense of irritation in his eyes was almost creepy. Liam was clenching his fists so hard that they almost expected his hands to shatter. They were all doing their best to try and block out the sound: when it became clear that Niall had no intention – and possibly no ability – to stop howling, Louis had done everything he could, summoning force field after force field, around Niall, around the boys, around their ears, even creating bubbles the size of peas to use as ear plugs – but it would appear that however impenetrable the fields were, they were not impregnable, certainly not where sound was concerned.

“Shut up!” Harry growled.

“I want to go home,” Niall wailed. “I want to see my family! I’m sick of this place!”

“We’re sick of you,” Harry mumbled, but he sounded unconvincing and there was no real malice in his town.

“I want to get out of here! I can’t stand it a second longer! I’m sick of being trapped here with no food and nothing to do and being strapped to a wall and hanging by my wrists and nobody telling me what’s happening! I hate being drugged, I hate being here! I’m going insane over here!” Niall let out a long, harsh scream of pure frustration, thrashing violently against his bonds with an insane expression on his face.

“Niall, stop it,” Zayn said wearily. “That’s not helping.”

“I don’t care! I can’t do this anymore! I can’t deal with having be the happy one all the time! I’m not happy, okay? I am not happy! I’m crazy and I’m mad and I’m going to kill someone!” Niall screamed.

“Niall…” Liam interrupted warily.

“Calm down!” Louis ordered.

Niall’s usually contented face was bright red, messy, streaked with tears and contorted in misery as he stared desperately at them all, his head jerking as he fixed each boy with a desperately angry and injured gaze, as if they had some kind of involvement in his imprisonment. The accusation in his stare was almost enough to convince Harry, Liam, Louis and Zayn that they were in some way guilty despite knowing that they had done absolutely nothing – they were just as much the victims as he was. Yet Niall seemed so much more innocent than the rest of them, despite the foul mouth they knew he possessed, that him being captured seemed far more of an injustice than it was for the others.

“Don’t tell me to calm down! Don’t you dare tell me to calm down! At least you can do something! At least you’ve got something out of this mess! You’ve got your force fields. You’re not useless like
the rest of us. Especially me. You guys are all tough and strong and athletic, and I’m not like you! I’m just Niall Horan from Mullingar who eats too much and isn’t that hot, isn’t that smart, isn’t that anything! I’m just me! And I always thought that was enough for me, but it isn’t, because I am sick of this place and I’m sick of not being good enough and I am sick of EVERYTHING!”

“Niall!”

His fluid bag was bubbling, but far more violently than Louis’ had; the fluid inside was churning like a stormy sea and splashing all up the sides of the clear plastic bag, roiling dangerously with raw power. But more frightening than that was the colour of the liquid inside; it was neither docile purple nor bright orange – it was luminous, toxic green.

“SOMEBODY GET ME OUT OF HERE! I CAN’T TAKE IT ANY LONGER! LET ME GO RIGHT THIS INSTANT OR I SWEAR I DON’T KNOW WHAT I’LL DO!”

“Niall!”

A horrible, metallic shriek ripped the air, searing through the room; it was agonizingly loud and pitched so high that they were amazed they could hear it. It was only overshadowed by Niall’s own scream, an awful, desperate howl that echoed with fear and shock, tearing at their ears and making the boys gasp in pain. Niall’s body convulsed sickeningly, his back arching violently as he leaned away from the wall, twisting in pain. His arms and legs looked like they were being stretched as he curved forwards, his head thrown back and mouth open in a wordless cry, his body straining against his bonds as he shuddered, like he was having some kind of fit. Every inch of him was trembling as he stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, and his scream intensified, shredding several octaves and reaching a painful pitch. In horror, the other boys stared at him, his whole body almost seeming to glow as he shook uncontrollably, tremors racking his thin frame, whipping his head back and forth in anguish. The expression of agony on his face was terrible, the kind of pain that made you hurt when you witnessed it, like you were experiencing second-hand torment.

There was a sudden roaring sound, and Niall’s convulsing body burst into flames.

“NIALL!”

Harry was the first to react properly. Throwing himself against his chains with an urgency he had never known he possessed, he battled desperately against his restraints, eyes wide with panic, knowing that he had to reach his friend even if there was nothing within reach to put out the inexplicable flames. For some unknown reason, Niall’s whole body had ignited and he was covered in a thick layer of rippling fire, sparks bursting off the inferno and his frame barely recognisable behind the blaze.

When it became clear that no amount of desperation would be enough for him to break free of his chains, Harry instantly twisted in panic to look at the one person who he would have relied on for anything, the first person he would think of to turn to, no matter what the situation. The person who was staring in open-mouthed horror at their exploding friend, his dark blue eyes wide with terror as he watched helplessly.

“Louis, do something!”

“Like what?” Louis cried.

“I don’t know! Use your power! Do something – anything! I don’t even care, just do it, and do it quick! For God’s sake, he’s burning to death! Do something!”
In a panic, Louis flexed his fingers desperately, and a glowing orb flickered between his fingertips, expanding and then vanishing in a split second, almost too quickly to be seen. It was faint and indistinct, almost colourless with barely any of the violet tint that they’d been used to, and behind the sound of the crackling flames and Niall’s relentless screams, the humming was indiscernible. The force field appeared and dissipated too fast for anyone to register.

“Louis!”

“I’m sorry!”

Instantly, Louis splayed his hands once again, and a tennis-ball sized sphere blossomed in the air a few inches in front of his face – but there was no substance to it, and once again it quivered and then faded into nothingness. The frustration and blind terror in his expression was almost more scary than Niall’s screams; Harry had never seen Louis look so fearful, so unsure. His hands clenched into fists as he stared in shock up into space, where his force field had weakly fluttered only seconds before. Never before since discovering his powers had he failed so badly.

“Louis, what are you doing?”

“I can’t do it!” Louis cried in frustration, ripping at his hair.

“What do you mean, you can’t do it? Of course you can do it! You’ve not stopped doing it for the past two days! You could do it in your sleep! What the hell is wrong with you, Lou? Just do it! Do it now!”

Once again, Louis’ fingers moved in that familiar, practised motion that should have resulted in the solid forming of a bubble in the air before him, the atmosphere twisting and wrenching at his command and then creating a purple-tinted sphere that would fly in any direction he chose. The air twitched, it rippled, and the faintest, weakest of pale blue frameworks appeared, staining the space between them for barely an instant. Then once again, it was gone, and Louis was hissing in desperation.

“I can’t!” he wailed. “I can’t do it! I’m panicking!”

Of course he was panicking. They were all panicking, wanting and needing to act but unable to free themselves. And behind that urgency to move was Louis’ own fear, his own shock at his sudden failure and inability to control the force fields that had been effortless only a few seconds ago – something that was easier than breathing, and suddenly he was useless.

Meanwhile, Niall was still burning.

“You have to do something!” Liam yelled over the sound of sizzling, crying out and the sound of Louis panicking. “You can’t just leave him!”

“What do you expect me to do?” shouted Louis. “I can’t make it work, okay? I can’t do it! The fields won’t stick; they keep breaking! I can’t keep them together for long enough to do anything with them!” To demonstrate, his hands twitched and a small bubble formed in the air, and he instantly hurled it in Niall’s direction before it could fall apart, but it had only made it halfway across the room before it was gone.

The flames leapt higher and higher over Niall’s body, flickering dangerously in an orange-yellow glow the same colour as the still liquid in Louis’ fluid bag. In Niall’s fluid bag, the violently rippling acid green liquid was still bubbling, and the larger and more uncontrollable the flames grew, the brighter and more fiercely coloured the fluid turned. It seemed almost to have a personality of its
own, and it captivated their gazes almost as easily as the flames themselves.

Harry had never seen fire like that in real life. It wasn’t like a bonfire; it was more of an explosion, flames that licked Niall’s body all over and framed his shape in a vague veil, like some kind of cloak of fire. The heat pouring off it could be felt even across the room, and Harry was terrified by the thought that if he was uncomfortably warm, and he was a good six or seven metres away, then Niall must have been in unbearable pain, burning alive. His screeches had stopped, and so had the strange metallic sound that had first arrived with the flames, but the sound of the fire crackling and snapping, heating the stones, and the noises of the boys gasping in shock, and Louis’ sharp hisses and groans as he furiously tried to conjure force field after force field with no results. Nothing was working; everything was going about as wrong as it possibly could, and even louder than the burning, the cries of shock, and the various mingling background noises, was the sound of Harry’s breathing, harsh gasps hissing through his teeth, and the constant thud of his heartbeat as he stared in fear at Niall. Who was on fire. And possibly burning to death before his very eyes.

But just as the thought had passed through Harry’s mind, the flames suddenly shut off, and Niall came back into view, hanging in exactly the same place as before and gasping for breath.

Liam, Zayn, Harry and Louis stared in utter disbelief at Niall’s face. His clothes were blackened rags, shreds of burnt fabric hanging off him and exposing bare skin. Shockingly, he wasn’t at all hurt; his face was pink, but there were no burns, no blisters, no marks and no sign that anything had happened to him whatsoever other than his ruined clothes. He was sweating slightly, blond hair sticking to his forehead, and looking completely shell-shocked, trembling as he looked down at himself. With singed clothes and wide eyes he took several shallow breaths and glanced worriedly around.

“Are you okay?” Harry croaked.

“…Yeah,” Niall said faintly. “I think I am.”

“What the hell happened?” Louis demanded.

“I don’t know!”

“I’ll tell you what happened: you were on fire,” Zayn said helpfully.

“But how?” asked Liam.

“I don’t know!”

“You aren’t hurt, are you?”

“No,” Niall said, stretching experimentally and checking his arms for injuries. “I think I’m fine.”

“Is it a power?” Harry asked.

“What? How can it be a power? We already know what power you get. Force fields. Like Louis.”

“Not necessarily,” said Zayn thoughtfully. “The liquid is a different colour. Maybe it changes from person to person.”

“It can’t be a power. How is accidentally setting yourself on fire a power?”

“Well obviously it isn’t supposed to be an accident, is it? Do it again, Niall.”
“Get lost! I’m not setting myself on fire! I don’t even know how!”

“It’ll be something stupid,” Louis said; “you won’t be aware of it at first, but when you work out what it is, you’ll kind of realize…that’s how you do it.”

“Well, that’s specific.”

“Well I’m sorry, but I discovered mine by accident! I never even realized what I was doing until Harry pointed it out!”

“What was I doing, though? Apart from crying and yelling at everyone.” Niall looked ashamed.

“Just focus,” Harry suggested.

Niall opened his mouth to start arguing – and then erupted into flames.

Harry yelled in shock, and Louis stared in utter horror at Niall’s fire-wrapped body. Liam and Zayn craned their necks to stare, but before anyone could speak again, the flames extinguished, and Niall was once again unscathed – but his clothes were in an even worse state, the edges curling and glowing slightly with the aftermath of flames.

“I guess that’s how you do it,” Liam said faintly.

“But what did you do?” Louis demanded.

Niall burst into flames once again to demonstrate.

“Stop doing that!”

“Sorry,” Niall said thickly, his voice contorted through the flames. He reached up, his arm barely visible through the fire that surrounded his limbs, and touched the explosion that was his hair – and then he went out, like a match that had been blown out. Apart from looking a little warm, he was still completely unhurt.

“Give him a break, Liam,” Louis said, “when you first find it…well, you kind of want to keep doing it. Just to see if you can.” He gave Niall a sympathetic smile.

“I don’t get it, though, how is that a power?” Harry demanded. “He sets himself on fire.”

“Oi! I don’t see you doing anything cool,” Niall said, injured at his new ability being insulted.

“Yeah, but no offence, mate…I just can’t see what you can do with it. I mean, Louis can protect himself from stuff…what can you do?”

“Looks like I’m imperious to fire,” Niall said cheerfully, “that could come in handy.”

“You could probably burn people, too. Lovely,” Zayn said brightly – so brightly that he was obviously being sarcastic. “You’ll be so popular at parties.”

“Shut up. If we ever get out of here and you get your cigarettes back, I’ll be your human lighter,” Niall pointed out.

Zayn looked extremely pleased by the idea.

“Great, so we’ve got a guy who makes force fields and throws them at people, and a human candle,” Harry said.
“Someone’s jealous.”

Liam tutted. “Can you blame him? At least you guys can do something.”

“That’s two out of five, though,” Louis pointed out. “Maybe you lot are next.”

“But shouldn’t I have been next?” Harry complained. “I’ve been here longer than Niall.”

“Maybe it’s random.”

“Just be patient. It’ll happen. Maybe you already have a power and you just haven’t activated it yet.”

“I hope so,” Harry muttered grumpily, shuffling back against the wall. “I really, really hope so.”
Louis was smirking all over his face while Niall shook his head and swore in annoyance. The new clothes he’d been lent were hanging off him in scorched shreds, his face was pink with exertion and his blond hair was sticking to his sweaty forehead, but other than that, he was still unharmed — and Harry was extremely jealous of that fact. Taking a deep breath, Niall shook his head, blew upwards to cool himself off a little, then rolled his shoulders to loosen up and nodded at Louis.

“Again, Lou.”

“Forgod’s sake, haven’t you practised enough?” Liam exploded.

“No such thing as too much practice,” Louis said instantly, stretching his fingers. “Ready, Niall?”

“Ready,” Niall confirmed.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath in, and then focused intently. It took a few seconds of shuddering and concentration — then the first tongue of flame rippled down Niall’s skinny arm, and within seconds his whole body was on fire, the ceiling licked by the flames surrounding him. Only the slightest outline of a human form was visible, coated in fire that shielded him from view. Harry sighed irritably. Louis grinned at the challenge presented by the sheer mass of flames, then flexed his fingers and summoned a huge domelike bubble all around Niall. Focusing intently, he tightened it, making it contract and slowly retreat until it pressed Niall against the wall. For a moment or so, Niall struggled against the pressure, flaming body wriggling — and then with a puff, a hiss and a cloud of smoke, the flames were extinguished, and Niall was sat looking disgruntled with not so much as a spark dancing across his skin. Louis’ mouth stretched into a very smug smirk.

“How long was that?” Niall panted.

“Thirty seconds,” Liam said in a bored voice.

“Excellent!” Louis said.

“Not excellent,” Niall disagreed, “that was rubbish.”

“For you, maybe. It only took me half a minute to put you out! I’m loving this!”

“Give it a rest,” Zayn said wearily.

“They’re only going to replace your clothes so many times, Niall,” Harry pointed out, eyeing the burnt rags that were all that remained of Niall’s borrowed shirt.

Niall shrugged dismissively. “We’re all guys.” He turned to Louis. “Again.”

Harry made a disgusted sound. Eyes glittering, Louis steadied himself and looked at Niall with a nod. Once again, Niall breathed in, and then he exploded outwards in a burst of flames, and all of a sudden the room was lit up with dancing orange lights, casting eerie shadows across the walls. With a moment of composure, Louis nodded to himself and then twitched his fingers, and within seconds a large, flat force field was pinning Niall’s flaming body against the wall. Violently kicking and flailing to try and shake the orb off, Niall sent the blaze climbing higher and higher, burning fiercely around him until it became a towering inferno stretching towards the ceiling. With a cry of triumph, Niall sent more fire shooting upwards, and Louis’ face turned red with the force of his concentration as he stretched out his splayed hands in frustration. A few more tense seconds passed, and then with
a short, sharp breath, Louis intensified his force field even more and snuffed Niall out like a giant candle.

“Man,” Niall complained, “that just isn’t fair!”

“I make that forty-four,” Liam decided.

“Forty-eight!” Zayn insisted.

Delighted, Niall said “Really?”

Louis pouted. “That wasn’t fair! I wasn’t ready.”

“You were. Don’t make excuses. I’m awesome.”

Louis huffed irritably but didn’t comment. Still, he spared Niall a small smile, and Harry felt a twinge of jealousy. He turned his face away to stare miserably at the door, avoiding Niall and Louis’ newly found bond. After all, he and Louis had met first – it wasn’t right for Louis to become best mates with somebody else. Having powers had brought Louis and Niall together, and Harry felt excluded in a way that he wasn’t used to. He’d always been popular, always been part of a group. Now, he felt like he’d been shoved out of the closest friendship he’d ever had.

With that rare talent that Louis seemed to possess, he instantly sussed out that Harry was miserable and, obviously, wasn’t going let the silence continue between them.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

“Mmm,” Harry said vaguely.

Another of Louis’ talents appeared to be having a dangerous amount of insight into Harry’s mind, because he lowered his voice as he said “You’re not jealous, are you?”

Harry stayed silent.

“Look, this is just a practice thing. You know that, don’t you?” Louis whispered so quietly that even Harry struggled to hear him, “you’re still my best mate.”

Just like that, everything seemed to be okay again. Despite himself, Harry couldn’t help but smile at Louis, his face lighting up as his bad mood evaporated, because he had just been told exactly what he wanted to hear. Louis was his best friend. The smile on Harry’s face was bright enough to rival Niall’s flames.

“Bet that’s what you tell all the guys,” a voice mocked. It was a slightly bitter voice, taunting, and yet strangely melodic and pleasing to the ear. Echoing powerfully through the room, it made them all jump as they looked around for the source – but Harry flinched the hardest, because the sound had come from just below his left ear.

“What the hell was that?” Zayn gasped.

Harry cringed away from the wall, looking at it in abject horror. “The wall spoke to me!”

“Hardly. I think you’re losing it.” The voice came once again, and Harry violently twisted to try and put some distance between him and it.

A boy’s head emerged from the stonework, making them all yelp. From the neck downwards, there was no body, just a solid wall – but the face of a young boy was grinning at them, poking through
the brickwork like there was nothing there. He had shaggy, untidy black hair that hung in his pearl grey eyes, a very pale, pointed face, and a wolfish grin that showed an awful lot of very white teeth. There was something creepy about his pale skin – and, of course, the way he was sticking through a wall. Harry edged away from him, looking horrified.

“Are you a ghost?” he demanded.

“Not last time I checked.” With that, the boy effortlessly slid the rest of his body through the wall and stepped into the room. Shoving his hands into the pockets of his red hoodie, he leaned against the wall he had just walked through and surveyed them casually. “Hello, kiddies.”

That was when the boys learnt one of the other main differences between Louis and Niall: when Louis panicked, his powers stopped working – but when Niall panicked, his powers went into overdrive. With a yelp, Niall exploded, bursting into flames like an out of control bonfire, and the towering inferno reached the ceiling with ease and started spreading outwards on either side, causing Zayn and Liam, only a few metres to his left and right, to cry out in alarm. Within mere seconds, it was getting uncomfortably warm, and everyone’s faces were turning pink, including the pale cheeks of the ghost boy, who was watching the burning Niall with interest.

“Louis, put him out!” Harry cried.

Obviously, Louis couldn’t. He was too busy staring in terror at the newcomer, who seemed oblivious to the havoc he was causing. The attractive black-haired boy watched Niall like he was some kind of exciting movie, and as Niall struggled to calm down enough to extinguish himself, the boy sat cross-legged on the floor like a child in primary school, his baggy hoodie falling loosely around his shoulders, and propped his chin up on one hand as he waited.

“Louis!” Harry cried.

“Okay!”

Concentrating very hard, Louis closed his eyes, then opened them, watching the space above his head where his hands were bound. He stretched his fingers a couple of times to loosen them up, breathed in and out, and then twitched his fingers. The air rippled like a lake that had been stirred by a giant hand, the space above Louis’ head contracting and pulsing between his hands – and then he pushed outwards, and a force field like a flying saucer attached itself to the wall, surrounding Niall’s flame on every side so that he couldn’t accidentally burn anybody else. Immediately, the heat lessened, and Liam and Zayn visibly looked relieved. Colour started fading from everyone’s red cheeks, including the face of the newcomer, who seemed fascinated by the force field. It took Louis far longer than it ever had before, even on his first attempt, but with a lot of effort, he pushed the field backwards, pressing it against Niall’s body as firmly as he could – and then, thankfully, Niall’s body came into view as in a large cloud of smoke, he went out.

Bright scarlet, Niall gasped breathlessly for a few seconds, wiping his clammy forehead on his shoulder. “Jesus! That was hot!”

“Don’t do it again,” Louis said hastily, “I’m not sure I could cope.”

The sound of applause made them all cringe. In the centre of the room, the boy had stood up and was slowly clapping, looking impressed. In shock, they all stared at him.

“That,” he said, “was cool.”

Harry caught Louis’ eye, and in an instant, Louis knew what was expected of him. It took only a
second, and a quick flex of his hands, and then the stranger was trapped in an enormous bubble, which reached way above his head and continued to the floor. He was tall and slender, and the orb was large and wide, accommodating his lanky frame. Seemingly unfazed by being trapped in a giant bubble, the boy reached out to experimentally touch the sides of the bubble, and found that apart from being able to push slightly at the sides and them stretching a little in recompense for the pressure, he couldn’t escape. Nodding to himself, the boy sat down once again, scanning the room to look at them all.

“Impressive,” he said.

“Who do you think you are? And what do you think you’re doing, poking your head through walls like that?” Niall scolded. “Nearly gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry,” the boy said, sounding anything but. “I would have teleported in, but I can only teleport to places I’ve already been to. So I had to phase through the wall instead.” He shrugged.

All five of them blinked at the unfamiliar word – and the rather more familiar one.

“What do you mean, teleport?” Harry demanded.

The boy – and the force field – vanished.

Before any of them even had time to yell, he had reappeared at the opposite end of the room – but he was still trapped inside the orb that Louis was focusing so intently on.

“Oh,” came the surprised voice of the stranger as he looked up at the bubble. “It came with me. That’s never happened before.” He looked at Louis. “How do you do it?”

“How should I know?” Louis asked shortly. “I just do. If you expect me to give you a physics lecture, forget it.”

“Fair enough.” Looking at Niall, the boy continued, “what about you, sparks? How do you do it?”

Niall scowled. “My name isn’t sparks. And I don’t have a clue.”

Tutting, the boy murmured “Shoddy.”

“Well, nobody explained anything to us, so how should we know?” Zayn snapped.

“Could you not work it out for yourselves?”

“We’re not physicists,” Liam pointed out, “and we’re not geniuses, either.”

“Enough with the interrogation,” Louis snapped. “We’re the ones asking the questions. What’s your name, and how did you get in? What’s phasing?”

The boy firmly closed his mouth.

Glaring, Louis pushed violently at the air, and the bubble shot backwards a few feet, rolling over and sending the boy sprawling to the bottom of the sphere, rolling uselessly around like a hamster in a wheel.

“Hey!” the boy complained.

“What’s phasing?” Louis repeated.
Huffing, the boy chanted “Phasing is when you reduce the density of the atoms in your body, which allows you to move through solid objects without harm.” He recited it word for word, like a small child who had been taught a speech perfectly – and punctuated it with a pleased smile. “Or so the theory goes. Before today, I’d never found an object I couldn’t walk through: walls, doors, trees, people – that’s fun, you should see their faces…” The boy chuckled. He reached out and experimentally probed the surface of the bubble around him. “It would appear that you’ve found the one thing I can’t phase through. Congratulations, by the way.” His expression turned a little sour.

“So…is that a power?” Niall asked warily.

“Presumably. I call it ‘phasing’. The experts call it ‘intangibility’. Same difference, as far as I’m concerned.”

“What’s your name?” was the next sharp question.

“Felix Hill.”

Splaying his fingers, Louis sent the bubble rolling over and over until it hit the wall, bounced off and slowly moved back towards the middle of the room. The boy’s attempt to stand with folded arms and act casual failed miserably; it’s hard to look cool when you’re falling on your backside with an outraged yelp.

“What was that for?”

“I don’t appreciate the wisecrack answers,” Louis said shortly.

“What? My name is Felix Hill! It’s not my fault! My parents are cruel people.”

Louis looked across the room to consult the opinion of his number one advisor. Shaking his head to flip a loose, unruly curl out of his eyes, Harry considered briefly before slowly nodding, looking into Louis’ eyes thoughtfully.

“Seems legit. I can’t think that you would make up a name like that.”

Under his breath, Felix grumbled in irritation, but didn’t complain. Wisely.

“Why are you here?” Zayn demanded. “What do you want?”

“I’m rescuing you,” Felix announced.

This was met with noises of disbelief. Nobody believed that he could rescue them, and nobody believed that he had any intention to. Seeming hurt by their scorn, Felix attempted to roll the bubble across the room, and discovered that, with difficulty, he could move around the room – although he fell over a lot, and looked pretty silly. He clumsily struggled across the room and paused beside Niall.

“Your power is pretty cool,” he complimented. “How long can you keep it up for?”

Blinking, Niall shrugged. “I don’t know. Indefinitely, I suppose, so long as I don’t get put out. We haven’t really tested the limitations. So far, we’ve been looking at how long it takes to put me out, rather than how long I can stay alight.”

Disappointed, Felix tutted. “What use is that? Anyone would think you don’t want to get out. What can the rest of you do?”
“Nothing,” Harry said sourly.

“Is that so? Unusual. How long have you been here? It took about a month before I discovered I could do anything.”

“About a week,” Zayn answered, surprised.

“I guess they must have learnt more about the dosage needed…” mused Felix.

“What happened to you?” Liam demanded. “How did you get your powers? How did you escape? How did you find out about us? Who are you?”

“It’s a long story,” Felix said dryly.

“We’re not exactly going anywhere,” Harry pointed out.

“Are you going to let me out?” asked Felix, shoving at the walls of the bubble.

Snorting, Louis said “No chance. How do we know you won’t just slip out through the walls? No, we’re keeping an eye on you. You’re staying right there.”

With a heavy sigh, Felix muttered “Fine! Have it your way.” Settling cross-legged on the floor, he ruffled his black hair and then looked around the room before continuing mockingly, “This might take a while. I hope you’re sitting comfortably.”
Chapter 9

Felix looked up and scanned the room, examining the five boys giving him accusatory stares. Niall was holding his hands out in front of him, as if the threat of setting himself on fire would be some kind of deterrent – although they weren’t sure whether he could project the flames or throw them, or do anything with them, hopefully the threat would be enough to subdue Felix if he started getting too hard for Louis to restrain. A few strands of silky black hair fell across his forehead, and as he shook it out of his eyes, he looked like a young child rather than the sour, mocking adult he was acting like. The cool grey eyes of a harsh, cynical young man were staring out of a boy’s face, and it was rather unnerving. Nobody quite liked to meet his gaze.

“Hi, I’m Felix Hill,” he said – and he paused with a wicked, impish grin plastered across his good-looking face. “And I’m an alcoholic.”

With an irritated sigh, Louis thrust his hands forwards and sent the force field rolling across the floor like a marble. Felix stumbled and fell, his hood falling onto his head and over his eyes, and he threw his hands out to catch himself before he tripped clumsily and dropped to the bottom of the bubble in a heap.

“Quit messing us about,” Louis growled. “If you’re not going to tell us the truth…” He raised his hands menacingly, and Niall coughed softly, holding out his arm and clenching his fist in a threatening manner, as if he might set it on fire and start landing flaming punches on whoever irritated him. Of course, the other boys knew that Niall could do nothing of the sort, and probably wouldn’t even if he’d had the ability – but Felix had no idea. Wisely, he backed down and sat sulkily on the floor again.

“Well, I’m sorry for trying to lighten the mood,” he huffed.

“In case you haven’t noticed, we’re chained to the wall in a dark room being filled with magical substances that are doing god knows what to our biochemistry – excuse us for not laughing at your crap jokes,” Zayn snapped bitterly.

“Just trying to make light of a bad situation,” grumbled Felix. He leaned backwards, shifting his weight, and examined Louis critically. “Do you want the whole story?”

“The whole, unabridged, non-government approved version, if you don’t mind,” Harry answered.

“Fine.” Felix sighed heavily and held up his hand, palm facing them, and recited boredly “I swear by almighty God to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the –”

“Do these drugs turn you obnoxious as well as supernaturally gifted?” Liam enquired, suspiciously poking his fluid bag with one foot.

“Hopefully not,” Harry murmured, sneaking a glance at Louis. He couldn’t imagine either Niall or Louis suddenly becoming obnoxious.

Put out at being interrupted, Felix demanded “Do you want your questions answered, or not?”

“Don’t get shirty with me, sunshine,” Louis snapped, “unless you want to give us another demonstration of how excellent you are at rolling all over the floor.” He flexed his fingers meaningfully. “Start talking.”

Clearly, the black haired boy disliked being at a disadvantage; he sullenly tossed several locks of
hair, that were blacker than crows feathers, out of his eyes, irritating Zayn the perfectionist, who
wanted to go rushing over and give the guy a haircut just to stop him flicking his hair around. Then
he met Louis’ gaze full on and gave a very loud and insolent sigh, like a rude teenager in high
school.

“My name is Felix Edward Hill,” he announced uninterestedly, “I’m sixteen –”

“Ha!” Niall exclaimed. “Say all you like; show off about your fancy powers; flip all your flicky hair
around like a dark-haired version of Barbie; make your daft jokes and act like you’re God’s gift and
you know it all – but the fact is, we can all legally drink, and you can’t. Suck on that, b –”

“Okay, Niall, thank you,” Harry interrupted hastily. But he couldn’t help but add “And we can all
drive legally as well.”

Felix made a disparaging noise. “Whatever. You lot will die before me.”

“Ladies, ladies, save it for the animal shelter,” Zayn said boredly.

There were several noises of outrage from the boys who had been childishly fighting, and Zayn
rolled his eyes, slightly amused at the reaction he had caused. Niall opened his mouth to start
squabbling, but Liam silenced him with a look.

“Keep talking,” he said, glaring at Felix.

“If you’re sure you guys can handle it without any more outbursts,” Felix snapped. He sighed
heavily and rubbed his eyes. “Okay. So I was innocently wandering along – like you do, heading
down the street, going to meet this girl. Her name was Abby, lovely girl, excellent t –”

“Spare us, please,” Louis begged, “we don’t care about your girlfriend’s boobs!”

Innocently widening his eyes, Felix protested “I was going to say ‘teeth’. What on earth is wrong
with you, making sexual innuendos out of everything I say?”

Tutting, Louis waved a hand as an indication for him to continue.

“Anyway,” Felix carried on, “I was walking along, and then this guy came and asked me if I was
interested in earning a bit of money. I said, what kind of money? He said, easy money. I was like,
yeah, okay, whatever. Why not? So I went after him. He sat me down in this cafe and started asking
me a bunch of questions – you know the sort; name, age, medical history, was I sexually active…”
The sudden wicked grin that appeared on his pale face answered that question before any of the boys
could voice it. “Then he headed me off to his big white van.” He grimaced.

“Oh, God,” Harry muttered.

“Yeah, I know. Stranger with a white van? Total cliché. I was starting to get a bit wary of the whole
thing, so I started to back off a bit – but he grabbed hold of my arm. Well, I wasn’t having any of it,
so I started yelling and fighting, and then all of a sudden he was slamming some gross stinky rag
over my nose and then I was…well, I don’t know. Passing out, or something. Like a girl.” He made
a disgusted noise. “I fainted! God, that’s embarrassing.”

“Chloroform,” Zayn murmured. “I’d rather have had that than a massive needle stabbed in my arm.”

“I gave him a massive whack,” Felix announced dreamily. “Took him a while to get me under, I
think, and I wasn’t going out without a fight…I properly walloped him!” He looked pleased with
himself.
“Well, that’ll be the reason why,” Louis sourly told Zayn. He turned to Felix. “Thanks, kid. You got us all a lovely shot of anaesthetic because you couldn’t keep your fists to yourself!”

“Don’t blame me!” Felix cried. “Stop yelling at me. I’ve come to break you out; you could be a little more grateful!”

“How do you plan to do that?” Zayn asked. “So far all you’ve done is prat about and show off about how great your powers are. What are you going to do – smash our chains with your big head?”

Sniggers rippled through the room. Felix looked annoyed.

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m trapped in a bubble,” he hissed.

“As it so happens, I had noticed,” Louis said mildly, “because I’m the one who’s trapped you.”

“How am I supposed to help you when you’ve got me stuck in this thing?” Felix demanded, violently pummelling the sides of the orb.

“As I’m not convinced that you’re going to help us at all, and we don’t want you popping off and leaving us, you’re staying right there.”

“You’ll have to let me go sometime,” Felix demanded, sulkily, “you can’t keep that up while you’re asleep.”

There was a long pause as they anxiously thought about that.

“Then I guess it’s a good job it won’t come to that, because you’re going to tell us everything, aren’t you?” Louis said fiercely, sounding far more confident than he really was. “After you’ve done that, we’ll decide whether or not to trust you. Then maybe we’ll let you out.”

Felix sighed and then carried on with his story. “Fine! Whatever you say. Okay. So I woke up in a room pretty similar to this one – dark, gross, not fit for human habitation…and at that point, I’m guessing the drugs were at a way more experimental stage. Don’t you guys lecture me about having it bad! They tried feeding the stuff to me first, but that didn’t work well; it tastes horrible, and reacts really badly with saliva; all these pus-filled blisters bubbled up on my tongue and didn’t start going down for about a week. They had to feed me through a tube because I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t even close my mouth without all the boils rupturing and new ones forming in their place. It was horrible. I’ve never been through anything so painful in all my life.” He swallowed bravely, but his eyes looked wet and shone a little too brightly.

Aghast at the revelation, Niall, Liam, Louis, Zayn and Harry stared in pity at him, shocked at the thought of anyone being subjected to an ordeal like that. It made their own imprisonment seem like a beach holiday.

“When they worked out that it wasn’t going to work that way, they started injecting me daily. They must have a better idea of the necessary dosage now. But I was being stabbed with needles twice a day, and given medical checks what felt like every ten minutes…and I just felt like I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“I know that feeling,” Niall murmured sympathetically.

“Then,” continued Felix dramatically, “one day, when I was just...hanging there, feeling like I wanted to die, something ultra freaky happened. It was weird. One second I was uselessly stuck up on the wall like some painting in a museum or something – the next, I kind of did this little shudder, and everything went all tingly. Then cold. And then I fell.”
“Fell where?” Liam asked.

“Onto the floor, of course!” replied Felix impatiently.

Niall blinked uncertainly at him. Louis pulled a sceptical face, raising one eyebrow and pursing his lips in disapproval. Liam shook his head slowly, seeming confused, while Zayn scrutinized Felix’s face with interest, trying to decipher the feelings behind the fierce pearly grey eyes that staring sullenly out at them. Harry, however, was watching Louis anxiously, noticing his hands beginning to shake slightly, the first few beads of sweat forming on his forehead as he struggled to hold the field firmly in place. Worried, Harry scanned his face, wishing he could help. Despite the amount of practice he had been getting lately, Louis still struggled to hold fields of such a large size and density for an extended period of time, especially without having even a second to rest. Sympathetically eyeing his best friend, Harry nibbled his lip and then nervously glanced at Felix. He hoped there would be no sudden mutiny; Louis was flagging, and Harry was afraid that under pressure, the bubble might pop.

“I thought I’d died, at first,” Felix murmured quietly. “I thought maybe through sheer force of will, I’d killed myself somehow. And that I’d fallen through the chains because I was a ghost. But I looked back, and when I saw that my body wasn’t there…I figured that somehow, I must have done it.”

Impressed, Zayn’s eyes widened.

“I tried a few more things,” Felix carried on, “and at first I whacked my fingers a couple of times, but then I figured out how I did it. I went a bit crazy with the whole thing – running through walls, stepping inside trees, that kind of thing…it was quite childish, really, but I wanted to get to grips with it. Then, I just walked out. Straight through the wall, onto the highway, and kept walking. For a long time.” He reached up and wearily raked a hand through his fluffy black hair. “Far too long. I didn’t know where I was. Just walking started to feel worse than being chained to a wall. At least I was warm when I was locked up. Especially because I wasn’t really dressed for the weather. Torrential rain. Thunder, lightning. And I was wearing an Arctic Monkeys t-shirt and Chinos. Lovely. I ended up just staggering along like a drowned rat, wishing I could be somewhere else…anywhere. But the place I most wanted to be was on Abby’s couch. Curled up with her and a bucket of popcorn, watching Family Guy. I closed my eyes, and all of a sudden…I was there.”

“Just like that?” Niall asked curiously.

Felix snorted. “Aside from the popcorn and Family Guy reruns. Also, it was three o’clock on a Monday morning, so Abby was at college. I ended up landing on her sofa and giving her mum a right shock. It was kind of funny, but she started screaming at me and trying to clock me one, so I ran out through the wall and didn’t stop running. I didn’t go home. I’m officially on the missing persons list now, but I figured out I couldn’t go back. God knows who’d experiment on me!”

“Why did you come here?” Louis asked tiredly.

There was a slight slur to his soft voice, and Harry was surprised to see that nobody else seemed to notice the faint exhaustion in his tone – or, if they did, nobody seemed particularly worried about it. The edges of the force field were flaring slightly, as if Louis was starting to lose control, and the bubble was losing its lilac tint. Anxiously eyeing his tired friend, Harry frowned slightly.

“Stay strong, Lou…” he thought worriedly.

“Give me some credit!” was the sharp reply, “I couldn’t sit around knowing that it was happening to other people, and other people were going through all that, and do nothing! Not if I could help.
Especially not when I can do stuff like this.”

“Fair enough,” Niall said cheerfully.

Nobody else seemed satisfied by the explanation. Zayn in particular was burning with questions, and began to fire them out in quick succession: how had Felix known where they were? More to the point, where were they in the first place? How had Felix escaped being grabbed by the police? How had he got in so fast? What did phasing feel like? Felix answered the queries sullenly, his mouth forming an uneasy, sulky line. He had known where they were because he wasn’t blind; he kept an eye on road signs, and had been easily been able to teleport into the room he had originally been brought into, as the criminals had lazily not bothered to move their base. They were somewhere remote in the Lake District; nobody recognized the name of any of the surrounding towns. He had escaped extremely easily, because if he saw a policeman, he could teleport away from them in the blink of an eye, or step right through them if they grabbed hold of him, although he preferred not to resort to the latter unless he had to, because rumours of a ghost boy wandering around the country was not exactly conspicuous behaviour. Besides, he could easily teleport out of the cell when they locked him up, mystifying the police beyond belief. He had gotten in quickly because walking through walls, for him, was like walking through thin air for them: effortesss, he barely realized he was doing it half the time, and more than once he had lost concentration and fallen through the floor of multi-storey buildings and landed in a room on the ground floor after dropping through the ceiling. Once he’d fallen through the foundations of a building, and ended up solidifying and having to haul himself up through the floor of the house, alarming quite a few people who saw him popping up from under the building. And phasing felt like walking through a draught; normal, but a little breezy, although he was more used to it now, and barely noticed the temperature dip anymore.

“Look,” Felix said eventually, standing up and looking imploringly at them, “I can help you! I want to help you, which is unusual for me. Will you let me out so that I can get you away from this place? Please?”

The other boys considered the idea for a while, then Zayn straightened and met the younger boy’s gaze with a steely look in his eye. “What exactly are you planning to do?”

Felix took a deep breath. “My powers revolve around atoms. When I teleport, basically I dissemble myself, transport my atoms through the air and reassemble somewhere different. When I phase through walls, I reduce the density of the atoms in my body which allows me to pass through solid objects. Essentially, that’s all it comes down to. To an extent, I can do the same to other people – that’s how I transport my clothes. What I want to do is to teleport you guys out of here, and at the same time I won’t teleport your handcuffs. So you’ll be completely free.” He gave a self-satisfied little nod, pleased by his own reasoning.

“It’s a good plan,” Liam said in surprise.

Nodding, Felix thrust his hands into the pockets of his hoodie. “I thought we could start with sparks over there? He’s the smallest, he’ll be the easiest to –”

“Whoa, hey, hold on a second!” Harry interrupted. “Have you ever actually done this before?”

Felix blinked at him. “Huh?”

“Clothes are one thing; people are another. Have you ever transported another person before?”

“Of course I have!” Felix cried. Suddenly he looked down, a little embarrassed. “It wasn’t intentional. This guy grabbed hold of me and I went to teleport, and I kind of took him with me. I think he must have thought he’d gone mad! One minute we were in Brighton, the next…Liverpool.”
A small, sheepish smile quirked his lips. “He almost had a heart-attack.”

“So you want to do something you’ve never done before on purpose, bearing in mind that you have no idea what you’re doing, and it could all go horribly wrong,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“Of course it won’t go wrong!” Felix scoffed. “I only ever left part of my shirt behind that one time, and that was ages ago –”

“You left part of it behind?” Harry asked in horror. “That’s it; you’re not taking us anywhere.”

“That was ages ago!” Felix protested pleadingly, “and besides –”

“No,” Harry growled abruptly. He glared fiercely at the dark-haired boy, who seemed to be shrinking under Harry’s gaze.

“What choice do we have?” Louis asked softly.

Harry’s head snapped up, and his green eyes widened as he saw Louis staring at him, blue irises clouded with exhaustion and lips trembling ever so slightly with the effort of holding the field around Felix. Tremors were shaking through his fingers, and Harry gazed worriedly at him.

“I’d rather have a bit of me left behind than be stuck in here forever,” announced Louis wearily. “I’ll go first, though. That way, if anyone gets hurt, it’s me.”

“Lou, no –”

“I’m the oldest,” Louis interrupted sharply, “and you know I wouldn’t let anyone else go.”

“But Louis,” Harry said desperately.


The bubble shimmered and made an odd hissing sound, and then it faded out of existence, sending the room plunging back into darkness without the dim light it provided. Taking a deep breath, Felix cautiously stepped forwards, arms outstretched as if he expected to run into an invisible barrier. Exhausted, Louis slumped against the wall, breathing shallowly, and Harry’s eyes were wide with concern for his friend as he watched. Felix slowly crossed the room, stood behind Louis, and placed a hand gently on his shoulder, and then gave him a long, sympathetic look as Louis inhaled breathlessly, clearly far more tired than he cared to let on.

“Liam,” Louis sternly said, “take care of the boys. Don’t let Niall burn too hard; I might not be here to put him out.”

“Don’t say –”

“Shut up,” Louis commanded. “Take care of them, do you hear me? Don’t let Zayn wake up Niall when he’s sleeping. Make sure you don’t exercise too hard, because you do way too much. And…” he hesitated, then looked over at Harry, who was staring pitifully at him. “Keep an eye on my curly, okay? Promise me?”

“I promise,” Liam answered fervently. “I’ll take care of them, Louis.”

“Louis!” Harry cried. “Don’t go!”

“I’ll only be a second,” Louis promised. “Like I’d leave you? Just wanted to make a speech.” He
swallowed and looked up at Felix. “You ready to go?”

“Ready when you are,” Felix said, and his fingers tightened on Louis’ shoulder. “It feels a bit odd the first couple of times you do it, so take a couple of deep breaths, okay?”

“Right,” Louis agreed grimly. “Okay.” Glancing up, he scanned the room, grinned wickedly, and then said “See you on the other side!”

Harry’s eyes widened in panic.

Louis choked back a laugh. “Of the w –” he began to clarify – but then Felix’s hand squeezed his shoulder painfully tightly, everything blurred in front of his eyes, and the world convulsed and was snatched away from him before he could finish his sentence.
Colours pulsed sickeningly in Louis’ vision, hideous mottled shades of mauve and mustard yellow, and acid green, that gave him a horrible aching sensation behind the eyes as the onsets of a migraine began throbbing through his brain. The blood pouring through his arteries that ordinarily he wouldn’t have been able to feel began to thicken and congeal, turning into a horrible thick treacly substance that chilled his veins like icy water. The outside of him, however, was burning, as if someone had painted his skin all over with flames – as if he were Niall, but the flames were burning him as fiercely as they burned everything else. His mouth tried to open and let out a scream, but he couldn’t move his lips. All of a sudden, he started to shudder, every muscle in his body shrieking in protest…because he could feel himself tearing apart. Every infinitesimally small part of his body was shredding itself into a particle that was a thousandth of a millimetre wide, and slowly detaching itself from the rest, as agonizingly slowly, he came apart, like a tiny, ridiculously complicated jigsaw puzzle being dismantled.

He couldn’t move, couldn’t scream, could hardly think – the colours were fading from before him as his eyes separated and started to float away from him. The panic of feeling himself being ripped to pieces was horrific; he thought he might stop breathing from sheer terror. He no longer had any toes…or any legs…or any lower body whatsoever. His torso was all that remained, and even that was painstakingly falling apart, vanishing into oblivion. Previously, he had been able to hear a harsh, low buzzing sound like a swarm of bees flying around his ears, but he no longer had ears to hear it with.

Every separate molecule of him had thousands of frighteningly intimate sensations running through it, like cool hands stroking bare skin, but far more gentle and far more intense. It felt like each tiny part was an open nerve ending, and every whisper of air made him want to scream because he felt it so strongly…and it felt amazing. He wanted someone to touch those almost painfully sensitive parts of his body, separated as they were from him; he could imagine the tantalizing sensation of soft hands brushing against him, and the thought made him ache with pure longing as he considered how it would feel. The desire was so overwhelming that he thought he might go mad with it, unable to act on it as he was.

Just as he was starting to be terrified that he might never come together again, he started itching instead of tingling – and all of a sudden, he was being snatched back together, being dragged once again into a solid form, and that was almost worse than being apart; he felt dull and numb as his body reformed itself, and once again, he was Louis Tomlinson, a real and solid man again.

He felt hard, compact ground beneath his feet, thick mud churning underneath his shoes, and a wave of dizzy nausea swooshed over him, making him bend over double with a groan. Every inch of his body ached, feeling like his cells had all been clumsily knitted together by an arthritic old woman. His legs shook, cramped and stiff, and harsh tremors stroked down his back, making him shudder and gasp. Instinctively, he breathed in, and his lungs rasped, the oxygen burning his insides and feeling like acid searing against his nostrils and throat. A loud groan ripped its way from his mouth, and Louis cried out as his body crumpled uncontrollably to the floor, shudders rippling through him as he sprawled face down in the dirt. His mouth opened as he choked, and then he retched, and choked up the pathetically healthy meal he had eaten a few hours previously.

A tentative hand rubbed his back comfortingly, and Louis moaned and reached up with an icy hand to push the stranger away, weakly attempting to push himself up into a more dignified position. He ended up collapsing back to the ground again with a small, pathetic noise that he hated for coming
out of his mouth. Mud squished around the muscles of his face, pressed against the ground, as he clenched his stomach fiercely, not wanting to throw up again.

“Sorry,” Felix apologized, “I should have warned you. It’s never been that bad for me, but other people don’t react well.”

“You can say that again,” Louis gasped, and he forced a hand to his mouth and wiped it in disgust.

It took him a while to get into even a vaguely upright position, and even then he wobbled dangerously and had to grab hold of Felix’s arm for support. For some reason, that made him feel even worse; touching the younger boy made his stomach squeeze uneasily, and he ended up gripping several clumps of grass as he slowly forced himself to sit up. His hair was flattened on one side of his head and filled with clumps of mud, and there was a streak of dirt running down his face from where he had fallen face first to the floor. Carefully rubbing his eyes, Louis blinked slowly as he started coming back to awareness.

“Is it always that vicious?” he demanded, wincing as he took another painful breath.

“Not usually,” admitted Felix. “Nobody’s ever reacted so violently before, are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m great!” Louis lied, “absolutely fabulous. I do so love being blasted into atoms and then casually throwing up on the – where are we anyway, where did you bring us?”

Felix threw a cursory glance around the surrounding countryside, as if he wasn’t entirely sure; an idea that somewhat worried Louis. “Um…Penicuik, Scotland.”

“We’re in Scotland?” Louis yelped. “Why the hell are we in Scotland? Why would you bring us to Scotland? You’re not Scottish. I’m not Scottish. None of the boys are Scottish. I thought you were just taking me outside the base! It isn’t in Scotland. Again, why the hell are we in Scotland?” He gave Felix one of the most suspicious glances in the history of the world, and stretched his fingers in a clear indication of what he was planning to do.

“Whoa, hey!” Felix complained, backing away, waving his hands above his head in surrender. “Don’t go sticking me in another of your goldfish bowls!”

“Why have you brought me here?” Louis asked warily, frowning at the younger boy. “What are you doing to me?”

“What kind of guy do you think I am? This was the first place that sprung to mind, that’s all. I’ll go back for the boys in a second, but first, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Louis snapped, “now go back for them, they’ll be going out of their minds!”

“Do you hate me?” Felix enquired inquisitively. There was no harshness in his voice; only curiosity.


“You don’t seem to like me very much.”

“I’m stressed, sleep-deprived and pumped full of drugs; you’ll have to excuse me for being a bit tetchy,” Louis snarled. He groaned and closed his eyes. God. He had no idea why this boy was inspiring such a vehement reaction in him – but for some reason, Louis despised him.

“Will you be all right here?” Felix asked, dropping the subject. “I can go and get them now. Any
preference as to who I pick first?"

A frown creased Louis’ forehead. He loathed favouritism, and no matter how much he secretly wanted to say ‘Harry’, he forced the thought back into the deepest depths of his brain and shook his head fiercely.

“I’ll be right back,” the dark-haired boy promised, straightening up from his crouch and brushing the muck off his jeans. He looked around for any adversaries who could randomly pop up and attack Louis, then directed his gaze towards the sky. His dark hair ruffled softly in the wind, making him look oddly ethereal and ghostly with his pale face. Slowly looking down, Felix nodded to himself – and then he was gone, and the drizzle was swirling through the space that his body had occupied only seconds before, as if the skinny sixteen year old had never been there in the first place.

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Harry was ready to bite his own wrists off and start pacing manically around the room by the time Felix popped back up in the darkened room – and when he saw that the boy was alone, and Louis wasn’t hanging onto his skinny arm, or holding a force field around him, or wobbling on the floor, the sentiment returned in full force. With a tiny sound of skin parting, his mouth fell open and he stared wide-eyed at the black-haired teenager, turning as pale as Felix the ghost boy. Stunned, he took several short, panicked breaths, then remembered exactly how to speak – and speak, he did.

“Where’s Louis?”

Felix rolled his eyes. “Does nobody trust me? You’re all as bad as each other. Louis is fine. He’s in Scotland, getting his breath back. He didn’t take well to teleporting.”

“Scotland?” Niall asked. “Why is he in Scotland?”

“It was the first place I thought of!” Felix snapped, “why so many questions? What have I done to make you all so suspicious of me? I came here to help you! You could at least pretend to have a little faith.”

“Fine, we’re sorry for being mistrustful when a teleporting guy who walks through walls materializes in the room we’ve been trapped in for more than a week, and immediately expects us to start doing a happy dance and singing his praises from the rooftops!” Harry snapped, “now stop whining and get us out of here!”

Pulling a face, Felix looked around the room, then eventually made his decision and crossed the room, laying a hand on Liam’s shoulder. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Liam muttered, looking nervously around at the boys. “You’re absolutely sure Louis is all right?”

“He’s fine,” Felix promised. “He was having a right old go at me when I left, so…trust me, he’s great. Oh! By the way, close your eyes. It’s easier if you close your eyes. And might I suggest holding your breath? I’m afraid the journey feels a little rough the first couple of times you do it. Louis can vouch for that; his vomit is splashed all over the Scottish Highlands.” He sniggered.

Making a disgusted sound at Felix’s amusement, Harry shook his head. On the other side of the room, Liam nodded slowly, gazing warily at the dark-haired boy, and looked around at his friends with an anxious expression clouding in his brown eyes. It was the first time since he had arrived that any of them had ever seen Liam look uncertain, and Zayn especially looked uneasy; he and Liam were mates in a similar way to Harry and Louis, only less intense. Steadying his breathing, Liam
rolled his shoulders carefully, then forced a smile.

“See you in a minute, boys,” he said with strained cheerfulness; his grin was so fake that it was almost painful, like the harsh plastic smirk on the face of a Barbie doll.

Then Felix’s grip turned harsh, his fingers dug into Liam’s muscled shoulder, and his face tightened in concentration. Liam barely had time to seal his lips, snatching a quick breath of air into his lungs, and slam his eyes shut before his muscles tensed and Felix whisked him into nothingness.

When he slammed into the ground and found his whole body pressed against a lot of dirt and dying grass, Liam groaned and curled inwards on himself, trying to stop the nausea. Little did he know that his own sickness was enviable compared to Louis’; Liam only thought he might be sick, whereas Louis actually had. He opened his eyes, and they immediately started streaming, bright light stabbing at his irises while the wind bit nastily at his cheeks and sent his hair wildly blowing up around him. Shaking his head violently, Liam moaned softly and bit his lip, not hard enough that it bled, but with enough pressure to distract him from feeling sorry for himself. He tasted the fresh flavour of wind and plants on his tongue, and he could smell musty earth and sheep all around him. With one hand, he forced himself into a sitting position and squinted, glancing around to find himself face to face with the source of the animal smell: a large sheep was stood docilely over him, staring him down with a very confused expression on its face, glassy eyes blank.

“Baaaaa,” it bleated.

“Holy sh –” the wind tore the expletive raggedly from his lips as he swore and scrambled backwards to escape the animal, which was looking at him with the stupidest of gazes. Liam instantly felt idiotic for being so frantic to get away from a sheep, but it had startled him, after all. He glared at it. He didn’t like being made a fool out of, especially by a white lumpy animal with a straggly, greasy woolly fleece.

“Baaaaa,” the sheep repeated doubtfully.

“Shoo!” Liam ordered, pointing masterfully in the opposite direction. “Leave. I don’t like sheep.”

“Baaaaa,” was the reproachful reply. The animal skittered uneasily a few steps in a way completely different from the one he had indicated, then looked over at him in confusion, as if anticipating further instructions.

“Go away!” commanded Liam. “I have people to look for, things to do…”

Ignoring his demands, the sheep took a few further steps towards him and butted his shoulder with its head, nuzzling into his arm. He was stunned to find himself being accosted by a sheep – so shocked, in fact, that he didn’t push it away. Making a satisfied noise, it cuddled up to him and he uncertainly rubbed its unkempt woolly back with the fingertips of his left hand, bewildered to find himself petting a sheep.

“Well, seeing as there’s nobody else around,” he said feebly. “Where’s that Felix buggered off to?”

“Hello, it’s the sheep whisperer!” called a familiar friendly voice. “Finally made a friend who’s on your intellectual level, Liam?”

Liam’s head snapped up, and he found himself face to face with Louis – who looked extremely different in the light of day. He was muddy, pale, way too skinny, his hair was un-brushed and sticking messily up, one cheek was scratched, and his stripey shirt was stained, his trousers torn.
Liam blinked, unused to being able to see him in such clarity, with so little dimness clouding his eyes. His pupils hurt from the sudden light, and he had to crease up his eyes slightly to look at the incredibly altered form of his skinny friend, who looked so changed when Liam could see him properly. He was taller than Liam had originally thought, and skinnier, although his arms bulged with impressive muscles. His eyes were a dark blue that Liam hadn’t been able to see, and his hair was a less dark shade of brown than it had seemed to be. Still, despite the difference that daylight and a bit of wind made to someone’s appearance, there was no mistaking the brilliance of that smile.

“Lou!”

Liam staggered forwards and threw his arms around the other boy, astonished at how real and solid he felt despite seeming so breakable. He didn’t smell too good; the scent of unwashed boy, musty walls and sick hung about him, he was trembling slightly as the wind snatched at his loose, dirty clothes, and he seemed almost desperate as he hung onto Liam with both hands – but who could blame him? He hadn’t been touched by a friendly and familiar face for days. Liam shared the sentiment; he was just as eager to hug as Louis was. He buried his face in the other boy’s shoulder and clung to him.

“God, you look even uglier in daylight,” Louis teased affectionately, nudging Liam with the top of his head. After a few more seconds, they broke apart, and the two boys examined each other, taking in every inch that they had been unable to see in the darkness.

Louis soon discovered that Liam Payne, the sensible one, with whom he had been willing to trust his best friend’s life to, was a tall, broad-shouldered young man with soft brown hair, which couldn’t seem to decide whether to be curly or straight, and instead waved indecisively over his forehead. He too was pale, from the lack of sunlight which came with captivity, and he had a distinctly fatherly look that Louis had already heard in his voice, along with a kindness that hung about his deep, friendly brown eyes. Now that he could put a proper face to the voice that he had found so reassuring and sensible in the past, and yet brilliantly funny enough to put a smile on his face. It felt good. Louis clapped a hand on Liam’s arm and squeezed hard, grinning at him.

“Nice to see you too, Tommo,” Liam greeted warmly.

Suddenly remembering how he had gotten to be there in the first place, Liam looked wildly around, his head jerking in a panic as he searched for their seemingly one-way ticket to freedom, who, ominously, had vanished.

“Where’d Felix go?” he demanded.

“To fetch the others,” Louis told him reassuringly. “He didn’t stick around. He’d barely dropped you before he was flashing off to go back for the others. Show-off.” He rolled his eyes, but there was a slightly bitter edge to his voice which gave Liam the idea that the other boy didn’t like Felix much.

He’d barely gotten the words out before the space only a few metres away from them was suddenly occupied, by the lanky Felix and a gasping Niall, whose eyes were wide open and face was bright pink. As they stared at him, the blond boy turned an ugly shade of green, groaned and doubled over, barely keeping his balance and retching violently behind a bush. Felix winced at the splattering sounds carried by the wind and shook his head pityingly, stepping out of range of Niall’s wildly flapping and singed clothes.

“I did tell you to keep your eyes shut,” he said.

“Man, that was rough!” Niall complained. “Worse than driving through Dublin on a Friday night! You really need to take lessons in teleportation.”
“You do it, if you’re so smart,” Felix retorted, shoving his shaggy hair off his forehead and then stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Anyway, it’s not a premium service. I’ve never had a problem with it. No, no, stay down; it’ll pass.” He shoved Niall back into a crouch before the other boy could stand.

Whining in protest, Niall sank back to the ground, his blond hair ruffling in the wind, and fixed them all with an injured, blue-eyed glance. In the fierce wind, the blood was falling from his cheeks as he cooled, and his burnt clothes were as dishevelled as the rest of him.

“Go back for the others,” Liam commanded, “they’ll be frightened out of their wits!”

“Oi! Give me a second! It’s not as easy as all that, popping back and forth all the time! Not only do I have to rip myself – and now, apparently, someone else – apart, but I also have to punch a hole in the fabric of –”

“Oh, spare us the logistics,” Louis interrupted sharply, “and the dramatics. Now go back for our friends, okay? And this time, bring them both. No one gets left behind, do you understand me?”

“I understand all right,” Felix bitterly replied, “I’m your personal taxi.” But he vanished without further complaint.

“He’s very rude, isn’t he?” Niall said cheerfully, getting to his feet and wiping his mouth. “But cool. He has great hair.”

“Don’t let Zayn hear you say that,” Liam chuckled. “As far as he’s concerned, no one’s hair is better than his.”

Louis, however, was silent. He had no wish to participate in the discussion – only to wait.
Chapter 11

Louis knew how fast Felix was, so understandably he was slightly alarmed when time slipped lethargically by and nobody came back. At first he wondered whether Felix was messing with them on purpose, but he decided eventually that nobody could be that cruel. Felix was rude, petty, obnoxious, self-obsessed and he seemed to exude an aura of dislikeable-ness that Louis alone was privy to, but he wasn’t horrible enough to deliberately frighten them all out of their wits with an unnecessary delay.

Niall didn’t seem to notice the passing of time. After the first few minutes, he had wandered over to befriend the sheep, and from that moment on his hands had been buried in its thick wool, stroking it and chatting to it while he petted it like it was a dog. The sheep seemed pleased by the attention, nuzzling into his arm and making occasional sounds of contentment. Liam, however, had a very different purpose in mind for the animal: Niall seemed quite keen to keep it as a pet, whereas Liam was secretly plotting about how they could use it, in the event that Felix never came back. He didn’t trust the black haired boy as implicitly as Niall did; he wasn’t as wary of him as Louis was, but he certainly didn’t trust him. The way Liam saw it, the sheep was very hairy, so they could make clothes and blankets out of its wool, and if it was a female sheep they could attempt to milk it (which he was quite reluctant to do, as he would have to mess around with several private sheep parts, and he wasn’t too keen on that idea; animal or not, private parts ought to stay private). Whereas if not, they could cook it and eat it. He would probably have to wrestle it out of Niall’s arms first, but Niall liked food, and once the animal was cooked, Liam was pretty sure the Irish boy would end up eating it anyway. If he consented to light the fire that they would cook it on. As their primary heat source, Niall had a certain power over them. Cuddling up to the sheep in his ragged clothes, he looked up at the other two boys, smiling cheerfully.

“This isn’t so bad.”

“Where’s Harry and Zayn?” Louis exploded, “that’s what I want to know.”

“Felix went to get them.”

“Yeah, and that was ages ago. I don’t trust him. He’s a creep.”

Niall opened his mouth to argue – and then he found that he could no longer maintain his eye contact with Louis to continue the discussion, as a very tall and lanky body was standing between them. Someone with long legs and a lot of curly hair had appeared out of thin air, and was wobbling unsteadily, looking very pale and wide-eyed with alarm. Louis blinked, shocked at the unexpected arrival – then just in time, he lunged, and his arms went around a slender waist with the bones exposed from lack of regular – or sufficient – meals, and he attempted to catch the boy. Unfortunately, Harry was unhealthily skinny but still pretty heavy, and Louis couldn’t hold him up, at least not for more than a few seconds. For a moment or so, they staggered together, and then Harry stumbled and fell backwards, his arms flailing wildly. Grimly, Louis hung on, and they fell together, crashing painfully into the dirt and knocking all the breath out of them – although Louis, who had Harry’s slender body to protect him, fell a little less hard. The white light was bright enough after the darkness of the room he had just left that Harry had to close his eyes, and therefore had no idea who had just leapt on top of him. Naturally, he panicked. But instead of rolling or struggling or kicking, as Louis had expected, and which he was prepared for, Harry surprised him by bucking upwards instead, rocking his hips violently and jerking them both upwards into the air. The movement was so fast and so sharp that Louis almost lost his grip right away; he came close to rolling off and had to grab at Harry to keep clinging on.
Eyes still squeezed tightly shut, Harry used his advantage and twisted suddenly, and once again Louis nearly rolled off onto the floor. Before Harry could knock him away again, Louis got a firm hold of his shoulders, then leaned inwards and his lips brushed through thick locks of curls for a good few tense seconds before his mouth found Harry’s ear and the contact of lips on skin made Harry freeze. Louis felt his mouth slowly slide open, and then he murmured “You going to throw me off, Harold? What a way to treat your best friend.”

Harry started so violently that he almost knocked Louis off again. His eyes took a few seconds to adjust as he opened them and squinted, and then he was focusing on the face that he barely recognized in the light, and intently listening to the voice that he recognized very well.

“Say something else,” he demanded.

Considering for a moment, Louis eventually said “Your hair looks even curlier in daylight.” Then he laughed.

It took a few seconds for Harry to force his eyes open, but he managed it eventually, and then he and Louis regarded each other for a while. They had seen each other in full daylight before, of course, in the earlier days of their captivity, but it had been such a long time that Louis wanted a moment to appreciate it, and so he leaned back a little to take Harry in. It was clear that, although he hadn’t noticed it much before, Harry had a few inches of extra height, and Louis found himself not minding, even though he was older and perhaps ought to have been taller. The curls helped, of course; a pile of fluffy, voluminous chocolate brown hair heaped up on top of his head. He smiled at Louis, and dimples grew in his cheeks, which were paler than Louis remembered. He’d lost weight; the lines of his face were more visible, like they had been carefully sculpted by an artist, and his bones stuck out so that curves had become sharp angles instead. His elbows looked like you could get a paper cut from them. Harry was slimmer and more fragile than he had been before, and yet to Louis, he looked incredible. The light in his green eyes was more than enough to disguise the less refined features of his appearance.

Before Louis could say another word, Harry surprised him by yanking him closer, into a huge hug. A surprised noise tore out of Louis’ mouth as he found himself being dragged into the insistent embrace of a pair of long arms, but surprisingly, it was a pleasant sensation. He’d never hugged another guy so closely before, but he enjoyed it – it felt right, almost safe. The wind was still blowing intensely, and Louis wasn’t dressed for the weather; he was shivering lightly. Harry radiated warmth in every direction, and Louis eagerly leaned closer into the hug to try and steal some of his body heat. He ended up leaning his cheek on Harry’s shoulder, and eventually burying his face in Harry’s neck and inhaling the gorgeous smell that was pouring off Harry’s skin; it wasn’t aftershave or deodorant or any kind of synthetic fragrance, but simply a uniquely Harry smell, and it was weirdly addictive. Louis breathed in heavily, savouring the scent. Curls tickled his forehead, and he smiled slightly, burrowing even further into Harry’s arms and laughing against Harry’s skin because it felt so good to hug him in that way, and it was making Louis feel a deep, stirring emotion that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Not entirely sure what he was feeling, Louis shrugged it off and shifted slightly, squashing Harry into the grass with the fierceness of the hug. The warm boy in his arms almost seemed to purr with satisfaction as they cuddled, and Louis listened to the humming sound that was coming from Harry’s chest and couldn’t help but soften slightly. This was his best friend. He would be happy not to move another inch from that spot, just hugging him. Perhaps those emotions were a little intense, but he’d had very little human contact for what felt like a lifetime, and he was close to Harry; naturally he would feel a desire to be close to him. Nudging Harry’s collarbone with his nose, Louis murmured incoherently under his breath, the wind snatching his words away, and both of their smiles grew.

A piercing wolf-whistle shattered the moment, and Louis pulled his face out of Harry’s neck to turn
around and see where it had come from. Niall was grinning, hands shoved in his tattered pockets, looking mischievously down at them.

“All right, lads? Having fun down there?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Louis said brightly, sitting up and shuffling backwards slightly so that Harry could push himself upwards too.

Harry dragged himself into a sitting position, and Louis found himself sitting on Harry’s knee, which, again, was nowhere near as strange as it should have been. They both grinned, and Harry got a good opportunity to examine Niall and see him properly for the first time. For a few critical seconds, he examined him thoroughly, then waved at him cheerfully.

“Nice to see you after all this time! I’ve never seen you in good light before,” he commented.

“Look at you!” Niall cried, “you’re so curly! And you look like one of those movie stars. Look at that smile, boys. Look at it! I bet he has girls chasing him in the street!” When no noises of agreement met his suggestion, he blinked and turned around. “Boys?”

“You mind socializing later?” Liam called, “because I could do with some help over here!”

Over by Liam’s side a good few metres away, sat at his feet, Zayn wasn’t in such bad shape; they all took a quick look at him and discovered him to be an attractive teen with immaculate hair and tanned skin, who was pale and thin like the rest of them, and clinging to clumps of grass with both hands to steady himself. Apart from being a bit wobbly, he seemed all right, having coped pretty well with the teleportation. However, beside him, Felix lay flat on his back, limbs spread-eagled dramatically, eyes closed, head thrown back. He had lain down with the deliberate intention of catching their attention, but it would appear that he had stayed there because he had no choice. His mouth was twisted into an uncomfortable grimace, his fingers clenching and unclenching, and he wriggled every few seconds, but he seemed like he wasn’t going to move for a while.

Louis got up and hauled Harry to his feet, and together they wandered across the field and reached the boy lying on the ground. Interested, Harry knelt beside him and reached for his wrist, checking for the pulse that he knew was there. He sneaked a glance at Louis and raised an eyebrow questioningly, and Louis grinned and nodded in response. Rocking backwards onto his heels, Harry choked back the laugh that he could feel coming and opened his mouth, grinning at Louis and forcing the humour out of his voice.

“I think he’s dead!” he announced, “What do we do? Should we leave him?”

One of Felix’s eyes snapped open at the question, and Harry laughed at the anxious expression on his face. Louis joined him, patting Harry on the shoulder and shaking his head in amusement as he pushed back a few tufts of hair.

“Nope, looks like he’s still with us,” he said amusedly, “bad luck.”

“Rude!” Felix grumbled, “I rescued you, remember; you could have a little more gratitude!”

He flopped uselessly against the ground, staring pathetically at the sky. Louis tutted and rolled his eyes at the dramatic expression on his face, then shared a smile with Harry, who looked like he wanted to laugh again. Niall wasn’t interested in Felix; he had dropped to his knees as well and currently had his arms around the sheep, cheerfully stroking it. Zayn was getting his breath back, and having a quiet conversation with Liam.

“Right,” Louis said, slinging an arm around Harry’s shoulders, “what do we do now? Because I
“Hey!” Felix argued, “give me a second! This teleportation isn’t as easy as you make it sound! I need a chance to get my breath back.”

“Well don’t take too long,” Louis told him roughly, “we don’t have all day.”

“You’re so rude!” Felix complained, “I told you, I need a minute!” He lay with his lips pressed tightly together, white with the force that he held them closed with.

Louis sighed impatiently, but he grabbed Harry’s wrist and whirled them both around, finding a fairly comfortable patch of grass on which to sit before he settled them both down onto the floor. They ended up sat far closer to each other than he had originally intended, with his head resting on Harry’s shoulder, but they were both perfectly comfortable with the position. Louis enjoyed the warmth coming from the younger boy, and he kept his expression carefully blank as he pulled one of Harry’s long arms towards him and started rubbing it to try and coax some more warmth into him with the friction. The wind was such that it whipped their hair violently into the air, and they were so close that caramel strands of hair wound with curly chocolate ones, making Louis feel a weird shiver of pleasure deep inside him.

“You guys cold or something?” Niall asked as he poked his head around the sheep. He looked ridiculous with his arms still thrown happily around its neck, his own hair fluttering as wildly as the ragged remnants of his clothes, but he didn’t seem to notice how their smiles widened. “Because you don’t have to cuddle like that, you know. I can fix it.”

Without waiting for them to reply, he detached himself from the sheep, reassuring it with a murmur and a pat, and then ambled a short distance away. The sheep excitedly followed him, seemingly enjoying his company, and Niall tutted fondly at it as he cleared a round, circular patch on the ground free of grass, leaving only mud behind in a thick ring with more grass left in the middle, like a doughnut-shaped patch of dirt. Getting to his feet, Niall stepped into the middle of the ring, paused – and then he caught fire. The blaze only lasted for a moment, crackling fiercely around him, and then he extinguished himself and leapt neatly out of the circle of grass, which had now lit itself, but was trapped from growing any further by the mud ring. Harry and Louis gathered gratefully around it, quickly followed by Zayn and Liam, who stretched out their hands to warm them with the flames, but Louis made no effort to distance himself from the younger boy; in fact, he only wriggled closer to him so that they could reflect the new warmth off each other. Satisfied, Niall went to sit by the stunned looking sheep, and put an arm around it to reassure it. Bewildered, the sheep stood beside him, not seeming to understand what had happened but standing with Niall anyway, even though he had just set himself on fire.

“Show off,” Liam chided.

Niall looked injured. “Everyone else got to use their powers! I thought it was my turn.”

Louis tutted and turned away to look at Felix. They all stared at him for a few minutes until it became obvious that he had no intention of moving, and that was when Louis got annoyed and started scowling at him. Ignoring the glares that were directed at him, Felix continued to scan the sky as if it were something fascinating, until Louis made a very irritated noise, and the black-haired boy’s head jerked as he turned and stared at Louis.

“Yes?”

“Do you mind not just lying there?” Louis exploded. “It’s cold, and we want to get back to civilization if it’s all the same to you.” The biting sarcasm in his voice showed that clearly, he wasn’t certainly don’t fancy sticking around here.”
expecting an answer.

Felix gave him one anyway. “I am *tired,*” he hissed, “and I feel sick and I’ve never teleported that many people, or in such a short space of time, and I’d quite like to lie down and have a bit of a rest, if you *don’t* mind.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. You offered to help us, and that doesn’t mean leaving the job half done because you’re a bit out of breath. Now *get up,* and make good on your promise,” Louis snarled.

Harry grabbed his arm. “Lou,” he warned.

Normally, Louis would have shaken him off, but he couldn’t help but weaken slightly at the sensation of warm fingers gripping his elbow. The anger roiling in his stomach immediately began to ease off, although he clung to it obstinately. He was furious, and when he was cross, he was intimidating; he could see that despite his backchat, Felix was a little bit scared of him. Louis had no intention of losing that advantage.

“If I teleport now,” Felix said calmly, “it’s very likely that I will leave bits of you behind. And I don’t mean I’ll leave a *person* behind, I mean I’ll leave random body parts strewn across the country, or possibly just dissolved into atoms if I can’t reform you properly. Is that what you want? Because if you really want to risk it, then fine.” He reached out a hand for Louis to pull him up, his eyes challenging.

Louis had always been one to take risks, and he might have taken Felix up on that offer just so that he could have the satisfaction of winning the argument, but unfortunately, Harry’s fingers contracted, squeezing him painfully hard, and looking down, Louis felt all the fight drain out of him as he exhaled in a heavy sigh. Harry’s thumb stroked down the back of his wrist, and he leaned against the younger boy in defeat.

“We can’t stay here for much longer,” he pointed out, “we’re right out in the open. If the authorities are really looking for you, then they’ll see us straight away if we stick around. We’re not exactly dressed to blend in.” He indicated his own bright red trousers and stripey shirt, which were about as conspicuous as you could wish for in a field full of grass and purplish heather that only came up to his ankles.

“I can’t teleport you all right now. You’re going to have to wait – unless you can think of a way that I can transport all of us without having to use up all the energy I don’t have.”

“Hang on,” Harry interrupted. “I think I have an idea.”

Clearly surprised, Felix blinked at him. “Already?”

Harry ignored him. “Before, when Louis caught you in the force field and you tried to teleport across the room, when you teleported, the field came with you. But you didn’t mean to bring it with you – it just sort of followed you. What if he put a field around us all, and then you teleported? The field would come with you, and so would we, but you wouldn’t be doing it intentionally. Would that work?” He looked anxiously at Louis for approval.

“That’s an excellent idea!” Louis told him instantly.

“It could actually *work,*” Felix mused, “as long as he could make a field big enough…”

“Of course I can!” Louis said, stunned and affronted at his abilities being doubted. Before anyone else could attempt to suggest that he was incapable, he flexed his fingers and a bubble blossomed around them to demonstrate, at least a hundred metres larger on every side than it needed to be.
“We can make a move, then! Can you get up?” Liam asked, but without waiting for Felix to answer, he grabbed hold of the boy’s hand and dragged him to his feet, making Felix cry out in annoyance.

“All right!” he snapped, yanking his arm away and massaging his shoulder, “no need to dislocate my arm.”

“Stop bickering,” Louis ordered. “Everyone come here.”

They all gathered in a little huddle around him, and Harry had to admit that he was more than a little anxious as he watched Felix slowing his breath as he prepared to use his powers, and Louis standing up straighter as he extended his fingers in readiness. Liam was forcing a calm expression across his face, but his brown eyes were dark with concern. Beside him, Zayn was clearly anxious, chewing violently on his lower lip, and Niall was still crouched on the floor with his arms around the sheep. Exhaling in irritation, Zayn folded his arms and watched the Irish boy, who was rubbing the sheep’s back and crooning under his breath to it. The others couldn’t decide whether to be amused or annoyed, but Zayn still felt a little sick and his temper was wearing thin, so a frown creased his forehead as he folded his arms and commanded:

“Niall! Get away from that sheep!”

“He likes me!” Niall protested. “I can’t just leave him.”

“It’s a sheep,” Felix pointed out.

“He’ll be lonely!” wailed Niall.

“I’m sure he’ll cope,” Liam said gently. “He did before you came. Let go of him, Niall.”

“But –”

Before he could argue any more, Zayn grabbed hold of Niall’s arms, wrenched him away from the sheep, and gave it a gentle shove. Surprised, the sheep bleated piteously and staggered away from them, dancing off to the right, and as Niall lurched after it with a cry, Louis concentrated, the bubble exploded into life around them, and then Felix tore them all apart and they vanished into oblivion, clinging to each other for dear life.
Chapter 12

There turned out to be several things that Harry had overlooked with his plan: one of them was that the force field had needed to be extremely large to accommodate six lanky teenage boys, and the alleyway that Felix surreptitiously materialized them in was one of the tiniest, most confined backstreets that he could have found. When they reappeared in the alleyway, hundreds of miles away from the expanse of Scottish land that had been stretching gloriously around them mere seconds ago, the first thing that the bubble did was to flex inwards to compensate for the walls that towered around them. It wasn’t strong enough to push the walls out of place, so instead the force field caved inwards at certain points, knocking them all into each other as the walls of it slammed into their backs. For a few minutes, there was chaos as they all fell over each other, around each other, on top of each other and underneath each other – only Felix avoided the madness; every time someone went to fall on him, they ended up going straight through him. It was a disconcerting sensation, like being plunged in warm water; Felix felt colder when he phased, whereas when he stepped through them, everyone else got warmer. Everyone struggled and kicked and protested for a while, until Louis suddenly had the sense to release the bubble, and all six of them dropped clumsily to the floor with yells of complaint.

Felix neatly picked himself up, dusted down the knees of his jeans, then threw a cursory glance around the alleyway to make sure that nobody had seen them. When he was satisfied, he reached down and hauled Liam to his feet, but left the rest of them to get themselves up, which Louis thought was pretty rude, actually, although he never spoke up. They all watched as Felix walked in a quick circle, tapping the walls, and although from his focused expression he appeared to be doing something important, both Harry and Louis were secretly fairly certain that really he was just stalling for time.

For a while, they allowed him to trail his fingers along the brickwork, examine the bins gathered in the corner, and check the windows of the building, and nobody made a sound as he scrupulously checked and double checked every square millimetre of wall as if it was the most important thing he’d ever done. A frown creased his forehead as though he didn’t like what he saw, and every once in a while he would try to pull open the door or one of the windows, which looked like the slightest touch would send them crumbling to dust, but in reality were far stronger than anyone had given them credit for. When he attempted to yank the door open, he ended up hurting his hand on the sharp iron door handle, and danced around swearing for a while, waving his hand in the air while profanities poured from his open mouth. Niall, who was renowned for swearing himself, was secretly impressed by the extent of the younger boy’s vocabulary. He was pretty sure that Felix could teach him a couple of new expletives, something that none of the other boys would be at all impressed by. In their opinions, Niall swore too much already.

Zayn lost his patience first. He was cold, his clothes were covered in bits of grass and muck, and although it wasn’t raining any more, the weather left a lot to be desired; the sky was a lovely shade of grey and looked like it might collapse in on them at any second. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he stomped over to Felix and stood behind him, glaring at the back of his head.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what are you doing?”

“Actually, maybe I do mind,” Felix said sharply, but he relented after a few seconds. “I’m working out how we get in. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to phase through this, because I’m pretty sure there’s a bunch of mould growing inside this wall and it feels completely gross walking through that, but I can’t see how else we can get in.”
Apart from stupid and implausible suggestions that instantly sprung to mind, which involved either Louis hurling force field after force field at the unfortunately solid door, or Niall attempting to melt it, nobody else could see how else they could get in, either.

“Fine,” sighed Felix, “I’ll go and let you all in. Then at least we’ll have somewhere a bit warmer to hide out while we work out what we’re doing next.” Before anyone could argue, he pressed the flat of his hand against the wall, then closed his eyes and, with a disgusted expression, started sliding through the brickwork.

It was disconcerting watching his hand vanish through the first unevenly placed stone, although all five of them smirked at the little squeal he made when his fingers encountered something slimy inside the bricks. But with his eyes squeezed shut, his entire hand became submerged up to the wrist, and then he kept going, inching further and further forwards until his whole forearm was sticking into the wall, up to the elbow. Felix didn’t stop there; before long even his shoulder was poking through the wall, and all of a sudden he seemed to tire of taking it slowly, and stepped quickly forwards. His whole body disappeared through the building, and Harry, Liam, Louis, Zayn and Niall stared after him in horror.

“That,” Liam said, shaking his head, “is just creepy.”

The other boys all made noises of agreement – other than Niall, who was pouting. He folded his arms across his chest and turned away from them, much to their bewilderment, and for a few moments everyone paused curiously to look at him. Louis was the first to realize what Niall’s problem was.

“Oh, for god’s sake, Niall!” he said in exasperation, “I hope you’re not going to start sulking about that flipping sheep!”

“He wasn’t just any old sheep,” Niall whined, “he liked me.”

“We couldn’t have brought him with us, Niall,” Liam reminded him; “he would just have been another mouth to feed. With grass. Which there doesn’t seem to be much of around here. Besides, no offence, but he was a bit of a fire hazard, and with you around, that has rather more significance, don’t you think? He was woolly, Niall. The slightest spark and he’d have been up in flames. Do you know what that means? If you’d gotten annoyed or upset when you were next to him, you could have burnt him alive. That would be cruel. Beyond cruel. You couldn’t do that, could you, Niall?”

Someone muttered something tasteless about roast lamb, and Liam attempted to quell them with a look, but having no idea which of the other boys had said it, he ended up fixing them all with a vicious glare to compensate for not knowing which of them had made the insensitive comment. Crestfallen, Niall looked down at his feet, acknowledging that Liam was right but disliking the truth of what he had said.

Before anyone else could say a word, the door burst open, nearly smacking Harry in the face. Instinctively, instead of flinging up a force field to protect the younger boy’s face, Louis did what he had been doing for twenty years before that, and reached out with his hands instead, seizing Harry’s arm and dragging him away, backwards from the door and out of range. A low breath slid through Harry’s teeth as a gasp, as he stumbled backwards and almost tripped into Louis’ arms. Catching him with a little difficulty, since Harry was taller than him and very long all over, Louis helped him to straighten and then tapped him comfortingly on the wrist.

“Watch yourself, Harry,” he murmured.

The only response was a sharp nod; Harry didn’t look round. He had his eyes on Felix, who was
stood grinning in the doorway, looking altogether too pleased with himself and not in the least bit remorseful considering that he’d almost whacked someone in the face with a large door. Louis thought that it was a wise move; he still didn’t trust Felix. Perhaps he was imagining that the boy was slightly shifty, or that his eyes were a little too innocently wide, his smile too sweet and white. He might have been paranoid in thinking that Felix looked like he was enjoying the whole situation far too much, including almost knocking Harry over. But whether he was being too suspicious or not, there was something about the boy which made Louis uncomfortable, and he wasn’t planning on letting him wander too far astray. The thought that someone else was keeping an eye on him as well was reassuring.

“Well, it’s hardly five-star accommodation,” Felix told them cheerfully, “not even one star, by the look of it, but it’s dry. Not warm, but I’m sure you can fix that, right, sparks?” He grinned brightly at Niall.

All five of the other boys frowned in irritation at the nickname which none of them liked, especially not Niall. In the past he’d offered to let the other boys call him ‘Nialler’, and they did on occasion, but to have an annoying stranger adopt an equally annoying nickname and begin to use it to refer to their friend, especially when they had already expressed a dislike for it, was maddening – perhaps even more so by the almost taunting expression dancing in Felix’s grey eyes which suggested he knew exactly why he had set all of their teeth on edge.

“Depends,” Niall said shortly, “do you want to be set on fire?”

“Why would I be set on fire?” Felix enquired artlessly.

“Because if it’s too dry, then everything could go up with me,” Niall snapped.

“How positive of you,” Felix answered, rolling his eyes. “I’m sure we can risk it – bearing in mind that I can teleport us all out again if things get a little…heated.” He seemed amused by his choice of words, but nobody else laughed or even smiled.

“Fine,” Zayn interrupted. “Let’s go in!” He stormed past Felix with a scowl, showing exactly what he thought of him…similar to what everyone else did: he didn’t like him at all.

Gripping Harry’s elbow, Louis lightly nudged him, then stepped forwards, hand outstretched just a few inches in front of them so that he was ready to protect them both with a force field if any danger appeared. Not that he was expecting any, but it was better to be safe than sorry, and he knew that although Harry made no verbal acknowledgment of the gesture, the muscles loosened slightly in his back, and he relaxed a little, so Louis knew that he was grateful for the thought. Together, they advanced after Zayn, following him into the darkened room. One-star was most definitely a generous rating; the room was not dirty, but cramped instead, filled with crates and boxes and general debris, like it had been some kind of store room that had been left messy. A wooden box was lying in the further corner, with bubble-wrap heaped on top of it, like a parody of a mattress and a duvet. Zayn had taken a seat on this, sat cross-legged on the bubble-wrap and casting unimpressed glances across the room. Louis loosened his grip on Harry’s elbow and looked around the room himself, just to check that there was no danger, and once he was confident that nothing was going to leap out at them, he released Harry all together, dropping his arm and giving him a reassuring pat on the back before he moved to explore the rest of the room. Not that there was much to explore.

Niall and Liam entered the room next, Niall uncertain, Liam focused, ready to attempt to act if the need arose, although frightened Niall would be more useful if they attacked. The first thing Niall noticed was a cardboard box labelled THIS WAY UP with a large red arrow (which showed how much notice had been taken of the warning, seeing as the arrow was not pointing upwards and the box had been tipped clumsily onto its side), and he poked it inquisitively, then started to open it.
Nobody bothered to scold him; clearly whoever had left it there wasn’t coming back for it, as was indicated by the date stamped on the side of the box (dated back at least four years ago) and when Niall ripped the cardboard apart to discover food, his cry of exultation was short-lived, because the sandwiches were green and furry, the salad was limp and brown, where it had not disintegrated all together, and the tins were so rusted that they would have been impossible to open even if any of them had happened to have a tin opener.

“Nice place,” Louis commented.

“All right, so it’s hardly Buckingham Palace –”

“It’s a dump,” Harry said disgustedly.

“Well, if you have any better ideas, I’d like to hear them!” Felix hissed. “Oh, wait, actually, no I wouldn’t.”

“Stop arguing!” Niall begged.

They all turned to stare at him, anxious at the blatant pleading in his voice and his widened eyes. He was unhappy with conflict, and disliked seeing his friends fighting with their saviour, but none of them had predicted that he would beg when all they had been doing was snapping at each other. Still, nobody could be nasty enough to continue having a go at Felix when he so clearly disliked Felix – and they both watched as Felix reluctantly backed down, knowing that there was no point in trying to fight with two people who no longer had any intention of arguing with him.

“It’s dry, it’s not cold, and there’s stuff to lie on,” Liam pointed out; “let’s face it; we could do worse. We’re free, remember? We can relax a little. This isn’t permanent; if we sleep on it, we can think about this and probably find somewhere way better tomorrow.”

Nodding, Zayn agreed “I second that.” He went to lie down, thought better of it, then took off his checked shirt to reveal the thin white cotton vest he was wearing underneath. Draping the shirt over the wooden crate he was sat on, he lay down on top of it, bunched up some bubble-wrap underneath his head as a pillow, then pulled a couple more sheets of the stuff over him as a makeshift blanket.

Felix was next to lie down, tucking his arms inside his hoodie and shrinking inside of it as if it were a sleeping bag, then laying down on similar box. Liam rolled his eyes and shuffled into a corner, nestling himself among a couple of boxes and wrapping his arms around himself before closing his eyes in readiness for sleep. Coughing, Niall stood helplessly in the middle of the room for a while, shivering in the ragged remains of his clothes. Harry gave him a pitying glance, and within seconds he was stripping off, taking off his jumper and crossing the room to pull it over Niall’s bed. It was a little too big for him, but at least it would keep him warm.

“Go to sleep,” Harry said softly, “and don’t singe my jumper, okay, Horan? If you burn it, I’ll get Louis to throw force fields at you, and you know how fun that is.”

Niall shook his head fondly; when he had nightmares, he would often set himself on fire without meaning to, something that both he and the boys had quickly learnt after he’d discovered his power. “Is that your way of saying ‘sweet dreams’?”

Harry shrugged. “If you like. Night, Niall.”

“Night, Harry.”
As if they couldn’t bear to be left out, the rest of the boys – Felix excepted – began bouncing “goodnight’s across the room, some tired and mumbling, others wide awake, but all sincere, especially Liam’s.

“Night, Harry.”

“Night, Liam.”

“Night, Louis.”

“Night, Niall.”

“Night, Zayn.”

“Night, Liam.”

“Night, Harry.”

“Night, Louis.”

This continued for the next couple of minutes, to Felix’s frustration; he ended up groaning and covering his ears so that he wouldn’t have to listen to them, which, of course, made Louis amused so he only spoke louder. Louis was noisy anyway; when he actually intended to be loud, he was practically unbearable. In the end, it wasn’t just Felix who was sorely tempted to throw something at him.

“NIGHT, ZAYN!” Louis yelled.

“Shut up,” Zayn mumbled, rolling over and burying his face in his shirt.

Snorting with laughter, Louis turned around to face the one boy he hadn’t yet said goodnight to, and paused. Harry was shivering lightly after having given his jumper away, arms wrapped carefully around his torso, a light sprinkling of goosebumps raised on his arms. Avoiding Louis’ gaze, he let a tuft of curly hair fall across one eye and determinedly stared at the floor. There was only one crate left in the room; one appropriate place left to sleep, and it was no larger than any of the others. In order to share it, they would have to squeeze up very closely against each other. Harry was fighting a blush, although he was adamant that Louis wouldn’t see it. After all, he wasn’t entirely sure why he was blushing in the first place. Why were his cheeks hot? Why was his heart pumping? Why did his blood feel like it was racing unnaturally quickly through his veins at the thought of sharing a bed with his best friend? Why should he care? It was just sharing a bed, after all; in a completely platonic, non-sexual way. Who cared about that?

“You coming, curly?” Louis asked softly.

Harry swallowed. “Yeah.”

They advanced on the crate together, and Louis lay down first, flopping back on the grimy wood without a care in the world, not seeming to notice how filthy it was. With an easy grin, he first shoved back a strand of hair that had flopped into his eyes, then reached out and grabbed Harry’s hand, pulling him down beside him. Shocked at the nonchalance with which Louis yanked him into his bed, Harry made no attempt to struggle, and all of a sudden found himself lying very closely against Louis, their shoulders, hips and thighs touching. It was far less intimate than they had been on the field about an hour ago, but Harry couldn’t help but feel warm all over, his hair sticking to his damp forehead. Excitement had his palms sweating, something which he hated, because nobody ever wants to hold someone’s hand if that hand is horribly sweaty – he wiped his hands on his jeans,
hoping that Louis wouldn’t notice.

“You’re freezing,” murmured Louis, and he reached out and put an arm around Harry, pulling him closer to his side with a little jerk.

Harry let out a little squeak of surprise, then quickly closed his mouth so that he couldn’t make a sound like that again. He trembled more than he had before, but no longer because he was cold. It was odd, because he’d never thought that he would feel like this around Louis; he’d always just been a friendly voice in the darkness. Harry had never expected that Louis would be gorgeous. It had never occurred to him that Louis might have a well-defined jawline, strong arms, humorous dark blue eyes, soft caramel-coloured hair (which admittedly needed washing, but it made Harry’s stomach hurt to think about how beautiful he would be after a bit of shampoo and soap had been into contact with him) and a smile that could take your breath away. Flustered, Harry closed his eyes quickly to distract himself from the thought, but with the heat pouring off Louis’ body in huge waves, he couldn’t really not think about the boy who so calmly had an arm around him. And it wasn’t helped by the fact that it really had been quite a while since Harry had been in a relationship, and he hadn’t had someone else’s very attractive body lying quite so closely to him for far too long. Perhaps it was understandable, bearing in mind his age and the almost inappropriately close proximity of their bodies – despite the innocent intentions Louis doubtlessly had and the fact that they were not in any sort of compromising position – that Harry would be thinking about sex. He was eighteen. He thought about sex a lot. It was kind of unavoidable.

Clearly oblivious to the agonizing sexual frustration that was running through the head of the boy beside him, Louis sighed contentedly, wriggled slightly and murmured sleepily, “Night, Harry.”

Taking a deep breath, Harry bravely forced all thoughts, sexual and platonic, out of his head, and made himself think about his exhaustion instead. He was tired – tiredness and physical action did not go well together.

“Night, Louis,” he said.

He closed his eyes.
Chapter 13

Harry awoke to discover that the warmth of Louis’ body beside him had departed, and so had Louis himself. He was lying alone on the crate, with his own jumper carefully draped over him, and he felt stiff and uncomfortable after a night of lying on stiff wooden boards that had been clumsily nailed together. Splinters were prodding uncomfortably into his back, and he sat up and reached behind him to pluck them out, which proved not to be as easy as he had anticipated, as the bits of wood that he successfully extricated dug sharply into his fingers, which almost hurt more. Growling, he shook himself and brushed himself down, attempted to tug the worst of the splinters out so that he less resembled a porcupine, and then surveyed the room.

Out of all of his friends, the one of them whose company he favoured the least was the only one still there: Felix was lounging lazily on his own makeshift bed, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling and chewing something, although Harry couldn’t make out what. He suspected that selfishly, Felix had sneaked out in the middle of the night for some gum, which seemed pretty unreasonable. Couldn’t he have gotten them some blankets or something? Scowling, Harry ran a hand through his hair to push it out of his eyes so that he could see properly, then looked around the room. After returning Harry’s jumper, Niall had vanished, and he was nowhere to be seen. There were no telltale scorches or a lingering stench of acrid smoke to give him away, which was just as well, really; there was enough cardboard and wood in the room to send the whole place up if the wrong thing caught fire. Zayn had abandoned his bed, although he alone seemed to have attempted to tidy his tiny area of the room; the bubble-wrap was carefully spread and folded on his crate in the likeness of a duvet, whereas his shirt was still acting as a pillow. That was reassuring; it was a nice shirt, and Harry didn’t think that Zayn would have left it behind if he was expecting to be gone for any length of time. Having no real possessions to speak of any more, none of them were willing to abandon what little they had. Liam had left no trace that he had been there at all, and Louis…all that Louis had left was a new sense of coldness in Harry’s bed, and a stiff ache in his shoulders from having an arm around him for most of the night. It had been nice, but it had certainly given Harry a cramp in the back of his neck.

Warily approaching Felix, unsure what mood he might be, Harry was cautious as he prepared his interrogation. He wanted answers, but he remembered all too well Felix’s wicked comments about walking through people, how weird it felt, and how funny their reactions were. Somehow, he got the feeling that he wasn’t at all keen to have that particular experience.

Lazily looking up, Felix raised an eyebrow questioningly. It was such an unbelievably condescending expression that Harry felt that he hated him a little bit; the idea that the younger boy was too arrogant even to speak to him was maddening. Burying his hands deeply into his cavernous pockets so that they would not be free to punch the teenager, Harry forced himself to stay calm. Yes, Felix was an obnoxious, snobbish prat, but he was a useful prat, and whacking him in the nose, however satisfying, would not be a good idea in the long run. Still, it took a lot of effort to keep his clenched fists in his pockets and not in Felix’s face.

“Where are the others?” he asked as politely as he could, doing his utmost not to let his almost painful aggravation shine through in his tone.

The attempt, although valiant, was not as successful as it might have been; an indolent smile crept across Felix’s face as he regarded Harry with an almost insulting amount of apathy, seeming to enjoy Harry’s barely concealed annoyance. Yawning, Felix sleepily rubbed his eyes and pulled himself into an almost-sitting position which wasn’t quite upright enough to convey attentiveness. His posture gave the impression that he was barely listening – probably accurate, but none the less
infuriating.

“Niall and Liam went to get their bearings and work out where we are,” he said boredly.

A frown creased Harry’s forehead at that somewhat worrying statement. “Don’t you know?”

“Do I look like a sat-nav?” Felix snapped. He closed his eyes, and the martyred expression on his face made Harry angrier than the bored one. What right did Felix have to play the patient, tolerant one, when he was the one who warranted tolerating? Harry gritted his teeth as Felix amended himself in a saint-like tone, “No, I’m afraid I don’t know.”

Of course, Harry’s next, impatient, almost rude demand was “Where is Louis, then? And Zayn,” he added quickly, embarrassed that he’d momentarily forgotten their other friend.

Felix waved a hand nonchalantly. “How should I know? Round and about, doing something or other. I think Louis said something about getting some more clothes; how they expect to do that without money, I can’t imagine.” He shook his head, as if astonished by their apparent stupidity.

Why was his tone so irritating? Harry shook his head as well, mirroring Felix’s pitying movement, then turned his back on him and marched across the room. Stopping before the door, he examined it for a while and tried to calm himself, annoyed that Felix could make him so furious with only a few choice sentences. It was a talent of his.

Only giving him a moment or so of relief from his exasperating company, Felix soon decided that he’d given Harry a long enough recuperation from his rudeness, sarcasm and generally unpleasant attitude, and slipped off his bed to begin walking across the room and intercept Harry. Inwardly, Harry groaned as he turned around to face the boy, wishing more than anything that he would just stop and walk in the opposite direction.

Oh, go away, he thought.

The thought was simple enough, but it felt different than usual. Instead of being his own, normal, light mental narration, it seemed to echo inside his mind, oddly commanding, as if someone had shouted the thought down a long corridor and it was reflecting off the walls, bouncing back in on him. Frowning, Harry shook his head, confused – and, pausing in his journey across the room, Felix emulated him, his head bobbing back and forth as he shook it, bewildered. At first, Harry thought Felix was copying his actions in a childish attempt to annoy him, but before Harry could yell at him, a surprised Felix turned on his heel and walked in a straight line back across the room, right over to his bed, and ended up standing in front of it, facing away from Harry.

Perhaps it was Harry’s imagination, but he thought he felt the faintest flutter of confusion prickling at the back of his mind – confusion that was unsettlingly separate from his own. The emotion was faint and detached from what Harry was feeling, and it felt different. He didn’t like it at all.

“Wha–?” Clearly perplexed, Felix shook his head again, turning around to stare at Harry. His expression was priceless; he obviously had no idea what was going on. Tutting disapprovingly, his lips framed something which looked like ‘overdoing it’ and he began approaching Harry again.

Oh, no, Harry thought wearily, please, I’m not in the mood. Go away, Felix!

That was when he noticed the weird sensation at the back of his mind, as if somebody were listening. He could feel something strange, which was attached to the emotions he could sense that were unmistakeably not his own; it felt like...well, he wasn’t entirely sure, but it seemed to be a mind. Somebody else’s conscious thoughts were buzzing madly like wasps in the furthest corner of
Harry’s head, and he had no control over them. Shocked, he tried to withdraw from the contact, and discovered that he couldn’t do it. Looking equally stunned, Felix stopped again, head in his hands, and dithered helplessly in the middle of the room, apparently torn between heading towards Harry and retreating across the room again.

Go, Harry commanded. Go and sit over there.

That was the first time he consciously became aware of what he was doing; when he had intentionally issued an order in the hope that it would be carried out. Previously, his weak requests had not been noticed, but now he was paying attention to what he was doing, he discovered some kind of odd link between the thoughts he was having and the strange kind of access he had to Felix’s mind. He couldn’t completely access it, but those thoughts at the forefront of Felix’s brain seemed to be rushing across it like insects darting across the surface of a pond, and these thoughts he could read easily. Not that he had any interest in them, even if they had been tangible; mostly all he found was uncertainty and confusion: Felix’s thoughts were scattered, sent into disarray by Harry’s command. He hovered for a moment or so, clearly trying to organize himself, and while he was distracted, Harry seized the opportunity to give his mind another gentle nudge as he firmly repeated the order inside his head.

He wasn’t certain exactly when Felix surrendered to him, or why, or even if he was aware that he had done it, but all of a sudden Harry felt himself pouring into the tiny sliver of Felix’s brain that he could feel inside his head, and all of a sudden, there he was, in control. A puppeteer. Experimentally, he suggested that Felix scratched his nose, and watched from his safe vantage point across the room as the boy reached up to dispel an itch that wasn’t there, clearly having no idea why he was doing it. The sight of his hands moving when he’d had no intention to do anything with them unsettled Felix; he gaped in horror at his twitching fingers.

Harry couldn’t resist the urge to have a bit of fun with the situation; Felix had mocked him often enough since they’d met, and now he had a chance to get his own back. Everything was very much trial and error, so it took him a while to get to grips with it, especially as in order to do what he wanted, he had to contort Felix’s arm into an almost painfully unnatural position – which took an awful lot of mental prodding, coaxing and patient repetition – but eventually, Harry gave a little smile of triumph as Felix’s hand was raised in front of his face, positioned so that he was staring at the back of his clenched fist. Sweating with the effort, Harry gave one last command, and then Felix’s middle finger popped up, and to his bewilderment, Felix found that he was swearing at himself, and couldn’t seem to stop.

Delighted with his progress, Harry slid to the floor, collapsing with his back against the door, exhausted but reluctant to relinquish his command. In the end, he wearily ordered Felix to drop his hand and had him stand in the corner, facing the wall so that Harry didn’t have to look at his stunned face. It was immensely satisfying.

After that, Harry merely began exploring his newly discovered ability. Having exacted his revenge, he was now interested in finding out the extents and limitations of his power, and refining it so that when the others came back, he would have an impressive demonstration for them. Maybe he wasn’t as flashy as Louis and Niall, but who needed bright lights and fancy colours? He had forced someone to give themselves the middle finger and be unable to do anything about it, which he was pretty sure thousands of people would envy him for.

At first he was clumsy, poking brutally around in Felix’s mind, but the constant whimpers and flinching from Felix’s direction, and the air of discomfort simmering within his brain, Harry eased off slightly and was a little more gentle, stroking Felix’s thoughts with his own while he examined them. Quickly, he discovered that he could read the primary concerns running through Felix’s head, but
latent ideas were buried too deeply, and therefore a mystery to him. He could also control not only Felix’s body by messing with his mind, but parts of his brain, too. This he discovered by forcing Felix’s vocal cords into action and insisting that he called himself an ‘irritating floppy-haired imbecile’, punctuated, of course, with some choice swearwords. Of course, this amused Harry endlessly, and he had Felix insult himself numerous times in various imaginative ways.

He couldn’t deny, however, that seeing Felix so terrified was less than fun. Harry might have released his hold and let the boy go, if he had not been able to see the intentions swimming through Felix’s head to teleport as far away from Harry as he could, the moment the opportunity arose. All attempts to communicate were ignored, although perhaps Felix was simply panicking too hard to listen. Patiently, Harry held him in place and prevented him from tearing himself apart, but it got boring after a while, and he wouldn’t be able to keep it up forever. That was when he started fiddling more purposefully, checking through Felix’s brain functions to see how many of them he could control. As it turned out, he had full command over all of them – more command than even Felix himself.

In the end, that was how Harry solved the problem. It didn’t take a genius to work out that Felix was cringing away from him because he knew that Harry could control his body – so all Harry had to do was erase that knowledge. Locating the part of Felix’s mind which held the memories, Harry examined the boy’s recollections of the past few minutes, trying to plan out a strategy: he had two options; tamper with them, and alter Felix’s memory so that he thought something entirely different had taken place within those past few minutes, which would involve Harry coming up with a plausible false scenario and convincing Felix’s brain to accept it in place of the old one – or he could simply remove the memory altogether, and leave Felix with a gap.

As a solution, the second was far quicker and far easier, and therefore probably the best option for him, as a beginner. However, it did mean that ten minutes of Felix’s life would have vanished from his mind, and that would mean some nasty questions being asked. The first option…Harry wasn’t even sure whether that was within his capabilities, and he was terrified of damaging Felix by shoving a false memory in where it wasn’t wanted, or in the wrong place. What if he covered up a memory that Felix actually needed?

That thought made the decision for him. Concentrating hard, Harry simply found the section of memory that he wanted removing, and he ordered Felix to forget it all. At first, he was worried that it wouldn’t work…until he saw Felix’s pearly grey eyes closing obediently, and then –

“What are you doing down there?” Felix asked rudely.

Harry almost laughed in relief. No trace of fear lingered in Felix’s gaze; once again his eyes were shrewd, unpleasant and challenging, and his tone as repugnant as ever. He was staring at Harry, nonplussed, but unafraid. It had worked. He, Harry Styles, had reached into someone’s mind and forced them to forget ten whole minutes of their life.

It was as horrifying as it was exhilarating.

Breathlessly, Harry gave a short laugh, and then forgot how to stop. Within the space of a minute or so, he was rolling around on the floor with his arms wrapped around himself, crying with laughter. Bright red in the face with tears rolling from the corners of his eyes and his stomach aching, he thought he might be sick, he was laughing so hard. Heat was flashing down his spine, moisture was dripping down his cheeks, his face hurt, he didn’t think the laughter lines from this explosion of mirth would ever fade out, and he was pretty sure his intestines were going to explode. His arms wound firmly around his torso as he shook with laughter, trying to hold himself together before shudders of amusement tore him apart. It felt amazing.
The door opened whilst Harry was still convulsing helplessly on the floor, and the stunned faces of his friends only made Harry laugh harder.

“What on earth is wrong with him?” Liam demanded.

Felix was appalled. “I think…I think he’s laughing.”

There hadn’t been many reasons to laugh when they had all been captured, so understandably, none of the boys had ever seen Harry so incapacitated with mirth before. It turned out to be dangerously infectious; Niall was the first to give in, first smirking, and then letting out a small snigger, and suddenly he was writhing around on the floor screaming with laughter almost as much as Harry was, without even knowing what he was laughing at. That was one of the many loveable things about Niall: he could laugh at nothing just as easily as he could laugh at anything. Louis fell prey to the contagion of Harry’s amusement next: only a tiny twitch of his lower lip gave him away before he exploded, and before long he was bent double, hanging on to Zayn in order to hold himself up. Harry wasn’t having any of that; he grabbed Louis’ wrist and started attempting to drag him to the floor, and between choking gasps of laughter which were close to sobs, Niall clung to Louis’ ankles so that Louis staggered every time he attempted to move. When the two of them eventually floored him as a team effort, Louis collapsed on top of them – and in a mood like that, where everything was funny, Harry, Louis and Niall nearly died laughing. Liam thought they might all have heart attacks from laughing too much, or simply stop breathing because they couldn’t control their gasps of amusement.

“O-oh god,” Harry gasped, “somebody stop me! Please!” He clung to his stomach with one hand and punched the floor with the other, unable to control himself and having to release the laughter that was being restrained every time he breathed in or out.

“Kill me,” Niall begged, eyes streaming. “Kill me now!”

Louis was too helpless with laughter to even voice a plea for help; he opened his mouth to ask for assistance, and ended up howling instead as he gave up and slumped uselessly back to the floor. That was what did it for Zayn and Liam; giving up, they dropped to the ground as well, and soon they were all a mess of flailing limbs, tearstained eyes and red faces, curling up into balls to try and stop the laughter from breaking them apart.

“I can’t breathe!” Niall moaned.

“You’re all mad!” Felix shouted above their giggles. “Completely mad!”

“Definitely!” Louis agreed, and they all giggled at that as well, despite the fact that it wasn’t the slightest bit funny.

It soon occurred to Harry that they were only laughing because it was so funny to see each other crying with amusement over nothing at all. For them to stop laughing, everyone else would have to stop first. That was when Harry had a brilliant idea, one which he felt quite proud of. Seeing as Niall’s laugh was the loudest and most uncontrollable, he reached for Niall’s mind first, and found that it was as pleasant and cheerful as Niall himself. It took him a minute or so to find the part of Niall’s brain that controlled his laughter, and seeing as Niall was apparently incapable of stopping himself, Harry did it for him. Abruptly, Niall’s snorts cut off, and he paused in surprise as he found himself completely solemn all of a sudden. Harry replicated the feat for all of the other boys’ minds too, until all four of them sat in a confused, wobbly circle, no longer even the slightest bit amused. When they had all stopped, it was extremely easy for Harry to calm himself, too – and then there was silence.
Seconds ago, all five of them had been close to choking on their own laughter, lying uselessly on the floor with tears streaming down their faces, clutching their agonizingly cramped stomachs as they fought to control laughter that seemingly would never stop. Yet there they all were, serious and unblinking, looking quietly around at each other. Nobody spoke, which was practically unknown; even in sleep, Zayn had been known to mutter nonsense, and Harry’s snoring was notorious for keeping people awake. They had never been so silent before since meeting each other.

“What the hell just happened?” Louis demanded.

And Harry got ready to explain everything.
Chapter 14

The girl who was perched behind the counter of the fanciest hotel Harry had ever set foot in was clearly disgusted by his appearance; flaring her delicate nostrils, her lips pressed into a pinched, disapproving line as she watched him approach. Her honey-coloured hair had been elaborately piled on top of her head and practically glued into place with so much spray that it was probably rock solid and heavier than a lump of metal. She wore sensible square glasses with round frames and had pursed, glossy red lips decorated with lipstick that had been applied to her thin mouth with almost military precision. Her neatly pressed navy pinstripe suit was so sharply ironed that the shoulders looked like they could take your eye out. Around her neck was a slender golden chain, her earrings were small, neat golden hoops, and she had a gold ring on one slim finger. Her eyelids were powdered gold and the blusher on her cheeks was very faint, and her fingernails were the same colour as her suit but with the hotel emblem painstakingly etched onto them. She could only have been in her early twenties, but she looked as severe as an old spinster, and Harry knew that with his best efforts, a charming smile and a bit of flirting wasn’t going to win this girl over.

Instinct told him to try anyway, and he leaned over the desk with a grin. Catching sight of himself in the gilt mirror behind her, he grimaced; he had a lot of dirty marks on his face, his hair was unwashed and plastered disgustingly to his head like a helmet, his clothes were crumpled and smelly, his cheeks so hollow that his dimples barely showed. He looked like he’d just wandered off the streets looking for handouts – which was pretty accurate, considering. With his most winning smile, Harry adjusted his almost frighteningly loose t-shirt and then tilted his head forwards to make his green eyes look larger.

“Hi,” he said cheerfully, “I’m looking for a room.”

Her response was instantaneous and disapproving: “None of our rooms are available. I’m sorry, sir, but you’ll have to look somewhere else.” She looked down her nose at him in disgust.

A quick glance down at the appointment book in front of her made Harry smile slightly in acknowledgment of the lie. “Oh, really? I can see at least twelve spaces in that book; there are a dozen spare rooms upstairs.”

The girl barely blinked; she was a professional, and her returning answer was instant. “I doubt you could afford our prices, sir. This is a very…prestigious establishment. We have a very specific clientele; I’m afraid you don’t quite fit the bill.”

So in other words, Harry thought grimly, you’re all a bunch of posh twats. He smiled again. “Are you quite sure about that?” he pressed, and as he widened his eyes innocently at her, he poked her mind with his own and murmured, I’m the most handsome man you’ve ever seen and you’d be glad to let me have a room. In fact, you’d probably let me share yours without much complaint.

“I’m quite cert – oh!” The girl blushed delicately, one manicured hand flying to her face as she felt one burning cheek with embarrassment. Flustered, she dropped her gaze to the book in front of her, suddenly convinced that a younger, rugged cross between Johnny Depp and Leonardo Di Caprio had materialized in the foyer of the hotel and was giving her a disarming smile. “I – oh! Forgive me, I – I don’t know what came over me. Of course you can have a room, sir. I’m ever so sorry! Let me – um…” She began flipping almost frantically through the book. “How many rooms do you want?”

“Six, if that’s all right,” Harry told her politely.

Her face fell instantly. “Oh dear. I’m terribly sorry, but you’re only allowed to book four rooms at
once, sir. It’s a very strict new protocol.”

For a moment, Harry considered this statement. He was confident that he could have the girl revoke this new rule for him with not too much difficulty, but he didn’t want to get her into trouble. She was going to be in enough bother already once he’d finished with her. “Four rooms it is, then,” he agreed diplomatically, awarding her a smile which sent her dizzy with longing.

“Excellent,” she breathed. Then, her harsh professionalism won out for a moment and she damped down her adoration somewhat as she asked, “which method of payment would you like to use, sir? Here at the Aristo Nobelle, we pride ourselves on accepting every kind of credit card – apart from fake ones, of course!” Her light, tinkling laughter filled the air between them, sounding a little raw from disuse; Harry got the feeling that she didn’t giggle very often.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said a little sternly, fighting to hide his guilt. Here he was, breaking the law. He felt a little bad.

Her expression faltered slightly with confusion, so Harry quickly nudged her mind as he mentally explained to her, You’ve been told to expect a management inspection and I’m probably on the senior management team. No payment is necessary. I’m very important. You’ll probably get a promotion if you do this right. Oh, and I’m the most gorgeous man you’ve ever met and you’d like to be the mother of my children.

“Yes,” she spluttered. “Of course. I’m ever so sorry, sir, I don’t know what came over me! It must be the heat – it’s ever so warm in here!” Punctuating her comment with another airy laugh, she fanned herself with one elegant hand, her cheeks quickly turning from pink to scarlet.

“That’s no problem; I can see you’re very thorough,” Harry told her warmly, “no harm in doing your job right, is there?”

She simpered and cupped one hand around her cheek as she fumbled underneath the desk for the four room keys, not taking her eyes off him. Clearly, she was breathless, struggling to focus as she stared longingly at his face. He had done his job well. “You’re so right! If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well, that’s what I always say!” Inside, she was a quivering wreck, and she wasn’t much more collected on the exterior. Harry was amused by her lack of coherency, and the confusion inside her head.

“I can see you do an excellent job,” he assured her, accepting the keys. Their hands brushed together as he took them, and she gave a little start as her heart stuttered, stopping for a fraction of a second at the contact. Harry bit his lip to hold back a laugh, and gently tried to tug the keys out of her grasp, but she hung on. “Excuse me,” he said gently.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Oh! Oh, I’m terribly, sorry, I – oh, I’m sorry!” Instantly, she dropped the keys and fought to regain her composure. A strand of lacquered hair came free from where it had been carefully sprayed against her hair and spiralled wildly around her head, sticking stiffly outwards. Harry smirked a little. Closing her eyes, the woman breathed in and said hurriedly, “I have to remind you, of course, that there is absolutely no smoking permitted in this hotel. Here at the Aristo Nobelle, the comfort and health of our guests is absolute priority. All of the rooms are fitted with state-of-the-art smoke detectors; if anyone so much as strikes a match, we’ll know.” It was a practiced threat, but not an empty one.

Harry nearly laughed when he thought of what Zayn might say to that, but his smile faltered when he thought of Niall, who still had a tendency to set himself on fire at inopportune moments – something which wouldn’t be easily explained. “My friend likes all of his food to be very well-done,” he lied; “he regularly sets off smoke alarms. Would it be possible to disable the smoke alarm in his room?”
“Well – I – I’m not sure, I mean, that’s highly irregular and completely against health and safety regulations –” the girl stammered helplessly.

Turning up the charm, Harry reminded her, *I’m gorgeous, and the nicer you are to me, the more likely I am to ask you on a date. You absolutely have to kiss me or else your lips will fall off. If you don’t get to go out with me, your life might as well end right now. The entire purpose of your life is to please me so that I will fall in love with you.* Then he looked rather pointedly from her eyes to her lips, and back up again.

The girl gave a resigned little moan. “Of course, sir,” she said fervently, “anything! Anything at all! I’ll send someone up to disable it right away!”

“Thank you,” Harry said, awarding her a large smile. He laid one of his large hands over her slender one where it lay on the desk. “What’s your name?”

The girl blinked weakly at him, and her mouth fell open and then worked silently for a few seconds. Harry had to stifle a laugh when he realized that she was so overcome by the sensation of him touching her hand that she’d actually forgotten. He’d underestimated the extent of his power, and when he was touching her, his influence was even stronger. Her mind was screaming out at him, filled with so much ecstasy at his touch that it was almost painful for her.

“I – Rachel,” she stammered faintly. “My name is Rachel.” Relieved that she had remembered, she quivered a little, obviously terrified that her apparent mental issues had put him off.

Feeling sorry for her, Harry assured her, *I probably found it cute.* Then he said warmly, “Thank you for your help, Rachel,” and slid his hand away.

His hand was less than clean, and he left a smudge of Scottish mud on her pristine skin when he removed his fingers, but the girl made no effort to scrub it away. She positively glowed with excitement, giving the dirty mark an adoring glance, and then stared longingly at him.

Harry quickly left, worried by the intensity of her feelings for him and wondering if he’d overdone it a bit. Back in the lobby, Louis, Felix, Liam, Zayn and Niall were waiting for him, and Harry joined them with a victorious grin, trying to forget that he had possibly permanently damaged the receptionist with a fog of lust and yearning for him, and focusing on his success instead.

“Did you do it?” Louis demanded.

Harry grinned and dangled the keys in front of him. “Of course I did! Hang on!” He interrupted as all five of them made a grab for the keys, “I only got four keys! Some of us are going to have to share.”

“What?” Felix demanded in disgust. “How does that work? Why couldn’t you get two more rooms?”

“Look,” Harry said, “I already had to screw that poor woman’s head up enough. She’s in danger of losing her job already; I won’t make things worse.”

“Well *I’m* not sharing,” Felix told them.

“I wouldn’t dream of inflicting your company on anyone,” Harry told him wearily as he shoved one of the keys at him, “take it.”

“I’ll share with Niall,” Liam offered.
Niall grinned cheerfully, delighted that someone actually wanted to share with him. Zayn stared pleadingly at Harry, and he gave a heavy sigh, knowing what that look meant. He held out the third key with a resigned expression.

“Go on then, Zayn. You don’t mind sharing with me, right, Lou?”


“Good,” Harry answered with a smile, “let’s go up, then.”

As they headed back through the foyer towards the lift, they all spotted the girl on the reception desk apparently having some kind of breakdown while one of the maids attempted to calm her down. Clearly, this behaviour was extremely unusual; the poor maid looked bewildered as Rachel babbled desperately to her, eyes almost maddened. As Harry passed, Rachel gave a little yelp and her eyes widened as she whirled to stare at him, leaning so far over the desk that she practically fell over it, a huge and slightly crazed smile lighting up her face. Uncomfortably, Harry gave her a little wave, and her answering sigh ended with a shudder and a kind of whimper as she clung to the desk, her knuckles turning white. Harry made a dash for the lift, and he didn’t breathe out until the doors had slid closed and the six of them were safely ascending to the top floor.

“Christ, Harry!” Louis said, “what the hell did you do to that poor girl?”

“I think maybe I went a bit too far,” Harry admitted. “I convinced her that I was the most handsome man she’d ever laid eyes on and that she wanted to be the mother of my children, and I think I might have made her think that she was going to get a date with me because I needed her to disable the smoke alarm in Niall’s room, and she wasn’t playing along.”

“Bloody hell,” Niall said admiringly. “Can you get a girl to freak out like that over me, please?”

“You really want some insane girl nearly choking to death because you touched her hand?” Harry asked dryly. “Trust me, it’s actually quite scary.”

“Yeah, but…she was hot,” Niall pointed out.

“Mmm. Not really my type. She was totally uptight before I messed with her.” The doors slid open, and Harry stepped out with a sigh. “Right, whose room is whose?”

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“What are we doing first?” Harry asked as he dropped down onto the bed in his and Louis’ room. It was a king-sized bed, but it was still only a single – although he was determined not to pay any attention to that.

“Bagsie first shower,” Louis said immediately. “I’m disgusting, I swear.”

“I think you might need some new clothes to change into, or the shower will be a bit pointless,” answered Harry with a smile, “I’ll go and get some.”

Louis was barely listening; he was already dragging his filthy shirt over his head and carelessly dropping it to the floor. Watching the muscles of his friend’s back shifting underneath his skin, Harry quickly tried to avert his eyes, but he couldn’t help but be fascinated. Stretching, Louis ruffled his dirty hair and started kicking off his trousers as well. “Don’t get anything too ugly. I hate polka-dots.”

Biting his lip to fight back his smile, Harry agreed, “No polka-dots. Got it.” Then he ventured out
into the corridor.

It didn’t take him long to find a porter wandering around, pushing people’s cases around, and Harry stopped him with one quick mental jab. The man wasn’t exactly the same size as any of them, but he was kind of similar to them all, so although none of his clothes would fit perfectly, they would all be a reasonably close fit. Harry easily persuaded the man to lead him to his own room deep in the bowels of the hotel, and he ended up wandering upstairs with most of the man’s wardrobes piled up in his arms. In return, he convinced one of the prettier women who was wandering the lower corridors to take the man into the laundry room and snog him for a bit; he thought it was a reasonably fair exchange.

When he got back into his and Louis’ room, Harry found the older boy sat on their bed wrapped in a fluffy white towel and shivering lightly, wet hair dripping, soaked but still attractive. Dumping the clothes onto the bed beside Louis, Harry grinned at him. “You get first pick. When you’ve got the stuff you want, take the rest of it down the corridor to the others – but save some for me, yeah?” Then he vanished into the shower without waiting for a response.

The water felt amazing as it poured down his back; Harry felt like he’d never experienced warm water in his life before. He lathered his hair with so much shampoo that he was surprised he didn’t flood the bathroom with bubbles. There were at least fourteen different bottles of complimentary soaps cluttering the sideboard, and although Louis had emptied several of them, there was heaps left, and Harry mixed them all together and scrubbed himself until he felt like he’d washed half of his skin off as well as the dirt. After that, he just stood and let the water pour down onto his head and saturate his curls until all the waves were shocked out of them; when soaked, his hair just touched his shoulders, and it had been so long since his last hair cut that it tickled his collarbones when he tilted his head down. Eventually, he wandered out of the shower and rolled around on the bathroom floor in the towel until he was almost completely dry, and his hair was starting to go from wet to damp, turning fluffy and exploding wildly around his head. He exited the en suite feeling refreshed and wearing only a towel like a toga around his waist.

“You look better,” Louis greeted approvingly as Harry emerged.

“So do you,” Harry responded.

It was true: now that he had been cleaned up a bit, Louis looked like some kind of fashion model, with his hair attractively ruffled and his dark blue eyes relaxed. He’d found himself a pair of long tan trousers and rolled them up to his knees, and dragged an enormous black t-shirt over his head, and he was sat cross-legged on the bed. It didn’t take Harry very long to find himself some Chinos and a long, loose white shirt, and there was a plentiful selection of underwear. Thankfully, Louis seemed to have saved most of the best clothes. As Harry quickly dressed, he pretended not to notice Louis’ eyes lingering on his face.

“Where are the others?” Harry asked as he found a burgundy blazer to wear over the shirt. Luckily, it matched his Chinos, or else he would have looked oddly mismatched.

Louis snorted. “Felix is trying to sneak into the Casino. Don’t know why he bothers; he’ll get chucked out the second they see him. Niall is eating – they have an excellent all-you-can-eat buffet in the dining room, apparently. Liam is checking out the gym.” He rolled his eyes. “And Zayn is being Zayn. ‘There’s plenty of hot girls in the bar, Lou’, he drawled in a passable imitation of Zayn. “I think he’s planning on teaching them why they shouldn’t go for the hot ones.”

“Oh, god. Poor girls.” Still, Harry couldn’t help but chuckle. He had a feeling that once he’d had a wash, Zayn would be ten times as devastating – that was one lesson that the girls at the bar would be all too eager to learn. “What are you going to do?”
Shrugging, Louis suggested, “Sleep? There’s a bed, and it has my name on it. Care to join me?” He grinned wickedly and patted the pillow.

Harry knew that Louis was only flirting out of habit, but the joke had his heart racing. “Maybe later,” he answered with an only slightly forced smile, “I might join Niall at the buffet. I’m sick of nourishing food – I want chips, chips, and more chips. I’m going to cram as many empty calories into me as I can, as quickly as I can.”

“Good. No offence, but you’re a skeleton. I can see your bones.” Louis poked one of Harry’s ribs disapprovingly, then started wriggling underneath the duvet as he got ready to close his eyes. “You don’t want me to come with you, do you?”

Harry laughed. “No. Get some rest. You’ll be falling asleep in the caviar otherwise, and those snobby twats out there are looking down their turned-up noses at us as it is. Go to sleep. I’ll babysit Niall all right by myself, don’t you worry.”

Propping himself up on one elbow, Louis said softly, “Maybe Niall’s not the only one who needs babysitting.”

“I can look after myself.”

Louis raised an eyebrow and asked him quietly, “Can you?”

They made eye contact for a while, Harry’s heart thumping unevenly. He knew that he ought to be offended that Louis didn’t seem to think he was capable of going down to eat a buffet on his own, especially since he’d already demonstrated that he was capable of reducing anyone who questioned him to a gibbering wreck, but he was actually quite touched.

Louis groaned. “Ugh, why am I arguing with you? I’m exhausted. Go on, go eat. I’ll catch up to you.”

Harry headed for the door with relief as Louis rolled over and dragged the duvet over his head, but he paused by the door and promised, “I’ll be all right, Lou.”

Poking his head out, Louis warned, “Just make sure you are. You don’t want me coming down to fetch you; I’m grumpy when I first wake up.”

“I won’t be long,” Harry said.

He hesitated for a second, feeling guilty – and then he hurried back to the bed and quickly kissed Louis on the forehead, squeezing his shoulder. Louis stared at him in surprise as Harry quickly backed away, looking embarrassed.

“I, uh – I’ll see you later,” Harry said quickly, and he rushed out of the room.

Surprised, but too appreciative of the comfortable bed to stay awake, Louis settled down and closed his eyes – but his head tingled from the feel of Harry’s lips for a good few hours, and he struggled to fall asleep.
Across the room, Harry could see that Zayn was looking immensely pleased with himself. He too had just tumbled out of the shower, but apparently he’d had time to gel his hair precisely into place on top of his head, play around with all the outfits he’d been offered, mixed and matched them with the kind of expertise gained from years of styling himself, and come out looking like a model. Albeit a tired, pale, slightly hollow-cheeked model, but didn’t that apply to most models when you removed the extra layers of photo-shopped features? But the reason for Zayn’s pride was not the way he had flawlessly fixed his appearance with limited resources, but the two rather pretty girls lingering beside him at the bar, flicking their hair around and giggling every time he opened his mouth. Although startled by the turn of events, Zayn was nonetheless pleased, and he radiated smugness from every direction.

Nursing his own drink, Harry took a little sip, and tutted to himself, wondering if Zayn would even remember the girls when the morning rolled around. If they kept buying him drinks, almost certainly not. After winning their favour by buying the first round, Zayn had been in luck; every time his glass was emptied, one of the girls ordered the barman to refill it. It was like they were trying to get him drunk. Perhaps they were. Shaking his head, Harry hoped that Zayn would have the sense not to drag one of the girls into bed with him; that would only inspire resentment and jealousy from the other, and potentially endanger their friendship. Unless they were two strangers, united in their attempted conquest of Zayn. If victory was what they wanted, they would have to try pretty hard; Zayn was an expert at the game they were playing, and he wouldn’t easily be beaten.

Just as he was taking another small, deliberate swallow of his own drink, and watching Zayn down yet another one of his in fifteen seconds flat, Harry found himself being joined at his lonely table by Niall, who was laden with plates covered in food, and looked extremely happy with himself. Harry had never seen so many chips piled on one plate in his life. Niall had been eating for a long time; Harry, despite his intention to eat until he was nearly sick, had been easily filled. He had retired to the bar – Niall had stayed at the buffet, apparently determined to eat every scrap of food there was in the hotel. All-you-can-eat was not the wisest of arrangements for a buffet when there was a hungry Niall on the loose.

Dumping his plate on the table so hard that Harry’s abandoned first glass jumped and rattled, Niall grinned and waved at him before stuffing some more food into his mouth with an enthusiasm that Harry admired. Toying with the cocktail umbrella poking out of his drink, Harry watched as more sandwiches vanished into the seemingly endless space that was Niall’s stomach, and said nothing.

Niall spoke first. “Zayn’s having fun,” he commented, casting a hand in Zayn’s direction.

They both glanced across the room at the shorter girl, who had green streaks in her long blonde hair, lots of big white teeth that made her look a little horsey in appearance – not that she wasn’t still attractive, but the resemblance was hard to ignore – and was wearing the tiniest pair of shorts Harry had ever seen. Cooing at something he’d said, she snuggled into his side, nuzzling his neck. Zayn clumsily wrapped an arm around her shoulders with a boozy smile. Fuming, her friend turned such a shade of jealous green that it practically matched the first girl’s hair, and, slamming her drink back onto the counter, barked out a demand for another to the worried looking barman.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed with a short laugh, “but he’d better watch it. It’ll all end in tears if he doesn’t play this exactly right. Whichever one of those girls doesn’t get invited back to his room later is going to be seething. She’ll probably stab him when he comes down to breakfast tomorrow.”

Snorting, Niall pointed out, “That’s assuming he doesn’t invite them both. He’s drunk enough.”
“Mmm,” muttered Harry disapprovingly.

“Ah, let him have his fun,” said Niall, “we both know he’ll regret it tomorrow. If he can drag himself out of bed, it’ll be a miracle. The only thing he’ll be sharing a bed with by the morning is the mother of all hangovers.” He chuckled.

“Let’s hope that’ll discourage him. I don’t want to have to go round convincing groups of girls that they’ve never met a man called Zayn Malik, just so that they’ll stop screeching at each other and arguing over who had him first. It’s exhausting, and I don’t like messing with people’s minds unless I absolutely have to.”

“Looks like it’s you they’ll be arguing over, mate,” Niall said sympathetically, “that woman from reception was practically ripping the cleaning lady’s hair out because the poor girl dared to say that you were hot. It was like a horror film!”

Harry was horrified. “What? But I haven’t even spoken to the cleaning lady!”

An amused expression crept across Niall’s face. “Don’t need to. You may have messed with the first one to make her fancy you, but now you’ve cleaned up a bit, you’ll be fighting them off with your bare hands without so much as blinking. Look at yourself, Harry. You’re pretty. I mean, seriously. You’ve got the teeth, you’ve got the curls, you’ve got the charisma…you’ve got dimples, for crying out loud! You’re adorable. Women love that.”

“But –”

“They love it,” Niall said sternly. Leaning back in his chair, he took advantage of Harry’s shock by swiping his drink out from underneath his nose, nodded conclusively, and then took a quick gulp of the amber liquid. “You’re a total chick-magnet, man – ew, what is this stuff?” In disgust, he dumped the glass back onto the table and pulled a face. “That’s disgusting! Tastes like paint-stripper.”

“How would you know?” asked Harry with a grin.

Sheepishly, Niall shrugged. “Okay, so maybe I swallowed some once by accident. Seriously, it was just this one time –”

A yelp disrupted their discussion; a distinctly feminine cry, and both of their heads jerked as they whipped around to stare at the source of it. The second girl, the jealous one with the red hair scraped into pigtails, wearing large hipster glasses and a skirt that was so short it could have been a belt, was on her feet, one hand clapped over her lipstick-smudged mouth to muffle her screams as she pointed with a shaking finger at Zayn. Her friend was frantically trying to disentangle herself from his embrace in a panic, caught underneath one of his long arms and stumbling in her stilettos. Clearly confused, Zayn attempted to release her, but intoxicated as he was, ended up pulling her closer instead. Panicking, the girl lashed out, fists flying, and a bewildered Zayn ducked to avoid the swing. Hauling her backwards, her red-haired friend started hissing a stream of strangled curses as Zayn as the two of them retreated mistrustfully, eyes wide, glaring at him.

“What the hell is going on over there?” Harry asked.

Zayn seemed to be attempting to ask the same question, but whatever he’d been drinking all night seemed to have thickened in his throat and was slowly drowning his vocal cords, so that all he could manage was a slurred, “Vas appenin?”

“Groaning, he pushed his stool back and stood up, clutching his head dizzily as he took a step towards the closest girl, and that was when Harry realized what the cause of alarm was. Blinking and shaking
his head in an attempt to clear it, Zayn staggered forwards a step and in doing so gave them a clear
view of what was going on behind him, which only caused several bystanders to either stare, shake
their heads and mutter admiringly about how drunk they had gotten so quickly, or panic and start
trying to run. A few inches above Zayn’s head, his most recent glass was floating lethargically in
mid-air, the remaining liquid inside it sloshing wildly around, and behind him, six empty glasses, one
of the girls’ handbags, Zayn’s wallet and the stool he’d just abandoned were also hanging eerily in
the empty space behind him; every time he so much as twitched, they altered their positions ever so
slightly, nudging each other in response to his movements.

A tangle of expletives ripped out of Niall’s mouth as he swore ferociously, dropping his food and
leaping out of his chair. Without following his friend’s example by swearing, Harry scrambled out of
his own seat and hurriedly began making his way across the room to grab Zayn before he could do
anything else. Not that Zayn was consciously aware that he was doing anything at all. He lurched a
little bit, and had to grab the counter for support to stop himself from falling, and that was when
whatever control he’d absently had over the power he hadn’t realized he possessed completely
dwindled to nothing, and the horrified barman started floating as well.

At first the man only hovered a few inches off the floor, but the more distracted Zayn became, the
higher up he went, and before long the man was shrieking hysterically as his head gently bumped
against the ceiling. Scrabbling for a handhold, the man eventually grabbed hold of one of the fancy
light fittings, a large and expensive chandelier, and hung on for dear life, like he expected to plummet
to the ground at any second. Zayn no longer seemed to have any control over himself at all, sending
things drifting randomly around the barman’s head as he clung to the chandelier, and before long the
man had tipped sideways so that he looked like a flag waving gently in the air, as if the light fixture
was a flagpole. His screams rent the air, and Zayn clutched his ears in confusion – as he did so,
several other people lifted off from the floor and began almost dreamily drifting through the air,
except most of them were horrified. The blonde girl was one of these, and she screeched in alarm as
she started to hover above the floor, frantically grabbing for her friend’s hands. By the time she was
hanging as high up as the top of the bar, her friend had caught hold of her, but to their dismay,
instead of the girl on the floor anchoring her friend as they had hoped, the girl who was floating
caused her friend to lift off the ground as well, and before long, they were both levitating above
Zayn’s head, bawling their heads off as they did. Squinting, Zayn looked straight up to find the
source of the caterwauling, and seeing as the red-haired girl was directly above him, got an eyeful of
her underwear as he accidentally looked straight up her skirt. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so
serious.

“Zayn!” Niall yelled, and he started sprinting across the room to make a grab for his friend.

“Niall, wait!” shouted Harry. “Don’t get so close to him!” His warning was ignored.

As soon as he was within the general vicinity of the disorientated Zayn, Niall became a victim of the
odd power Zayn was using and his own feet left the floor. He cried out and tried pushing himself
back down to the floor again, but it seemed like the harder Niall tried to ground himself, the faster he
 gained altitude. Everything that could be grabbed was grabbed in an attempt to stay as low as
possible, but he couldn’t get a good enough grip on it before it slipped out of reach.

“Shit!” Niall cried as he lost his hold of one of the beer pumps and continued drifting upwards.

“Zayn!” yelled Harry. “Zayn!”

Confused, Zayn lifted his head and stared blearily across the room. “Harry?”

“Zayn, stop it. Put those people down!”
“Huh?” Drunk, Zayn was barely coherent.


For a while, he and Zayn stared at each other, Zayn clearly too drunk to focus properly. Then some form of comprehension seemed to dawn as Zayn properly looked around the room at all the yelling people who were hanging above his head like bubbles, and all making the loudest noises of complaint he’d ever heard. Even Niall was scared, running through a list of every swearword he knew and apparently inventing a couple of his own to punctuate his rant of exactly how much of an idiot Zayn was. It took a few seconds for Zayn to get it, but as soon as he had, he was imitating Niall and swearing as loudly as he could, grabbing two handfuls of his hair.

“Shit! Fuck! Fucking shit!” Zayn swore.

“Shut that potty mouth, Malik, and get me down!” Niall yelled – ironic, seeing as seconds ago he’d been teaching everyone in the room some new swearwords.

“I don’t know how!” Zayn wailed wretchedly.

But then, as if to contradict him, everything stopped. For a few seconds, the people stayed floating around Zayn’s head, wide-eyed with shock but unmoving – and then whatever he’d been doing cut out as the sixteen people he’d been accidentally levitating all dropped to the floor. The barman was the only one who didn’t fall; his legs swung forwards as gravity returned to him and there was a horrific smashing sound as he collided with the chandelier, slicing his legs to ribbons and showering bits of crystal all over the floor below him, but everyone else simply dropped to the ground.

Niall was lucky; he landed on a sofa in the corner, although how he had propelled himself in that direction before he fell was anyone’s guess. The two shrieking girls landed with a horrible crash on the bar, and the smaller girl whacked her head so hard that she knocked herself out, while her friend fell on top of her and started screaming. Everyone else hit the floor with various bangs, yells, shrieks and whimpers, and as people fell apparently out of the sky and painfully landed on the ground, thumping as they dropped, Zayn’s eyes widened and he stared in a panic at Harry.


Rolling off the sofa, Niall jogged over to them, leaping neatly over groaning people who were collapsed on the floor and avoiding a glittering pile of broken crystal from the chandelier. Above his head, the barman was still clinging to the light fitting for dear life, pleading with the heavens to save him and crying pathetically as he swung gently to and fro, legs dangling in mid air. A few drops of blood dropped from one leg and plopped onto the floor, staining the glass.

“Oh my god,” Harry whimpered. “Oh, god, what do we do? Oh, bloody hell!”

Niall reached him in seconds and clapped a hand on his shoulder, and for the first time ever, his purposeful, determined expression gave him away as being older than the curly haired boy who he was comforting. His mouth set in a hard line as he took in the scene, all the destruction they had just caused, all the sobbing and injured people…

“I’ll tell you what we do,” he said grimly. “We run.”

Zayn didn’t need to be told twice. Turning on his heel, he sprinted for the door, jacket flapping wildly, hair collapsing from its carefully styled splendour. Harry hesitated, looking desperately around at the chaos around them.

“But – but the people –’”
“Harry,” Niall said, gently propelling him towards the door, “run.”

“But they’re hurt!” Harry protested.

“Yes,” agreed Niall, “they are. But so will we be if we don’t leave now. They’ll dissect us, lock us up, do god knows what – you can’t mess with this many people’s heads before someone gets here and starts asking nasty questions. Over a hundred people saw this, Harry. We have to run before anyone tries to stop us. We have to find Lou and Liam, grab Felix, and get the hell out of here.”

Before Harry could argue any more, Niall firmly planted his hands on the younger boy’s shoulders, and then cast an anxious glance around the room himself at the groaning people. He knew what had to be done, but that didn’t mean he felt any better about it. Giving Harry a gentle shove, he pushed the boy forwards, and as if he’d only just realized how much danger they were in, Harry gave a tiny gasp and started to sprint, rushing out of the bar and thumping towards the lobby, heading for the lift so he could get back upstairs and find Felix.

Niall gave one final, sweeping glance around the room, and then he followed his own advice and legged it.
“Louis!”

It had taken long enough for Louis to fall asleep, and now someone was trying to wake him up! It was completely unjustified, and Louis determinedly kept his eyes closed even when he felt his eyelids flickering. His indignation at someone attempting to wake him up when he was certain he’d had nowhere near enough sleep was practically boundless. He was tempted to flip them off, but seeing as he was pretending to sleep, he felt he’d better not. Could he mumble some swearwords at them in his sleep? Did he sleep-talk? He didn’t know, so perhaps he shouldn’t risk it. Instead, he tucked himself into a tighter ball underneath the duvet, snuggling up to his pillow and squeezing his eyes even more firmly shut.

“Louis, you need to wake up!”

Go away, Louis grumbled to himself.

A hand landed on his shoulder, a large, long-fingered hand, and someone started frantically shaking him. He recognized the feel of that grasp, and was outraged. Still keeping up with his facade of sleep, he was unwilling to open his eyes, so he had to try to work out who it was simply from the warmth of the touch and the feel of the fingers. Harry, his brain offered up helpfully. Why was Harry shaking him? What had he done to deserve that?

“Louis!”

“Bugger off,” groaned Louis.

“Louis, we need to go! Move your arse! Louis!”

Harry’s hands landed on the lump that was Louis, and he gave him a massive, desperate shove. He was stronger than he looked: Louis yelped and his eyes snapped open as he rolled over, and then he was falling off the bed and landing on the floor in a heap of sheets and pillows and an enormous fluffy duvet that he didn’t have any intention of being parted from any time soon.

“Oi!” Louis yelled, sitting up with a jerk and rubbing his head indignantly. “What was that for? I was trying to sleep, you absolute –”

“We have to leave,” insisted Harry, firmly wrapping his fingers around Louis’ wrist and trying to tug him up off the floor. “We have to leave right now!”

“Why?” Louis demanded, resisting all of Harry’s attempts to haul him upright. “I’m not moving! I’ve only just started having the best night’s sleep I’ve had in ages, and now you’ve wrecked it. I’m bloody tired, and I am not moving from this spot until I’ve had at least eight hours of shut-eye!”

Under normal circumstances, Harry would have teased him for sounding like Zayn, who was a great believer in sufficient sleep and had often treated them all to a lecture about why they all needed to shut up and exactly how important it is to get at least eight hours of sleep every night – whilst refusing to let them speak in order to point out that by rambling excessively on at them, the only one who was preventing them from getting eight hours of undisturbed sleep was him. However, these weren’t normal circumstances, and Harry wasn’t in the mood for jokes.

“Listen,” he hissed, kneeling down and grabbing Louis by the shoulders, “Zayn just went down to the bar, got drunk and accidentally levitated sixteen people and stood there with them fluttering
round his head like butterflies, and then when he realized that half the people in the room were drifting up to the ceiling, he panicked and dropped them. Onto the floor. The barman is hanging bleeding from the chandelier, he knocked out one of the girls he was chatting up, and her friend is lying screeching on top of her. The rest of them have all broken god-knows-what bones and about seventy other people saw it happen – I can't modify that many people's memories, Louis! Not all at once! And even if I could, I'd have to leave them with a gap, and if over eighty people all forgot the same ten minutes of their lives, questions would be asked. I'm sorry, Louis, but we're not safe here. We screwed up, and we have to go. Now!"

Mouth hanging open, Louis struggled to his feet, kicking off the duvet and muttering a thankful prayer that he hadn't bothered to get undressed before tumbling into bed, and snatched a carrier bag off the floor. It took him a matter of seconds to cram all of their stolen clothes into it, and then he seized Harry's hand and squeezed it, hard.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he stared at their interlocked hands; tanned skin and pale skin intertwined together in a firm grip. Louis had cool but strong hands, and Harry's long fingers made Louis' small, elegant digits look tiny in comparison. He liked the way their clasped hands looked together – that was an understatement; he was so excited to see it that he felt a little bit giddy, feeling blood rush to his cheeks and turn him bright pink, like a blushing schoolgirl. There was a rushing sound echoing in his ears and an odd thudding sensation as blood coursed through his veins. His stomach convulsed, but it felt strangely nice. The way Louis was holding his hand, their arms were pressed together, and he could feel Louis' pulse fluttering softly against his wrist. Harry felt his colour rise and his expression soften as he gazed straight into dark blue eyes, picking out the pretty flecks of gold that glittered in their depths. Slowly, Louis blinked at him, and Harry had to swallow very hard. He hoped that Louis couldn't feel his pulse the way Harry could feel Louis'; it would be embarrassing if Louis could feel Harry's heart racing so fiercely just because they were holding hands. It was such a small gesture that he almost felt pathetic for being so excited by it; he was slightly ashamed.

"It'll be okay," Louis promised, his eyes sincere. "It'll be okay." Hesitantly, he reached up and then cupped Harry's cheek with his free hand, and carefully stroked down the side of his face with one thumb. Where their skin met, Harry's flared up brilliant red with pleasure. Louis almost seemed to laugh a little bit as he pretended not to notice, and then he dropped his hand and nodded gently.

"Let's go," Harry said nervously, looking down at the floor.

Louis turned and began heading for the door, their hands still linked, and Harry's heart banging painfully in his chest. Astonishingly, Louis didn't seem to have noticed that they were still holding hands – or if he had, he simply didn't care. His grip was firm but gentle, and as they walked across the room, his thumb glided soothingly over the back of Harry's hand, smoothing the skin and making Harry's whole body tingle with longing. He was starting to realize that he had some pretty deep feelings for Louis: he would have had to have been pretty stupid not to figure that out. Sure, he didn't completely understand why he felt so odd, like someone was stirring the contents of his stomach around with a big stick, but he knew that there had to be a reason behind it other than the fact that he was a little bit tipsy. Drunkenness couldn't make you blush just because someone touched you. He was confused – but he didn't have time to be mixed up for long.

"We'll be okay, Harry," Louis promised him determinedly as he dragged him towards the door. He could be daft and immature, but when it was important, he knew how to take charge, and when it was the right time. Harry was grateful for that; he needed someone to tell him what to do, because his own head was too befuddled and filled with conflicting emotions to allow him to have full command of his judgment.
“Will we?” Harry asked worriedly, needing some kind of confirmation even though he knew that there was no way Louis could possibly be certain. If Louis pretended that he thought things were all right, that would be enough for Harry.

Luckily, Louis seemed to understand; he paused before opening the door, and his grip on Harry’s fingers tightened to an almost painful intensity as he squeezed them, hard. “Of course we will,” he said firmly. “Trust me. I’m the man with the force fields! If anyone tries to bother us, I’ll…” he paused, a smile lingering on his face. “I’ll bop them over the head with one of them.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh delightedly at the reference to their first ever conversation. “You remembered!” he said happily.

“Oh course I did! How could I forget? Like I’ve ever forgotten a word you’ve said to me, Harry.”

They paused, staring into each other’s eyes, and Louis nibbled his lip anxiously like he thought he’d said too much. As far as Harry was concerned, Louis hadn’t said anywhere near enough; he wanted to throw them both back down onto the bed and listen to Louis rambling on forever…especially if he was going to say things like that, which made Harry’s chest tighten so fiercely with adoration.

“Anyway,” Louis added quickly, “we’d better go. Things to do. Hotels to run away from.” He huffed in annoyance. “It’s nice here, too. We haven’t even been here for a day!” Rolling his eyes, he gave the back of Harry’s hand one last token stroke and then rushed him out of the door.

They were sprinting hand in hand down the corridor when Felix came running through the door of his room and stopped dead right in front of them – not through the doorway, but the actual door itself, which made Harry and Louis skid to a horrified stop. Could you ever watch that without feeling a little bit sick? Certainly they hadn’t got used to it quite yet.

Panting heavily, Felix bent over double and slammed his hands onto his knees, his chest heaving, showing that despite being extremely thin, he was very unfit. Although there wasn’t much need for running when you could teleport, Harry supposed. Felix groaned dramatically, and started to straighten, and that was when Harry panicked a little bit, because he and Louis were still holding hands, and he didn’t know how people would react to that. He didn’t even know how he was supposed to react to it yet. Besides, what if people made assumptions? What if they thought that he and Louis were…together? Not that Harry had any aversion to the idea, but maybe Louis held hands with all of his friends. He’d certainly been pretty keen on the hugging side of things; maybe handholding was like a hug for him? If Louis didn’t get the same dizzy swooping feeling in the pit of his stomach that Harry had started to feel, then Harry had no intention of pushing Louis and making things awkward between them. If Felix looked up and saw their interlocked fingers, doubtlessly he wouldn’t see the platonic, comforting side to the gesture and would start hurling accusations, and that was something that Harry didn’t want. He was pretty terrified by the feelings he was having already, and he didn’t want to be labelled – at least not until he’d started to figure out what was going on by himself.

He dropped Louis’ hand like it had burnt him and stepped quickly away from him as if he couldn’t stand to stay beside him for a second longer.

The hurt expression on Louis’ face as he shot Harry a sideways glance was enough to make Harry want to seize the other boy’s fingers again, but he clenched his fist and shoved it into his pocket, keeping it restrained. Injured, Louis continued giving him a look that was too piteous to be resentful, then turned his attention back to Felix – but Harry thought he saw Louis twitch slightly, his eyes cast down a little, and he looked almost…miserable? Bewildered by the idea, Harry shook his head? Had the sudden distance between their skin given Louis the same vicious sensation of a punch in the chest that it had given Harry?
“Has he told you?” Felix demanded breathlessly, jerking his thumb at Harry, and Louis noticed with irritation that even when he was having breathing problems, Felix still possessed an amazing capability to be rude and annoying whilst using very few words.

“Yes,” Louis replied sharply, “Zayn did something stupid and made a bunch of people float, and then he dropped them on their heads because he’s an idiot.”

“Oi!” Zayn cried as the door of his own bedroom burst open and he staggered out, “that’s not fair!”

“How drunk are you?” Louis asked disgustedly.

“Very.” Harry said dryly as Zayn dropped his own carrier bag of clothes onto the floor and they exploded everywhere. “Someone pour cold water all over his head. That ought to wake him up a little bit.”

“Don’t you dare!”

Niall and Liam rushed out of their room, similarly laden with bags, although their dishevelled appearance made everyone stop and stare at them. Bright red in the face, Niall was sopping wet, his blond hair dripping and showering water droplets everywhere. His clothes were soaked as well, and dark smoke was curling lethargically from his shirt, which was slightly singed. Liam looked stressed, and he was breathing heavily.

“What happened?” Louis demanded.

“Caught fire,” Niall admitted. “Couldn’t help it. I was panicking and we were packing so quickly and all of those people were hurt and it was our fault...”

“My fault,” Zayn mumbled.

“– and it was just so horrible, I just couldn’t hold it in any longer. It’s a good job you got them to disable the smoke alarms, Harry, because I was seriously...” He waved his arms vaguely. “Whumph.”

“I had to put him out,” Liam said wearily. “Chucked water all over him.”

“Okay, okay, let’s have our cosy little catch-up chat later!” Felix said impatiently. “Come on. Do your thing! We need a field, and we need it now!”

Louis didn’t even bother to yell back; he just flexed his fingers and manifested a huge, throbbing orb around them, and then without waiting for permission, threw a supportive arm around Harry’s shoulders and dragged him closely against his body. Harry couldn’t help but lean up against him as Felix concentrated, so Louis’ face was the last thing he gazed at as Felix focused, and ripped their bodies into millions of atoms and scattered them across the world, transporting them to god knows where.

~*~

“God, that’s rough! Can’t you take some kind of refresher course or something? I swear it gets worse every time! Ugh!” Groaning, Niall sat up and shook his head to clear it, glancing around him. His disgust only grew as he took in his surroundings. “Where are we now? It looks disgusting. And it stinks. Why would you bring us here? Why have you ever even been here in the first place? Why would you want to? This is even more like a landfill site than the last one.”

“Stop complaining! You could at least thank me for taxiing you everywhere, you know! Anywhere
in the country in the blink of an eye, and you still moan at me if the journey is a little shaky! You’re
taking me for granted. I should probably start charging,” Felix sniffed as he picked himself up.

“Oh, shut up,” Harry said wearily.

Zayn rubbed his head, and his voice was rough as he grated “Where are we?”

“I don’t know,” Felix snapped, “I didn’t really think about where I was going.” Raking a pale hand
through his hair, where it looked almost unearthly white next to the thick, fluffy strands, he glanced
around anxiously. “Somewhere not very populated, clearly…”

They had been making enough noise for fifty people, but no heads had popped out of windows and
no doors had flown open as angry locals emerged to scold them viciously for disturbing the peace so
late at night.

“What are we going to do now?” Louis asked.

Felix gestured limply across the road. “There’s some kind of accommodation over there; we can set
up in there, and then…then we’ll think about what to do tomorrow.” He sounded exhausted.

Luckily, it was a small family-run bed and breakfast hotel, with not much space but a whole lot of
welcome, and few questions were asked when they stumbled tiredly over the threshold, begging for
rooms. Thankfully, Harry got his own bed along with the rest of them, and he curled up underneath
the covers, waiting for his head to start throbbing so he could think. With Louis on the other side of
the room, it was far easier to concentrate, and to know his own mind, but he still missed the older
boy. Without Louis lying beside him, providing a reassuring amount of warmth, Harry’s bed was
cold and unwelcoming, and he lay awake for several hours, staring grimly at the ceiling.
Chapter 17

“Shit!”

That was the first word that Harry awoke to – in fact, that was what woke him; someone yelping an expletive at the top of their lungs, and as he grimly squeezed his eyes tightly shut, he heard mattresses creaking as the other inhabitants of the room sat up with sleepy groans, and then cries of shock echoed around the room, as people bounced swearwords off each other and shouted in a panic. Harry was determined to stay asleep and not resurface from the rather lovely dream he’d been having about jumping off a skyscraper to escape from the police and then discovering that he could fly, which he thought was a far more interesting power than the one he actually had – but when it felt like someone started rocking his bed, because it was gently swaying underneath him, he quickly lost his patience. His eyes flew open and he sat up with a jerk.

“Oi!” he yelled as he sat up. “Keep it down, will you? Some of us are – oh, holy f –”

He didn’t have time to get the whole word out before he quickly lay back down again and stared at the ceiling, clinging to the mattress with both hands as he tried not to be sick. He’d never been particularly good with heights; high places made him nervous, and now his bed was floating gently up towards the ceiling, swaying lethargically from side to side and giving him the sensation that he was on some kind of boat in the middle of the sea. That wasn’t comforting; he’d never been fond of boats, either.

“Someone wake him up!” Louis ordered.

“I’m awake,” Harry called grimly.

“Not you. Zayn! He’s the one who’s turned us all into balloons and personally I’d like him to wake up and put me the hell down, because right now I feel sick and I’m floating right in the window and people can probably see me!”

“You think that’s bad?” Niall demanded. “I just got out of the shower. I have no clothes on! I am literally wearing a towel instead of clothes and I’m soaked and it’s quite breezy up here! Someone get him up right now and make him put us down so I can get dressed before he does this again. Levitating is all very well, but levitating whilst naked? Not cool.”

“How is he levitating us in his sleep anyway?” Felix snapped. “You all do it! Sparks sets himself on fire if he has a bad dream, pretty boy sends us all flying around the light-fittings…What sort of people can’t control their powers when they’re asleep?”

“You shut up,” Liam said roughly, “I know very well that you were walking through the walls last night in your sleep, and I heard you fall through the bathroom floor at some point.”

Felix flushed bright scarlet.

“This is pointless,” Harry hissed, “we’re all stuck until we wake him up. OI, ZAYN, GET THE HELL UP!”

A low, gentle snore was the only reply, and all five of them swore loudly. It took a lot of effort for Harry to claw himself into a sitting position and then pick up his pillow. He lobbed it at the sleeping shape in Zayn’s bed, the only piece of furniture in the room which wasn’t flying around, but pillows aren’t particularly hard, so it just bounced off Zayn’s back and fell to the floor. Seconds later, of course, it began rising again, and Harry could snatch it out of the air and shove it back behind his
head with a scowl.


Nodding, Louis flexed his fingers and sent a large force field pinging towards their sleeping friend’s head. It hit his skull with a dull thunk, then ricocheted off in the opposite direction, whipping towards Niall’s head, and he had to duck and throw himself flat against his mattress to avoid getting a solid smack in the face. Louis attempted it again, but it was almost as if Zayn was unconsciously protecting himself, because several more force fields started shooting towards him and then changed course halfway across the room, rebounding towards the other boys, and the ones that hit their target were even worse, heading directly for people’s faces. In the end, Louis had to stop bombarding him to avoid one or the other of them ending up with a broken nose.

Felix tried next, teleporting randomly across the room in an attempt to gain some kind of closer proximity to Zayn, but as he popped from the bathroom door to perching on the headboard of Niall’s bed, it became clear that his efforts were useless; every time he landed on something new, he started floating again with a frustrated yelp, gently bobbing up and down. Phasing was equally unhelpful; if he landed on a solid object for long enough to start going through it, he would simply reverse and start heading for the ceiling again.

“What the hell do we do?” Felix demanded in despair as he made a grab for a floating chest of drawers and attempted to sit on top of it, wobbling worryingly. “We can’t just wait for him to wake up; that could take all day. What if someone comes in?”

“Stop moaning and do something helpful, then, genius,” Louis snarled.

Nobody had noticed that Harry was attempting to do exactly that, with his eyes closed as he slowly rubbed his temples, trying to focus. He wanted to tell them all to shut up, but that would only draw attention to what he was doing, and he didn’t want to be embarrassed as the other boys had. How Liam was feeling was anyone’s guess; he had established himself as a born protector, and he was the only one who so far couldn’t do anything. Personally, Harry thought it was a good job; as the most grounded of them, Liam was very important to the group, and if he too had uncontrollable powers running amok, then things really would be in a mess.

Focusing on Zayn’s sleepy mind, Harry sent a couple of inquisitive tendrils of thought towards the other boy’s unconscious. Discovering that people were far more confusing whilst asleep was not something that surprised him, but it was a little disheartening; he had hoped that Zayn would be more easily controlled whilst asleep. Still, he could work around it. Carefully probing around, he discovered that Zayn was deep asleep, and tired, and he clearly had no idea what he was doing. His thoughts were thick and fuzzy and they ached with the beginnings of the mother of all hangovers, which made Harry wince in sympathy.

He spent a few minutes exploring, but didn’t like to linger because it felt like an invasion of privacy. At first he attempted to find the area of Zayn’s brain which controlled his powers, but either Zayn was completely unreachable and that part of him was too deeply asleep and therefore inaccessible, or he had a very strong mind, because there seemed to be some kind of wall around that part of him which prevented Harry from manipulating it. That made him grimace, because clearly he was going to have to be a little more elaborate than that. Wrinkling his nose, he sent a slightly vindictive jab deep into the recesses of Zayn’s brain in annoyance, hoping that the barrier would recede, but although he felt Zayn flinch and saw him shudder a little bit in his sleep, he didn’t give in. Harry had to admit that he grudgingly respected Zayn’s mental strength; no one else had even posed even the slightest challenge to him before.

In the end, he reverted back to the basics, and started communicating his own thoughts into Zayn’s
mind in an attempt to convince him to obey. Zayn stiffened at first at the contact, but he recognized
Harry, obviously, because seconds later, he relaxed, and feeling horribly like a boa constrictor, Harry
laced coils of thought around Zayn’s mind, slowly tightening them like a corset around his friend’s
brain so that he could, although it was a sinister thought, crush any resistance, as it were. Not
seeming to notice that Harry was preparing to suffocate his free will, Zayn loosened in his sleep, and
his frown disappeared.

*Wake up,* Harry ordered. *Put those things down, stop levitating everything, and wake up.*

A crinkle made its way across Zayn’s forehead and he pouted slightly, obviously not impressed by
Harry’s directive. The first flutter of resistance poked weakly at Harry’s mental hold, and he
instinctively tightened his grip.

*Wake up,* he repeated.

Confusion met his order, and then refusal. Harry was horrified; instead of gladly obeying, Zayn
was… fighting him? It was unsettling to realize that as well as the unflinching compliance he’d
received before, people were capable of defying his commands. Harry felt his forehead begin to get
clammy and his hair start sticking to him; he clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes tightly shut.

*Wake up, now. Open your eyes and sit up. Wake up, Zayn! Wake up right this second!* He felt
stupidly like a mother, like he was chiding Zayn for not getting up for school. And still, Zayn was
refusing to do what he said. Angry, Harry gathered himself inwards, retracting and slithering away
from Zayn’s mind. Cautiously, Zayn hesitated, then began to calm down a little, obviously believing
that Harry had given up – which was exactly what Harry had wanted him to think. His next breath
was a hiss of exultation as he threw himself at the other boy again with the kind of force that would
have been hard to fight off even if Zayn had been given a chance to throw his barriers back up again.
Barrelling against Zayn’s mind, Harry relentlessly battered against him for a few seconds, just to
show who was boss, and then he squeezed every last ounce of resistance out of Zayn’s head like
water out of a sponge.

*I’m sorry,* he muttered, then: *NOW WAKE UP, YOU LAZY SOD!*

With a yelp of shock, Zayn jerked upwards in bed, his hair sticking up everywhere. He stared around
the room in disbelief – and then, with a clatter, everything fell back to the floor again. Louis just had
time to swear and then throw out an enormous force field around them to cushion the floor, so that all
of the furniture hit the ground more gently and bounced a little instead of breaking – but he missed
Felix, who yelled out his disapproval as he abruptly dropped straight through the carpet into the room
below. For all of their sakes, Harry hoped to god that the youngest boy hadn’t fallen onto anyone
else’s head.

Of course, Felix wasn’t gone for long; he’d barely vanished from sight before he reappeared, cross-
legged on the end of Zayn’s bed, and looking distinctly unimpressed. Zayn was groaning and
clutching his head, and Harry could feel his discomfort rebounding faintly through the mental link
that he hadn’t yet severed, although he wasn’t sure whether it was his own vicious mental attacks or
the sheer amount of alcohol Zayn had drunk the night before that was to blame.

“How did he - ?“ Harry didn’t realize he’d actually *spoken* to Zayn, not really – at least not in a way
that Zayn could have been able to hear him. Still, if his apology had gotten through, he was glad that
Zayn knew he felt bad. Ashamedly, he said, “Sorry. You weren’t listening to me; I had to
do something!”
“Yeah, but…that? Really?” Aggravated, Zayn rubbed his forehead.

“It was kind of justified, mate,” Niall said.

Louis was still staring open-mouthed at Harry. “You did that? You woke him up?”

With a mischievous grin, Harry reached out a careful mental probe towards Louis, and said teasingly, *What, you don’t think I have a prosperous future as an alarm clock?*

The noise that fell out of Louis’ mouth was a combination between a stunned laugh, a yell of shock, and a burst of surprise and anger that Harry had been able to shove his way into his mind so easily. He staggered back a couple of steps and warily eyed Harry with a combination of mistrust and admiration. He hadn’t realized that Harry’s power was so formidable, or so powerful, or that he could speak with his mind and therefore was pretty much telepathic – but at the same time, Harry had clearly demonstrated that he was capable of rifling round in Louis’ head, making him do things against his will, and controlling him completely, and he hadn’t done it. Unless, of course, he’d erased his memory – but he remembered perfectly everything that had happened, and he knew that Harry wasn’t up to creating false memories yet…his suspicion died as quickly as it had flared up. What reason did he have to think that Harry would ever mess with him like that?

*Well, I suppose I should be thankful that you have that much confidence in my abilities,* Harry said lightly, and Louis blushed as he realized that the younger boy had heard every single little paranoid bit of that.

“I – I’m sorry –”

“Don’t be. I’d be worried if you weren’t suspicious. At least now we know you’re not a complete idiot,” Harry joked. *I’ll get out of your head, now, shall I?*

“If you don’t mind,” Louis said faintly.

Amused, eyes sparkling, Harry gave a little nod and then Louis paused anxiously for some kind of indication that Harry had withdrawn.

“Um – are you out, yet?” he asked cautiously.

Harry choked a laugh and then struggled to hide it. “Yes.”

“Out of where?” Felix demanded.

Louis was disliking him more and more each second; the thought of punching him was extremely tempting, and he had to take a couple of calming breaths before he helplessly looked at Harry. They both burst out laughing, and Louis smacked Harry’s arm lightly as he watched the younger boy throw back his head and laugh in a flash of white teeth with curls bobbing everywhere. Secretly fascinated, Louis examined the movement with eager eyes, enjoying watching Harry’s shoulders heave with laughter and his eyes close as he giggled softly. Beside him, Louis fought the urge to throw an arm around Harry’s shoulder and draw him closely against his side, and nuzzle the top of his head with his nose. Shaking his head, Harry turned to him, and they both paused for a second, wide-eyed, staring at each other. Louis felt his expression soften slightly as he watched the younger boy, and saw Harry’s laughter die and turn into something different entirely, scrutinizing Louis’ face. Feeling embarrassed, Louis ducked his head, cheeks burning hotly. It took a lot of effort to force a cheerful grin onto his face when usually it would have come so easily.

“You explain,” he said, and he reached out to fondly ruffle Harry’s curls with one hand.
Everyone else was still tucking into breakfast when Louis popped upstairs to get his jumper. The thin cotton shirt he’d put on to go downstairs didn’t accommodate for the fact that the heating didn’t seem to be working very well, and after shivering profusely for a couple of minutes, discomfort had won over laziness in the internal battle he’d been having with himself, and he’d hauled himself out of his chair to go and fetch something a bit warmer. Felix had excused himself from breakfast because he said he felt ill – a perfectly valid excuse, seeing as, courtesy of Zayn, he’d been dangling in empty air for a good fifteen minutes that morning – and as Louis headed into the room all five of them shared, he raised a hand to knock, and then hesitated.

Why bother? Felix would never have been that polite to him. Besides, like Niall had said, they were all guys; Louis wasn’t the least bit interested in Felix’s body, so he didn’t have any qualms about walking in on him, no matter what state of undress he was in. The kid was lazy; he was probably lounging pathetically on someone else’s bed, feeling sorry for himself. Rolling his eyes, Louis lowered his hand. He wasn’t going to knock just because for courtesy’s sake he was required to be civil to a boy who evidently disliked him, and made no effort to return the favour. Reaching out, he pushed the door open a little, and was about to step in when he saw that Felix was stood leaning out of the window, sharp chin resting on his pale hand, and the other hand raised to his ear, holding a mobile phone.

Louis frowned. Felix had said he was on the run! What sort of fugitive rang people? That was a massive giveaway if there ever was one. He was about to comment on it, and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing Felix flinch at the sudden sound of a voice behind him, no matter what state of undress he was in. The kid was lazy; he was probably lounging pathetically on someone else’s bed, feeling sorry for himself. Rolling his eyes, Louis lowered his hand. He wasn’t going to knock just because for courtesy’s sake he was required to be civil to a boy who evidently disliked him, and made no effort to return the favour. Reaching out, he pushed the door open a little, and was about to step in when he saw that Felix was stood leaning out of the window, sharp chin resting on his pale hand, and the other hand raised to his ear, holding a mobile phone.

Louis frowned. Felix had said he was on the run! What sort of fugitive rang people? That was a massive giveaway if there ever was one. He was about to comment on it, and enjoy the satisfaction of seeing Felix flinch at the sudden sound of a voice behind him, when his forehead wrinkled even harder. Why had Felix hidden the phone from them? Why had he made up excuses and sneaked off upstairs to use it? Something was most definitely not right. Crouching on the floor, Louis pulled the door carefully back inwards so that it was almost completely closed, leaving only the smallest of cracks for him to listen against, and then he fell silent and waited.


Frustrated, Louis shuffled every so slightly in his uncomfortable position on the floor. If Felix was just going to be his usual rude, irritating and stubborn self and give monosyllabic responses, he wasn’t going to glean any information from this conversation, so it would be pretty pointless for him to listen in! He ground his teeth and forced himself to stay still, just in case. A suspicious phone conversation could be explained away; he was convinced that there wasn’t an innocent explanation behind it, but unless Felix said something that gave away the subject of the conversation he was having, it would be all too easy to lie and make up something. Perhaps it was petty, but he’d never liked Felix, and he wasn’t going to pass up on an opportunity to dish the dirt on him, when such an enticing opportunity danced underneath his nose. It was like dangling a carrot in front of a donkey – but Louis was no donkey, and he was determined that the bait would be his.

“Look, I told you, they don’t suspect a thing!” Felix snapped.

_Oooh. Incriminating._ Louis didn’t much like the sound of that. It was a typical movie scenario; informant insists that his supposed allies have no clue what he’s up to, while the hero listens in with a similarly horrified expression to the one that Louis could feel creeping across his face. Was Felix _playing_ with him? Was he going to turn round and make some sarcastic comment about eavesdroppers, and then shout ‘gotcha!’ in Louis’ face? Louis wouldn’t put it past him – but Felix sounded far too sincere for his liking.

“No. No. Listen, they’re thick, all right? _Totally_ thick. They have literally no idea what’s going on. They really think I’m their personal taxi and that I’d ferry them around just because I feel sorry for
them. Huh! It’s ridiculous.” He sniffed. “One of them, Louis, does give me funny looks every now and then, though.”

At the sound of his name, Louis stiffened. So, he thought darkly, you noticed, did you? They were more glares than ‘funny looks’, but he wasn’t going to argue, obviously; he stayed patiently listening. Things were getting interesting…and worrying.

“Of course not! He’s as thick as the rest of them. Nah, he just doesn’t like me. Yeah. Yeah, that’s him; the one with the force fields. Mmm. Mmmmm. Yep.” Felix shifted uncomfortably, and sat up a little straighter. “Don’t you give me that! Which would you rather; that I updated you every ten minutes and they caught me at it, or every couple of days, when no one’s going to find out? Yeah. Thought so.” His expression soured. “We can’t all turn invisible at will, you know.”

Louis sucked in a shocked breath and then winced at how loud it had sounded, to him, anyway. Invisible? Did that mean that Felix was in league with other people who had supernatural abilities? Why had he not told them? Things were looking worse and worse by the second, and Louis edged backwards a little, ready to make a run for it if he had to. He held up one hand protectively in front of him, ready to lock Felix in a force field at a second’s notice.

“Whatever. I don’t – no, I am not bloody jealous!” Felix hissed. “My powers are better than yours, anyway. Yeah. Yeah, I do. Oh, piss off, Cheren. I don’t care. I really don’t. No. No. Get off the line, you arse; they’ll be expecting me down there in a second.”

That was Louis’ cue to leave. Scrambling backwards on his hands and knees, he hurried as quietly as he could back down the corridor, in a rush to reach the other boys and try and raise the alarm before Felix could get back down. He would work on Harry first; if necessary, Harry could examine his memories and see what he had seen. Gritting his teeth, Louis straightened up and fled into the kitchen, rushing to beat the younger boy, who didn’t even know that it was a race.

He burst into the room, panting heavily. “Ha –”

Felix was already sat in the chair to Harry’s, and as Louis exploded through the door, he raised his head inquiringly. He spotted the agonized expression on Louis’ face and his expression instantly hardened, giving Louis the impression that Felix had just figured out that he knew something was up - and he looked extremely unimpressed. Panicked, Louis felt his eyes flicker over to Harry as he blinked, desperate to tell Harry what he knew, but knowing that his hands were tied.

Surprised, Harry asked, “Louis? What’s wrong?”

Louis had to stare, agonized, into Felix’s eyes, as he reluctantly said, “Um…nothing.”
Chapter 18

Louis thought he might explode from the stresses of knowing that Felix was ‘up to something’. He didn’t know how he was supposed to get near Harry to tell him that something was wrong when he had no idea what was going on, and Felix was clinging to Harry like a limpet, possibly because he knew that Louis wanted to talk to Harry. Either he was being deliberately obnoxious and keeping them apart, or he was determined not to let Louis tell Harry what little he knew.

Weirdly, nobody else was suspicious of why Felix was suddenly being nice. It ought to have set off alarm bells in everyone’s head immediately – Felix didn’t do nice; he was rude and horrible and had no consideration for anyone else, and the only things he cared about were himself and his hair, which he took immense pride in. Yet suddenly, he was all for hanging out with them, and firmly integrating himself into the group. He took especial interest in Harry, which set Louis’ teeth on edge more than anything else. Harry was his best friend.

One look at Felix’s self-assured smirk made him realize that the angrier he got, the more Felix was enjoying the situation. Louis got his own back in petty little ways: sprinkling extra salt onto Felix’s meal, pouring nasty things into his drink, tying his shoelaces together, ‘accidentally’ spilling things on his clothes when they’d just been washed… it was all childish and pathetic, but it made him feel better – every flash of annoyance on Felix’s face at each tiny mishap was like a small victory, and Louis treated it as such, celebrating it in smug silence.

It took long enough for Louis to get Harry on his own for ten seconds, let alone a few minutes, which was what he would need to explain the situation – not helped by the fact that Felix had a nasty habit of sticking his head through walls when you least expected it, or appearing beside you when you weren’t paying attention, and shocking you out of your wits, then laughing rudely at you when you flinched. Knowing that Felix could interrupt Louis when he was in the middle of blowing Felix’s cover did very little for Louis’ nerves. More than once he was tempted to ask Harry to incapacitate the kid for a bit, just to get rid of him, but he was afraid that Harry would start asking questions that were hard to answer, and that once again, Felix would burst in halfway through and then they’d be in trouble. He could only hope that Niall would accidentally set Felix’s hair on fire, or that Zayn would levitate him above the house and then drop him. Little fantasies like that kept him entertained very successfully for a while.

Until one evening, about three nights after the terrible revelation, Felix popped up into the room with damp hair, requesting Niall’s services as a hairdryer, and announcing that he was going out. Louis perked up visibly and couldn’t bring himself to be ashamed at how blatantly pleased he had been by the news.

“I’m heading out on the town,” Felix told them a little sourly, shooting Louis a dirty look because Louis’ face had just lit up like someone had wrapped fairy lights around his head and plugged him into the National Grid. “Don’t expect me back in a hurry.”

“Have fun at the crèche,” Louis said, then realized that he’d accidentally let it slip out loud.

Drawing himself up, Felix responded with all the dignity he could muster, “I’ll have you know that I’m going to a bar. One of the girls down the road invited me for a drink. I’m going to get her to buy alcohol for me.”

This was met with several snorts of amusement, because of course nobody else was going to admit that they had employed this tactic many times over the years before they had reached the beautiful position of being able to acquire their alcohol legally. Of course, after that, it somewhat lost its
appeal; there was no risk in it, which made things less interesting.

“You do that,” Louis told him dismissively, and if ever a sentence had sounded like a pat on the head, it was that one. It was so condescending and almost patronizing that it made Felix blush all over again. Louis allowed himself a small stab of vindictive pleasure in knowing that he’d gotten to Felix, at last.

“Don’t wait up for me,” Felix told them, and then he vanished from the room.

Louis waited a few seconds to make sure that the boy wasn’t going to reappear and make some feeble attempt at a comeback, and when he was certain that Felix had truly gone, he slumped thankfully back against the bed. His relief was tangible. Still, he was determined not to waste any time; he’d barely fallen backwards before he was sitting up again with a jerk, swinging his legs off the bed and marching across the room to where Harry was lounging in a chair with a bored expression on his face. Stopping in front of him, Louis tapped the back of his hand carefully.

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

Niall’s loud wolf-whistle ripped through the air, quickly followed by his laugh as he chuckled at himself, clearly amused by himself. “Get a room, lads.”

“Already got one, but unfortunately, you’re in it,” Harry said playfully, picking up Felix’s pillow and chucking it at Niall. “Shut up, you Irish fool.”

“Harry,” Louis said urgently.

That got Harry’s attention; he paused halfway through the beginning of a silly pillow-fighting war with Niall, allowing the pillow that Niall threw at him to hit him hard in the face and bounce off to the floor without intervention. Standing up, he closed his fingers around Louis’ wrist very carefully, almost holding his hand, and squeezed very lightly. Louis looked back at him, his blue eyes wide and with the flecks of gold in them barely visible. They showed best when he was happy, and at that moment, ‘happy’ was something that Louis definitely was not.

“Are you okay?” Harry asked, and his free hand lifted a little as if he was about to touch Louis – it went halfway towards his face, then at the last moment, Harry recovered himself and quickly veered downwards to rest his fingertips on Louis’ elbow. Louis almost laughed at the clumsy awkwardness of the gesture, but he didn’t much feel like laughing, so he stayed miraculously straight-faced.

“I kind of need to have a word with you,” Louis told him. Harry waited for a couple of seconds, then reminded him gently, “I’m right here.” Oh! Louis groaned to himself in inner frustration; he really didn’t want to hear the stupid, clichéd ‘in private’ come out of his mouth. Something in his expression must have alerted Harry to what Louis really wanted – that, or the way that the annoyance was probably pouring off him in giant waves, and Harry could probably feel every little bit of it. Taking Louis’ elbow with a little more force than was needed, he guided Louis towards the door, opened it, and then led them out into the corridor. However, he didn’t stop there; they were all the way downstairs and standing in the back room with the washing machine and dishwasher before Harry released Louis’ arm and took a little step back. The thuds of the machines at work would disguise the sounds of their conversation from eavesdroppers, and Louis breathed a little sigh of relief.

“Now,” Harry said quietly, “what exactly did you want to talk to me about?”

“Felix,” Louis told him.
Harry’s forehead crinkled in confusion like a sheet of paper being crumpled; Louis and Felix made no secret of how heartily they disliked each other, so to hear Louis mention Felix’s name in a sentence which had nothing to do with how much of a prat the boy was…well, it was definitely unusual. Almost unheard of, in fact.

It hadn’t been the strongest of starts, but Louis figured that he might as well get on with it. He wasn’t doing this to be dramatic, after all. So immediately, he started spouting accusations and trying to convince Harry that Felix was indeed the scheming bastard that Louis knew him to be. “We can’t trust him. He’s not on our side. He wants to sell us out to these other guys; he’s been spying on us and feeding information back to a bunch of people who have powers too!”

For a moment, Harry’s eyes widened and his forehead wrinkled even harder, but then a laugh exploded out of his mouth, and he grinned as he thumped Louis on the back. “You had me going for a second! That was great. You should try pulling that one on Niall; he’d fall for it hook, line and sinker, it’d be brilliant.” He was delighted by what he thought was a joke.

“This is serious, Harry,” Louis insisted, “I’m not joking!”

“Good one, Lou.” Harry was still grinning, looking amused. “You did actually get me for a second. If you like, you can tell everyone I believed you. It was a good joke, I’ll give you that. Felix does sometimes seem like the type.” He patted Louis warmly on the arm.

“Harry,” Louis pleaded, “I’m not messing with you! Felix really is selling us out to…” he paused. He didn’t actually know. “Well, he’s selling us out,” he finished weakly.

For a few seconds, Harry watched him, and then his frown was back, his mouth transforming into an uneasy, confused twist. He reached out and touched the edge of Louis’ mouth, his fingertip tracing the unsmiling lips with almost frightening gentleness – and then he said softly, “Why aren’t you smiling? You always smile. Whenever you play some stupid trick like this you always get this daft grin on your face; your mouth wobbles like you’re about to burst out laughing, and you get a little smile hovering on your lips. And you get a tiny dent in your forehead because you’re trying so hard not to laugh. Right here.” He carefully poked Louis in the centre of his forehead.

“I’m not laughing because I’m not messing with you,” Louis said softly. “The only one who is messing with you is him! He thinks he’s got us all wrapped round his little finger! I don’t know what he wants from us, Harry, but whatever it is, it’s not good. We need to work out a plan; we need to find out what he’s up to, we have to –”

“Louis.”

“ – find out what’s going on and sort everything out before he gets us, or before his friends get us – God, what the hell were we doing, letting him go out like that? He could be consorting with them as we speak!”

“Louis?”

“Who knows what he’s up to? He could be bringing them back to take us away! Harry, we have to run, we have to –” he reached out and grabbed hold of Harry’s shoulders, practically shaking him “ – stop him from getting hold of us or any of the other boys, and we have to run! God, that’s impossible, how the hell do you outrun a teleporter? No harm in trying, I suppose; it’s not like he can get through my force fields any –”

“Louis, SHUT UP!”
Harry had never intended to shout so loudly, but he was so desperate to shut Louis up for a second that the words came out louder than he’d intended to – and he accidentally screamed it inside his head as well, forgetting of course, that whenever Harry thought about something he wanted a person to do, they were forced to do it.

Which meant that the force of his shout reverberated through his mind, and through Louis’, and it sent a little shudder rippling through Louis that he barely noticed, because unless Harry attracted your attention to it, it was almost impossible to detect his presence inside your head, and therefore he didn’t realize it when Harry launched himself at Louis, coiled his mental lasso around the part of Louis’ brain which controlled speech, and then tightened his grip, contracting his hold until he was all but suffocating that particular, delicate part of Louis’ mind, and as he did so, he snuffed it out and plunged himself further into the depths of his best friend’s conscious thought, and the further he immersed himself, the harsher his grip got, until he forced Louis into complete silence, cutting off the speech receptors from Louis’ mouth.

Louis opened his mouth to ask what was wrong, but to his horror, no sounds came out of his mouth – not the slightest noise. His eyes widened, and he tried to clear his throat, but even the little coughing sound wouldn’t come out, and he merely gasped as his hand flew to his throat and slid down the smooth column of his throat as if he could feel what had stopped him from speaking.

Harry’s horrified expression told him all he needed to know, and the look on Louis’ face melted from horror and confusion to shock, and then his eyes widened even more, so that Harry was almost afraid that they might fall out of his eye sockets and roll across the floor like marbles. Louis raised one shaking finger to point accusingly at Harry, the other hand still wrapped around his throat like he could squeeze new syllables into it. He backed away a little, slowly shaking his head, like he couldn’t believe what Harry had done – a sentiment which Harry shared; he could hardly believe that he’d done it himself.

Still, silence was not something that Louis had ever been good at, and he wasn’t going to let a little thing like being unable to speak get in the way of letting his opinions be heard. Knowing full well that Harry was lingering inside his head in order to keep a firm hold of his mind, he started battering the insides of his own mind in a desperate attempt to get at Harry, despite having no insight into what he was doing. It was an almost piteously pathetic attempt; Louis was lashing blindly out, and his own mind was ridiculously feeble compared to Harry’s – not that having his best friend trying to beat him at what he did best wasn’t awful, and perhaps a little weird. Louis was screaming, yelling at a deafeningly loud volume inside his head, and Harry didn’t want to listen to any of that for too long, so he ended up narrowing his eyes and forcing himself to restrain other parts of Louis’ brain as well; the parts which allowed him to voice his thoughts so assertively. Before the awful invasiveness of rifling round in Louis’ innermost thoughts could incapacitate him, Harry quickly pinched at the part he needed to pinch, and then the fountain of abuse and mental screams stopped, because Harry had cut those off, too.

Therefore, Louis just stood, appalled, and stared emptily at him, incapable of coherent thought or speech because Harry had just separated the rest of his consciousness from the parts of his brain he would need to access them. Betrayal was not something Harry was familiar with, but he was painfully aware that in Louis’ eyes at least, he had just committed it.

He took a slow step forwards and reached out to touch Louis, just a touch on the shoulder to reassure him, but Louis jerked away in a panic and started backing off as quickly as he could, retreating towards the furthest wall, backing himself into a corner, although he wasn’t to know that, because he hadn’t looked round. His mind was empty, but he still had enough presence lingering in the severed connection between his thought processes and the rest of him to know that he was trying to get away from Harry, and to keep trying, even when he was no longer sure why.
It was such a primal, desperate fear that as Harry sent a stroke of mental power down Louis’ brain, he felt like he might be sick when he grabbed a fistful of impulses on their way to the brain and delicately picked out the ones he needed, halting the necessary ones and keeping the less necessary ones under lock and key, in a manner of speaking. He only needed a few seconds. Before another minute had passed, Louis was not only silent, but paralysed as well, stood perfectly still apart from the speedy rise and fall of his chest as he breathed quickly in and out, a response to his mute panic, and the way that his eyes flickered desperately around the room in seconds, flitting from wall to wall like a butterfly trying to escape from a dim room.

With a cry, Harry staggered back and collapsed into the wooden chair that luckily was almost directly behind him. If it hadn’t been there, he would have fallen over. As soon as the wooden legs of it were supporting him, he leaned forwards and buried his face in his hands, stifling a sob and a few tears so that nobody would see them if they came in.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered helplessly, but he didn’t think that Louis, anchored in place and silenced as he was, would really be in the mood to listen to apologies.

Once again, it was time for Harry to make the choice of how exactly he was going to wipe Louis’ memory. It had only been a stupid accident, a slip because he was angry and panicking and confused, but Louis wasn’t going to accept that – and any chances of him being tolerant had been wiped out of existence when Harry had panicked for the second time and stopped him from thinking and moving as well. The second he was free, Louis would be making a run for it, and Harry didn’t blame him. If his best friend had mentally gagged him and frozen him in place just because they’d had an argument, he would be running for the hills the moment he could. He wouldn’t even look back. Harry couldn’t lose Louis like that.

Therefore, he once again had to choose exactly how he was going to modify Louis’ memory, and he had to do it in a suitably precise way that Louis wouldn’t know he’d done it. In the past, he’d clumsily blanked out recollections that he wanted forgetting, and left people with a gap in their memory. Louis knew that was how he did it; he would be wise to that. If he knew that Harry had tampered with his memory, he would get paranoid and probably think that Harry had done something even worse than what he had done, which was not what Harry wanted. So he could try and implant a false memory, but he’d never practiced before, and again, if Louis realized that Harry had been messing with his head, he’d want to know why, and God knows what kind of conspiracy theories he’d come up with if left to his own devices.

Helplessly, Harry started poking around, trying to figure out if there was any alternative way of doing this – and that, of course, was when he found it. Maybe he didn’t have to leave Louis with a gap, or make a false memory to replace the one he was getting rid of. What if he could erase the bad stuff, then join the last bit of good memory to the start of whatever memory he would start forming after Harry let him go?

In the end, that was what Harry did. It was almost ridiculously easy to get rid of all of the stuff he didn’t want Louis to remember, leaving him hanging there like a puppet, stood motionless and with no intentions of his own in place. He took the last bit of memory before he’d started messing with Louis’ mind, when Louis had been yelling at him, and he prepared to fuse it together with the memory that Louis would be starting in a few seconds. To make it realistic, he stood in the same position he’d been in before, pulling Louis back to where they had been standing – but just before he set things in motion again, he nervously dipped forwards and brushed his lips very lightly against the corner of Louis’ mouth. Louis had soft lips and they tasted like coffee and something else which was probably just the taste of Louis, something which made Harry feel a bit dizzy. He almost wanted to do it again – but quickly shaking his head, he stepped backwards into his original position.
“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Then he released his hold on Louis’ mind, allowing him to start forming memories again, and at the same time knitted the memory of the conversation they’d been having together with what was happening right now. As far as Louis was concerned, they’d never stopped speaking. They were still in the middle of a discussion. This became apparent when Louis’ voice echoed loudly throughout the little room, almost obnoxiously loud after the few minutes of silence that had came before it, and Harry flinched.

“God, that’s impossible, how the hell do you outrun a teleporter? No harm in trying, I suppose; it’s not like he can get through my force fields any –”

Visibly, Harry cringed at the loudness of his voice, and Louis paused, looking warily at him. He bit his lip in the exact place where Harry had just kissed it, and a blush sprung up onto Harry’s cheeks, turning them the colour of raw meat – unhealthily red.

Louis pinched the bridge of his nose wearily. “Sorry. Sorry! I just got carried away.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed faintly.

Quickly, Louis crossed the distance between them, and wrapped his arms around Harry in a quick hug. It was only a friendly embrace, but it sent Harry’s heart into a wild flutter as he breathed in so quickly he almost choked on the air he had inhaled.

“I –” Harry struggled out of Louis’ arms, stepping backwards to disentangle himself from any more hugs that might come his way, hugs that he shouldn’t have been so desperate for. “You can’t do this to me, Louis. You can’t spring something on me like this and expect me to believe it!”

“Check,” Louis offered.

He had to tap his head with one finger before Harry understood what he meant. Understandably, Harry recoiled from the suggestion. He wasn’t going to mess with Louis’ mind again! He’d done that more than enough already.

“Just leave it!” Harry begged. “Leave me to make up my own mind. Please?”

Before Louis could answer, he turned and fled from the room, because he was terrified of what might happen next if he didn’t – the second kiss that he so wanted to steal, a proper kiss that time rather than a quick brush of mouths when Louis wasn’t even conscious. Louis stared after him in bewilderment, calling his name, but Harry didn’t once look back.
Chapter 19

Harry wasn’t sure what he’d been thinking when he’d chosen to gather all of his friends – and Felix – in the room that all six of them shared, but all he knew was that he wanted to get a grip on himself, and the best way to do that which he could think of was to make sure that he was busy. So he might as well do something useful and work on his powers, right?

He couldn’t make eye contact with Louis, who was alternating between trying to catch Harry’s eye and throwing force fields around the room. Zayn was sat in the corner trying to make things fly without levitating everything in the room; his momentary lapses in concentration when Louis’ force fields flickered too closely in his peripheral vision were evident because everyone in the room would rise a few centimetres off whatever they were sitting on before he gritted his teeth and wrenched everything back under control again. Niall was sulking because he couldn’t practice his power, seeing as the smoke alarms were very good in the room and nobody fancied setting off the sprinkler system, and Liam was looking at Harry with brotherly concern. It was sweet, but it made Harry nervous to know that he was being watched. Felix was lying flat on his bed with his arms folded behind his head, sprawled lazily across the duvet and looking uninterested.

“What’s this about, Harry?” Liam asked.

What, indeed? Harry thought, as he scanned the room and looked at each other occupant besides Louis. Whenever he caught the slightest glimpse of his best friend, his brain helpfully presented him with flashbacks of how Louis smelled, and how soft his mouth had been when Harry had kissed him, and what the gentle tickle of his stubble had felt like. He was attacked by hundreds of desperate, hungry impulses that he didn’t particularly want to be having, and he could feel himself blushing at every small and inappropriate thought. But this wasn’t about Louis – it was about him, and practicing his powers.

“I need to improve my powers,” he said. “You guys are all practicing, you’re all getting better…I’m just kind of sat here, doing nothing. I want to get better. But I’m not just going to do it without your permission –” he couldn’t look at Louis, he would have to stop and run away if he looked at Louis “– so I wanted to know if you’d let me practice on you.”

“I’ll do it,” Louis said immediately. Harry couldn’t help it; his head snapped as he turned to stare at Louis in shock. The older boy’s face was lit up with excitement – well, that was just so classically Louis; he loved trying new things. The idea of allowing his best friend to throw him around and mess around with his head appealed to him.

“No,” Harry shot back just as quickly, then felt the colour first drain from his face, then rush back to it as he realized what that must have sounded like.

Hurt, Louis stared at him and asked in an injured tone, “Why not?” His expression was imploring, his eyes wide and reproachful as he blinked at Harry, trying to understand why Harry would snap at him like that.

Harry started frantically scrambling for a decent excuse which wasn’t I secretly enjoyed messing around in your mind yesterday and would actually love to do it again, but if I do, I will probably kiss you, which I should most definitely not do. “Um…” He had to find someone else to practice on, and a decent reason why he was favouring them over Louis. Almost instantly, his gaze alighted on Felix, whose mind he enjoyed tampering with simply because he liked vindictively shuffling Felix’s thoughts around in his head like a pack of cards. Raising a hand, he pointed at the younger boy. “I want to practice on him,” he said commandingly.
Felix had been lounging back on his duvet and staring at the ceiling, but his head snapped up in surprise and he stared wide-eyed at Harry with an expression warring between anxiety, confusion and defiance. “Me?”

Replacing his hurt with outrage, Louis looked appalled as his head whipped sharply and he stared at Harry as well, his gaze fluctuating between Harry and Felix. His tone was remarkably similar to Felix’s as he said in utter revulsion, “Him?”

Harry answered both of their astounded queries with a calm “Yes.” His hand moved to his hair and he absently pushed it off his forehead as he said “You’re too happy to let me do it. If you want to let me in, it’s too easy. You’re too co-operative, Louis – no offence. I need someone stubborn, someone obstinate, someone who’d never let me order them around in a million years. Someone like him.” He indicated Felix.

“You’re not messing around in my head,” Felix said sulkily, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“See!” cried Harry. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about!” He looked reasonably at Louis. “You offered to let me in; he point blank refused. I’m not going to be dealing with many people who want me inside their heads – I need the experience.”

“You can get it from someone else, then,” snapped Felix obstinately, folding his arms. “I’ve told you before and I’ll tell you again; you are not going rifling around inside my –”

“Oh, pipe down,” Harry told him, and he calmly sent a mental stab in Felix’s direction.

The effect was instantaneous: Felix’s teeth came together with an audible snap, and then his lips slammed together as well, sealing his mouth completely shut. In horror, Felix’s eyes widened as he reached up and grabbed his mouth as if he were going to prise his lips apart, but with an almost lazy mental flick, Harry had pinned Felix’s arms by his sides, and was appraising him with his head tilted to the left and a small smirk on his face.

“That’s better,” Harry told him, and he started burrowing further into Felix’s head, delving deeper into the recesses of the boy’s thoughts as he struggled through the layers of unnecessary mind-babble like it was water he had to wade through. Through the rushing of someone else’s thoughts rushing from their brain into his, Harry heard Louis murmur “Oh, that’s a definite improvement.”

Harry was a little too busy controlling Felix’s body to do much with his own, so he absently had Felix raise a finger to his lips and say in “Shhhhh…” It came out as a mangled slur; Harry struggled to make Felix’s mouth form words and the other boy’s tongue felt odd and heavy to move, so the syllables came slowly and thickly, and Harry’s voice could be heard as a faint undertone, echoing behind Felix’s – but the message got through, and Louis fell silent.

Then Harry went back to rifling round inside Felix’s mind, trying to figure out the extent of his limitations. If he could erase memories, what else could he do with them? That curiosity peaked, and he started gently probing Felix’s mind, trying to investigate his own limitations. After a while, he wondered if it would be easier to manipulate Felix if the boy was distracted, rather than focused on throwing everything he had at Harry – so he waved a hand in Zayn’s direction. Harry wasn’t sure whose mouth he opened as he said stiffly, “Zayn, could you…?” but both his and Felix’s voices chimed in unison, so he assumed it had been the other boy’s vocal chords he had borrowed. In response, Zayn obediently raised them all a few inches off the floor. Seeing as he couldn’t move or speak, Felix panicked twice as hard as usual, and his mind went blank of everything except a jumble of incoherent mental yelling as he tried to drag himself back down to the floor again.

This sudden upheaval was exactly the opportunity Harry had been looking for, and he instantly
grabbed Felix’s mind and twisted, contorting the memories to what he wanted the boy to see. He was in an odd mood, so he decided to have a bit of fun with it: wrenching at the boy’s most recent memories, he contorted them, messed them around, and then implanted what he thought was a good memory into Felix’s head.

Then, he released him, trying not to laugh at what he had just forced into Felix’s brain.

Felix yelped in shock and staggered backwards, falling over as Zayn dropped them all onto the floor. Niall was the closest to him; his gaze fixed on the Irish boy and his eyes widened so much that Harry was surprised he didn’t get eye strain. He was naturally pale anyway, and the tiny bit of colour he had leech from his face. Gasping, he raised his hand and gestured helplessly at Niall, seeming to have lost the capability to speak. Harry worriedly checked to make sure that he had given Felix his vocal cords back, which he had, and then realized that without any of his further intervention, Felix was, in fact, speechless.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh a little bit, and then cover his mouth with his hand because he shouldn’t have been so amused; Felix looked traumatized. Still…to get him to shut up for a little while, it had perhaps been worth it.

“Where are they?” Felix demanded, his hair exploding in an inky blur around his head as he whipped his head back and forth, looking frantically around the room. “Where did they go?”

“Where did what go?” asked a perplexed Zayn.


Harry was the only person in the room who didn’t look at Felix as if he was insane. In fact, Harry doubled over with silent laughter, unnoticed by everyone else, all of whom were throwing horrified glances at the youngest boy.

“How did you all not see them?” Felix cried, “they were floating! They were – they were right there!” He pointed at Niall. “They were – they were in the…exact same place…that you are…” He deflated visibly. “They…weren’t really…there. Were they?” Giving Harry a defeatist stare, he shook his head sadly.

Niall, however, was delighted. “Man, you did that? You made him see pink elephants? That’s awesome! It’s like being on drugs, but without all the nastiness and health issues! And illegality. Can you do it to me?”

Raising an eyebrow, Harry said “It isn’t a game! It’s not supposed to be a party trick! That was just a practice. I’m not making you hallucinate. Besides, it wasn’t even a proper hallucination; I just made him think that he’d already seen flying pink elephants. You wouldn’t even see them properly – you’d just remember seeing them.” He stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“Still sounds cool,” Niall argued defensively.

“It wrecks your head,” Felix moaned. “I feel dizzy. And sick. My eyes hurt.” Dramatically staggering across the room, he pulled himself up a chair and collapsed into it with a low groan, tilting his face towards the ceiling.

“Yet you’re still complaining,” sighed Harry, “obviously I didn’t wreck your head enough.”

“Can you not shut him up again?” murmured Louis; “I preferred him when he kept his mouth shut if I’m honest.”
“You’re not the only one.” Rolling his eyes, Harry raised his voice and said a little louder “don’t you worry, Felix; there’s no pink elephants. I just distorted your memory to make you see them. The nasty elephants aren’t coming to hurt you.” He smirked.

“Oh, shut up,” Felix grumbled, and Harry and Louis’ grins grew enormously. “Don’t screw up my mind and then take the mickey out of me. I’ll walk through you.”

“Just you try it,” Louis and Harry said simultaneously, Louis outstretching his fingertips in readiness to create an enormous force field around them, and Harry tapping his forehead meaningfully.

Quickly backing away, Felix said worriedly, “Okay, okay, I was only – I – never mind, I wouldn’t – um.” He looked extremely anxious.

Delighted, Harry said “I think he’s scared of us, Louis!”

“You know, Harry, I think you might be right,” agreed Louis gleefully. He still hadn’t forgotten Felix’s mysterious phone call, and was loving the idea that Felix might be feeling uncomfortable about having Harry in his head – maybe Harry would add it all up and figure out that there really was something amiss.

“Look,” Felix argued hastily, holding his hands up protectively in front of him, “I just don’t like people messing around inside my mind, all right?”

“Why?” asked Harry playfully. “Got something to hide?” He hoped that Felix would panic at that; secretly, he was testing the waters in his own little way, trying to see what Felix’s true intentions were, and whether he really was betraying them, in a way.

“No!” Felix insisted shrilly.

So, in other words, yes. That was all Harry needed to know. Without giving Felix a second to prepare, he lunged and started the mental assault, hurling himself at the other boy’s mind. It wasn’t like Felix had ever put up much of a fight anyway; Harry slid into his mind and started rifling around as surreptitiously as he could, trying not to draw attention to the fact that he was inside Felix’s head.

Talking whilst so distracted proved to be difficult, but not impossible. Harry knew his eyes were glazed over and he wasn’t blinking, but at least his tone was vaguely normal as he said lightly, “All right, all right, keep your wig on.” His smile was forced; he hoped it didn’t look it. A cold, clammy sweat had broken out in the small of his back and his fringe was getting a little floppier with the exertion and effort of hiding his actions. Multitasking wasn’t for him, it appeared.

“My mind is my own,” Felix said firmly, “and I don’t particularly want other people messing around in it. We all have things we’d rather keep to ourselves, don’t we?” He folded his arms defensively across his chest, determined not to give anything away, trying to keep his expression unreadable – the turmoil in his thoughts gave away his panic; Harry almost felt sick from the churning in Felix’s stomach that he was experiencing second-hand.

“I don’t know,” Harry said with effort, “do we?” Come to think of it, perhaps everyone did have things they’d rather keep to themselves; he knew he definitely did.

“Everyone has things they aren’t proud of. Everyone has things they wish they hadn’t done. But when you look back, I guess everything you wish you hadn’t done taught you something, so when you think about it, turning back the clock wouldn’t do you any good, would it?” said Zayn thoughtfully.

All eyes turned to look at him. Niall considered that statement for a while, his head tilted in confusion.
while he tried to fathom what it could have meant, while Liam just blinked as if it might make a little bit more sense to him afterwards. Harry thought he understood it a little, which was surprising, because he wasn’t really listening.

Felix asked “What on earth are you talking about, man?”

“What he meant,” Louis offered helpfully, “was ‘shit happens, but it happens for a reason’.”

Noises of agreement met that explanation; it was less long-winded and emotional, and sounded far less deep than Zayn’s comment.

“Well why didn’t he just say that th – ow!” Felix winced and clutched his head. “Ow!”

“What?”

“My head’s killing me! I’ve just suddenly got a massive headache,” whined Felix, looking mistrustfully at Harry.

“Oi! Don’t you blaming me every time you get a migraine!” Harry said defensively, hoping that no one had noticed that his hands were shaking with the effort of hiding what he was doing. It had been the tiniest slip in concentration that had done it, but he’d prodded Felix’s mind hard enough to hurt, and now Felix was onto him.

It was an emergency, and Harry treated it as such. He found the first flutter of panic that he came across, then attached himself to it and followed it into the deepest recesses of Felix’s mind, to listen to the fears and the tiny secrets screaming out at him.

Felix’s mind was a rush and it was confusing to pick at one little thread and follow it, so he just fell into the pool of thoughts and attempted to listen to every little bit of it – not an easy task; a confusing one, and he struggled with it. But several words, and a few names, repeated over and over in a rush that was hard to hear: Cheren, and Deino. He assumed they were names; he didn’t recognize them, but he was sure they weren’t words.

No matter how hard Harry searched, he couldn’t seem to find the faces that went with the names; Felix’s memories were fuzzy and clouded, and in frustration, Harry had to just listen. It took a lot of patience, but eventually he dredged up a vaguely useful memory: he could only hear voices, not see the faces of the people who owned them, but the voices were all he really needed.

“You have to watch them like a hawk, Felix! You’re positive they don’t know what you’re up to?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, these kids could be dangerous. They clearly have no idea what they’re doing – but they’re powerful, and you and I both know that power and ignorance don’t go well together. There’s nothing more dangerous than a powerful idiot.”

“Uh-huh. Okay.”

“Felix!” the voice snapped. “Are you even listening?”

“Yep,” Felix answered shortly, a wave of irritation drifting through him as he scowled. He hated taking orders from Cheren. “Look, I told you, they don’t suspect a thing.” His annoyance was ridiculous; if Cheren had been beside him, he’d already have tried to hit him. He’d never realized how annoying Cheren’s voice was as well as his face – perhaps more so, because a voice wasn’t something you could punch when it annoyed you.
“Not one thing at all? You’re telling me there isn’t the tiniest doubt in a single one of their minds?”

“No! No. Listen, they’re thick, all right? Totally thick. They have literally no idea what’s going on. They really think I’m their personal taxi and that I’d ferry them around just because I feel sorry for them. Huh! It’s ridiculous. One of them, Louis, does give me funny looks every now and then, though.”

“So he suspects you.”

“Of course not! He’s as thick as the rest of them. Nah, he just doesn’t like me.”

“You’re totally sure about that?”

“Yeah.”

“Louis…” drawled Cheren slowly, drawing out the syllables. “Isn’t he the older one? The one you always moan about?”

“Yeah, that’s him; the one with the force fields.”

“So he’s a bit uncertain of you?”

“Mmm.”

“Is it because you’re so rude?” asked Cheren mildly.

“Mmmmmm.” Felix said vaguely.

“You bring it on yourself, you know.”

“Yep.”

“You’re very opinionated, Felix, did you know that? You make another person hate you every time you open your mouth. Listen, you’ve been giving me heart attacks these last couple of days; you never call! I told you to keep me posted on everything you’re up to!” Did Cheren actually sound worried? Felix might have almost been touched, if he hadn’t heard so many of Cheren’s rants and lectures over the years. “I’m beginning to regret letting you go out there and watch them.”

“Don’t you give me that! Which would you rather; that I updated you every ten minutes and they caught me at it, or every couple of days, when no one’s going to find out?” Cheren’s silence said it all. “Yeah. Thought so. We can’t all turn invisible at will, you know.” Yeah, so he was ridiculously jealous! Cheren’s power was cool!

“You’re just lazy.”

“Whatever. I don’t…”

“Oh, and jealous!” Cheren said in a sing-song tone.

“No, I am not bloody jealous! My powers are better than yours, anyway.”

“You really think so?” Cheren taunted.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“We all know how much you want my powers off me.” There was far too much amusement
colouring Cheren's tone.

“Oh, piss off, Cheren. I don’t care. I really don’t.”

“Don’t you?”

“No. No!” Felix whined. “Get off the line, you arse; they’ll be expecting me down there in a second.”

“You love me really.” Pausing, Cheren added, “keep yourself safe, though, yeah? Watch yourself. I don’t want you to get hurt if the idiots panic.”

“Whatever. I can take care of myself. See you later, yeah?” The call was disconnected.

With a gasp, Harry tore himself out of Felix’s memories just in time to hear Liam say “Well I don’t know about you, but I certainly don’t want people wandering around inside my head! There’s private stuff in there.” Spotting Harry’s greyish pallor and wide eyes, he frowned a little and reached out to concernedly touch Harry’s elbow. “You alright, kid? You look a bit green.”

“Fine,” Harry said hoarsely. “I need the loo, I’ll be back in a second.” With that, he vanished into the bathroom, then sat on the edge of the bath with his head in his hands, gripping two handfuls of curls in a panic as he tried to come to terms with the fact that Louis was right, and they were being double-crossed – and now they had to run from a boy who could teleport and walk through walls, and Harry had no idea how they were going to do it.
“Get down!”

Liam’s yell pierced the night, and Harry dived at Louis and knocked him to the ground just as an enormous metal dustbin flew over them, exactly where Louis’ head had been moments before. Swearing, Harry and Louis flattened themselves against the ground, and Harry felt grit sticking to his face, but he didn’t dare brush raise his head to brush it off until Liam shouted the all clear.

“Okay, move! Quick!”

They had barely taken a few more steps before Liam was shouting out another warning, another cry for them to duck.

“Down!”

“This isn’t working,” Harry growled as he hit the floor. His body screamed in protest; he’d landed awkwardly, and it bloody hurt! Patience evaporating, he gave up with a frustrated groan. Thrusting his mind outwards, he linked a tendril of thought with Liam’s brain, connecting it to his – and then he could see everything.

Liam’s power had usefully kicked in roundabout when they’d first started fleeing for their lives – after Harry had taken the boys onto one side and frantically explained to them that Felix wasn’t on their side after all, and was selling them out, although to whom he didn’t know. Louis had looked so relieved that Harry had thought he might kiss him – not that he would have objected. Harry had been sceptical of Louis’ judgement, but no one dared to question Harry’s; rushing upstairs, they’d started packing their few belongings in a desperate rush.

Then all of a sudden, Liam had paled, his head snapped up, and he said “He’s coming!”

Nobody had any idea how he could possibly know that; the whole house was silent – but sure enough, seconds later Felix walked through the door – quite literally – and said “Hey, guys, what –” He froze in shock. “What the hell are you doing?”

It had been a great testament to the strength of the friendship between the other five boys when the moment they leapt into action, each of them coincided perfectly with each other. Harry snatched at Felix’s mind and froze him in place, and then all five of them sprinted for the open window. The bond of trust was ridiculous; they all jumped at almost the same time, surprisingly cramming all of their lanky bodies through the window – and then Louis snapped his hands and a bubble ballooned around them, as Zayn stopped it from plummeting to the ground and carefully lowered it to the floor. Louis released them, and then they ran.

Harry’s concentration had broken and he felt Felix’s mind flutter frustratingly out of his grasp within the first five minutes of their sprint for freedom, when he stumbled over an inconveniently placed rock and almost landed flat on his face before Louis grabbed his shoulder and saved him.

They kept running, and Liam kept shouting out warnings after that – telling them this, that and the other that was about to happen, yelling alerts and reminding them to tie their shoelaces – not in case they tripped over, but because they would trip over. Liam had somehow gained some kind of insight into the future, and judging by the frightening accuracy of his predictions only seconds after discovering his ability, he was good. Nobody argued, nobody was sceptical. They didn’t really have time. Running was all they had time for; running and breathing. Although breathing wasn’t as easy
as any of them would have liked; the air was snatched from their lungs far too quickly, and then dragged in again with wheezes, sounding downright unhealthy.

“Don’t stop!” Liam ordered. Out of all of them, he was coping the best; he ran a lot simply for pleasure, and so he was sprinting way ahead of them with ease, closing his eyes every so often to maximise his ability to foresee any dangers that might be heading their way.

“Easy – for – you – to –say!” gasped Niall, wearily extinguishing himself for the third time in the last five minutes. His concentration was slipping and he kept unintentionally setting himself alight, so that for several seconds at a time, a boy on fire ran a couple of steps – and the heat was making him uncomfortable, causing him to sweat even more than just the exertion.

“They’re on our tail,” warned Liam, “if you stop now, they’ll have you.” His certainty was almost frightening.

“Who’re ‘they’?” demanded Zayn, skirting around a tin can.

“Felix and Cheren!”

That exasperated cry chilled Harry more than anything else, because he hadn’t told Liam that name, and he knew for real that Liam truly had been able to see it in his future – that he could see all that ever could be, and everything that would. The idea frightened him: Liam would know everything about his life. Every little bit. He pitied Liam ridiculously for that, already, even though he wasn’t sure whether the thought had occurred to the other boy yet.

“Who the bloody hell –” began Niall with a moan.

“Stop!” yelled Liam, and they all skidded to a halt.

“What?” asked Louis.

“What?” asked Louis.

“Shut up! Let me think! Let me think, let me think, let me think – God, my head!” In frustration, he grabbed two handfuls of his hair like he might rip them out, and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. Harry wondered if it helped him to see better, or whether he was just doing it out of habit. “They’re coming. But I can’t see…” He swore. “It’s all so blurry! Everything’s fluctuating. I can’t see clearly enough. Something hasn’t happened yet…a decision has to be made…”

“Like bloody Twilight,” Louis mumbled. “You can’t see anything until they’ve decided they’re gonna do it.”

“It makes sense!” Liam snapped, “if you don’t like it, you try seeing the future! It’s bloody difficult. So far it’s all been hazy flashes and unmade decisions and not a set of winning lottery numbers in sight. Now shut up, I need to – that way!” His voice urgently cut off, and he lurched out at Louis, shoving him towards a filthy alleyway. “Go down there!”

Only Louis was strong-willed, and unused to obeying orders; he liked to do what he wanted. So despite Liam’s good intentions, despite knowing that Liam knew what was going to happen, he hesitated just a split second. It wasn’t as if Liam didn’t know he was going to do it anyway. It was the tiniest of pauses, but it was ever so slightly too long.

“Hello, hello, hello, what have we here?” The voice that spoke was like Felix’s, only deeper and more pleasant to the ear; but it shared the same talent for being annoying using very few words.

“What’s this, a mother’s meeting?”

They were jumbled together in a clumsy conglomeration, resembling a kind of circle, so it was easy
to understand where the metaphor had come from, but it made all of them grit their teeth in annoyance. Instantly, Louis shifted his position, twitching closer to Harry like he couldn’t help it, their hips touching, and Harry was reassured instantly. He watched Louis flex his fingers in readiness and started stretching out his mind to try and attack the mind behind the voice. As he had no idea what he was looking for, that was less than easy. Niall started trying to look menacing, which of course was practically impossible for him, and Zayn shrugged helplessly and waited for something to happen. Liam pressed his fingertips against his temples, concentrating on watching everything that could and would happen.

Then out of the gloom stepped two brothers who were clearly identical, but determined not to be. Felix was ever so minutely smaller than the other boy, but made up for it by having extremely tall hair that stuck up in a giant tuft over his head. His brother had a few extra millimetres of height and his hair was more flattened, but thicker; otherwise there was little difference between them. They had the same pale grey eyes, the same sharp, pale faces, sarcastic expressions and mocking voice, except Cheren’s was a little deeper and had a rumbling quality to it that was only faintly noticeable. He was, like Felix, attractive, but there was something about his mouth that made it quirk in a way which suggested he was never far from a sneer.

“That’s them!” Felix said loudly, casting out his hand.

“I can see that,” came the mild answer, as Cheren critically examined them all like they were old friends of his who had changed and he wanted to take in every small difference in their appearances. “You did describe them very clearly to me. The charmer…curly hair, big green eyes…he hides himself behind charisma that the devil himself couldn’t hope to match and hopes that no one will find out what’s whirling around inside his mind.” His own eyes moved lazily over Harry’s slightly outraged face – was he no more than just ‘the charmer’?! – and then flickered to Niall’s face. “The cute one, the adorable little Irish boy who’s always hungry. Who eats his own weight in snacks every day just to feed the flames, to keep them burning…” His voice was almost a caress, smooth around the words.

Niall’s jaw dropped as he considered whether there might actually be some truth in that; was he always hungry because of the fire? Admittedly, he had been rather harder to fill up lately, but he’d thought that was down to the lack of food in their cell.

“Then the reliable one…who runs away from it all and hates that he has to come full circle, has to come back to it all. The one who the girls call beautiful, who often thinks of himself, who can lift objects with his mind alone but has no control over it, just like he has no control over his own life…he hates it. Isn’t that right, Zayn?” Cheren raised an eyebrow questioningly. “And last but most definitely not least; the man who seeks only to protect; who would lay down his life for his friends. But the things he protects by far the most fiercely are his own secrets. He protects them so well that even he doesn’t know them all.” Cheren fixed Louis with an uncomfortably knowing stare. “He’s afraid of himself – not that he’d ever admit it.”

“He does that,” Felix explained in response to the five aghast, open mouths that greeted his brother’s speech. “Most people hate him for it. With just one look at you, or a description, he knows more about you than you do. It isn’t a power, either. He’s always done it. It’s one of his more horrible talents.” He laughed darkly, but the sound was harsh.

“Now, now, little brother, don’t be bitter. Let’s not bring old family arguments into this,” admonished Cheren, in what was quite possibly the most patronizing voice ever.

“I am not your little brother!” Felix squeaked, his pale face flushing bright red and his voice turning high pitched with embarrassment as he glared in outrage at Cheren.
“I’m older than you.”

“By two and a half minutes!”

It was clearly an argument that they’d had before; there was a practiced air of smugness on Cheren’s face, and Felix looked like he couldn’t decide whether to be angry or bored with the stupid teasing. Still, he was aggravated by it, despite the familiarity with which they argued, and he didn’t like being reminded of the tiny age difference.

“Run!” Louis said suddenly, surprising them all, and he shoved Harry first, trying to push him forwards, but he’d barely taken a step before Liam shook his head ever so slightly, looking frustrated.

“If you run now, he’ll have you on the floor in seconds,” Liam informed Louis flatly. “He’s fast. Faster than you can believe.”

“Faster than a bullet,” said Cheren almost boredly, “we’ve checked. I outran it. Easily.”

“You’re very modest,” muttered Niall.

“Wait, wait,” Louis interrupted, “when you say he can move fast…do you mean that he can run faster than a bullet?”

Cheren raised an eyebrow. “Yes.” He sounded so pleased with himself that it was very tempting to slap the smirk off his face.

“Well then,” Louis said carefully, “that’s a shame. Because maybe we can’t outrun you, but who needs to run when you can fly?”

Of course, they all knew what he meant by that, so when a force field materialized around them and Zayn sent the five of them shooting upwards into the sky, the only people who looked shocked were Cheren and Felix. Swearing, Felix started leaping about like an idiot and grabbing at his hair angrily, stamping around like he was in a bad movie and had to act out having a tantrum. Cheren stayed calm, but he seemed stunned as he craned his neck to watch the force field rise above the roofs of the buildings that towered over them, gaining altitude constantly until it vanished from sight.

“Right,” Louis said, “now how the hell do we steer this thing?”

They were hovering several hundred metres above an unknown city in a transparent bubble, suspended in a joint effort from two people who could lose control and drop them at any second, and all five of them were horrified as they realized they actually had no idea how to answer that question.

Niall, however, ended up answering it completely by accident as he tried to shift his position and ended up tripping over, slamming into the side of the bubble as he fell. The whole field was knocked to the side and rolled like a marble through midair, sending them all rolling over each other and swearing furiously as their various arms and legs got tangled up in new and imaginative ways. Harry found his head under Louis’ left arm while one of his legs was wrapped around the older boy’s waist, which was more than a little awkward, to say the least.

“Like that, maybe?” offered Niall weakly.

“Ten out of ten for observation.” Louis shook his head. “Come on. Let’s start moving this thing.” He started leaning heavily against one side of the force field, and it started slowly rolling like they were hamsters in a ball.
“They see us rollin’ they hatin’,” someone muttered, and Louis snorted.

“Yeah, but they don’t see us rolling, do they, because we aren’t going anywhere! Come on, let’s get moving, before we get grabbed, because then it really is all over!” And he hauled Harry to his feet, and they both started shoving at the sides of the force field, rolling it forwards as they headed off into the sky.
Chapter 21

The house they found to hide in was quiet and abandoned, with boarded-up windows and no electricity or running water, and a lovely sign in the front garden implying that it was for sale – not that anyone in their right mind would want to buy it. The garden resembled a miniature jungle and had a lop-sided ‘for sale’ sign buried into the ground, and no one lingered mistrustfully underneath the dim orange glow of the streetlights to watch the five exhausted boys staggering up the road, supporting each other. Paranoia had four of them routinely checking over their shoulders every few minutes to check for pursuers, even though Liam kept warily reassuring them that no one was coming; he would know.

Out of all of them, Niall was by far the most tired; Liam had put a supportive arm around his shoulders and was half carrying him down the street. Louis, however, looked murderous rather than tired, and nobody liked to speak to him for fear that he might bite their head off.

Zayn levitated them over the fence (there was a gap beneath them which they could have fairly easily squeezed through, but none of them fancied being crushed underneath the tiny gap where they would be speared with what looked like used needles, impaled on broken glass and coated in dog dirt) and then from there, up to a window on the top floor where some of the wood that had been used to board it up had split and was coming away. After a good few minutes of persuasion – and Zayn complaining about how exhausting it was keeping all of them airborne – Niall shook himself and woke up enough to burn some of the wood away, and then the five of them clawed at the boards until there was enough of a gap for them to force their way through.

Once inside, they split up, dividing up the rooms. Niall seemed surprisingly alert and darted downstairs to commandeer the old, lumpy and worn sofa, throwing his jacket over it to cover all the filthy marks and then snuggling down to sleep, making himself a small fire out of old newspapers that he kept safely under control in the bin. Zayn made a beeline for the bathroom and made himself a bed in the bath, using towels as a mattress, Liam found himself a place in one of the bedrooms (to his disgust, the bed had been taken away, but no one allowed him to backtrack on his decision) and that meant that the master bedroom, the one which actually contained one enormous bed, was allocated to Harry and Louis.

By the time they were alone, and Louis sat darkly on the bed with a scowl on his face, Harry didn’t like to say anything because Louis looked like he was in an even worse mood than before. Bouncing nervously up and down on the balls of his feet, he shot an anxious glance across the room at Louis, afraid to say anything for fear of how angrily Louis might respond. He was tired, he looked like he was in a foul mood – all Harry wanted was a hug, but he wasn’t too sure how well that request would be received.

Then, it occurred to him: why did he need to ask?

It had been a long day, and he just needed a bit of reassurance; a friendly cuddle to relax him, to calm him down. Like in his childhood, after school, when he’d had a bad day, he would run through his front gate and into his mother’s arms, and it made him feel better – that was all he wanted. That feeling of coming home. Just a simple hug; that was all. It wasn’t his fault if Louis wasn’t in the mood to give him one. What would be the harm in making sure that he got it? After all, it wasn’t as if it would be ridiculously out of character; it wasn’t as if Louis had never hugged him before. They’d slept in the same bed a few days ago, for God’s sake! Swallowing hard, Harry advanced on Louis, doing his best to seem assertive, and told himself, It doesn’t matter. This is nothing he wouldn’t be perfectly happy with normally. He found that thought reassuring; he repeated it nervously several times...
times over while he tried to summon the courage to just do it.

Louis spotted him hovering and coolly looked up to meet his gaze, not hostilely, but his expression was definitely not encouraging. Oddly, that spurred Harry into action where nothing else had; hating to see that sour expression lingering so unpleasantly on the face that he was so fond of, the face that usually looked at him with kindness, amusement or friendliness, he set about trying to change it, sending that first cautious probe of thought unfurling across Louis’ mind, testing it, feeling his thoughts fluttering just below the surface. He was focusing on getting rid of that unfeeling mask; the blatant frostiness on Louis’ face reminded him too much of the last time he’d controlled Louis’ mind, which meant that perhaps he shouldn’t be doing it again – but he wanted to fix it anyway. Still, he was wary and careful, and he inched their minds closer together, slowly, slowly, determined not to be caught out again. Louis didn’t consciously notice the contact, but his hard expression wavered, his eyes softening a little in response, as if Harry’s presence had calmed him. Pleased, Harry pushed a little harder, testing the barriers, meticulously scanning Louis’ memories while he was at it, just to make sure that no memories of the last time he’d been in Louis’ head had filtered through. He found a small bump in the recollections; a slightly uneven patch where he had fused two memories together, but no indication that Louis had noticed that anything was amiss. Happy with his handiwork, Harry allowed himself a moment of satisfaction before he went back to attending to the matter at hand.

He would have to be more subtle about this. Louis knew how his gift worked, and that was dangerous, because it meant that Louis would know if he went messing around with his mind too clumsily. So instead of doing what he had done to the hotel receptionist, and simply ordering Louis to hug him, he murmured in the furthest corner of Louis’ mind,

Don’t you think I look sad?

Blinking at him, Louis tilted his head to one side in confusion. Abruptly adopting a suitably downcast expression, Harry let the bait lie for a moment or so. After a few slow seconds, Louis echoed him: Harry looks quite sad. Then, without prompting; I don’t like Harry being sad.

Maybe you should try to cheer me up, suggested Harry.

Frowning, Louis considered that for a while, his mouth twisting as he thought about it. Eventually, he decided, I want him to smile.

Harry almost ruined the whole thing by grinning at him, but he caught himself just in time. Give me a hug? he requested, and the uncertainty in his tone made him a little doubtful as to whether Louis would obey.

Looking at him, Louis did nothing; he stayed sitting on the bed, staring at Harry with faint confusion, his forehead wrinkled with thought. Patiently awaiting his decision of what to do, Harry remained silent.

He was just beginning to wonder whether he ought to repeat the request, when Louis surprised them both by leaping up and hurling his arms around Harry’s neck, their bodies slamming together as his enthusiasm caused them to collide. Harry wasn’t sure which of them was more surprised; Louis himself was shocked by the intensity with which he had hurled himself at Harry, and Harry almost tripped – but then he stepped backwards, steadied himself, and regained his footing. Louis’ grip was so tight he was close to strangling Harry, but Harry was enjoying it – he felt safe, being held like that, and he smiled as he felt Louis nuzzle his face into Harry’s shoulder with a sigh. The confusion inside Louis’ mind was somewhat distracting, buzzing like a hive of bees inside his head; Harry soothed him, telling him to calm down, but more with sensations than actual words.

Only it was beginning to feel like it wasn’t enough. Louis was beautifully warm, and his hold was comforting, and Harry enjoyed melting into it, but he was starting to crave a different kind of touch
as well. This closeness was provoking certain other thoughts that he shouldn’t have been having, strictly speaking – but how could he help it? Truthfully, he was just curious. He wanted Louis to kiss him. Just to see what it felt like! It was completely innocent, he told himself; just an experiment. Nothing sordid or sexual; nothing creepy – just a kiss between friends. So it was a little intimate! People did it. He’d seen girls holding hands or kissing their mates; why shouldn’t he do the same? It was nice being cuddled by Louis, so it stood to reason that being kissed by him would be even nicer. Harry was eager to test the theory.

No, he told himself forcefully. That’s most definitely not normal – at all. The whole condition you set yourself for this thing was that you could only make Louis do things he wouldn’t mind doing under normal circumstances.

Ah, argued his brain, in the annoying habit that it had of having to be right, but to be fair, are you not doing that now? Would he still be hugging you this hard and for this long if you weren’t forcing him to do it?

I’m not forcing him! Harry insisted crossly, It’s…encouragement.

He came to a kind of compromise with himself, in the end. He would suggest the idea to Louis; implant the thought of kissing Harry into his head, and see how it was received. If it was met with revulsion, he would say no more about it. If Louis didn’t object to the idea…then maybe he would try it. You couldn’t say fairer than that.

Louis was still holding him, and Harry whispered his name very quietly. Instantly, Louis tilted his head upwards to look at Harry, and got an excellent view of the underside of his jaw (it really was a magnificent angle; Harry was given the opportunity to see it second-hand, from someone else’s eyes, and was pleased with what he saw).

I look quite hot from this angle, don’t I? he asked slyly.

For a moment or so, Louis struggled to process that idea, wrestling with the suggestion for a moment or so. Eventually, he succumbed, and admitted without too much reluctance, Harry looks quite attractive. Very attractive, he amended himself after Harry wrinkled his nose inwardly at that, and Harry was satisfied with the affirmation.

Treading very carefully, Harry said delicately, it would be the easiest thing in the world to stand up on your toes and kiss me, you know. So, so easy. What might it feel like? Would you like to kiss me, Louis? Don’t you think you should try it?

Instantly, Louis’ whole self rebelled against that suggestion, dredging up a huge list of arguments against it: Harry’s a guy – he’s my best friend – that’d just be weird – he’d hate me – I’m not gay! – who kisses their best friend anyway, who does that? – it’d just be super awkward – all the things which, coincidentally, Harry had been thinking. But just as he was about to give up on the idea as an unwise one, something interesting caught his attention: Louis was struggling not to blush, because he was recalling a strange dream he’d had a few days ago in which Niall and Zayn had been painting the sky (odd in itself) and then they had stopped and invited Louis to join them. He’d stepped on a cloud, using it as a stepping stone to reach them – and then out of nowhere, Harry had materialized and thrown his arms around Louis’ neck and started kissing him. It had been the weirdest dream Louis had ever had, but he had…liked it. Mainly the kissing bit.

Making his decision, Harry decided against playing fair. He flooded Louis’ body with feelings: lust, longing and desire, and then left the last part to nature. Louis was a chemical cocktail of high-running emotions and hormones, and he shivered lightly as Harry looked down on him, pulling his chin up so their eyes met. Then Harry bit his lip, teeth grazing his bottom lip as he stared at Louis with an
intensity so deep that he wondered if his eyes might fall out and start rolling around on the floor. Lowering his head, he pressed his lips to Louis’ ear and murmured, *Kiss me, you fool.*

Louis’ reaction stunned them both. Harry hadn’t realized how strongly he was coming on and how fiercely the attraction was blazing between them, or how effective the combination of pheromones and mental prodding was going to be. Neither had he foreseen how suddenly it would all kick in, nor how desperate Louis would be when he succumbed.

Harry was not expecting to find himself being thrown against a wall which he’d been almost certain was a good two or three metres away, and it was not an entirely unpleasant surprise, although the bones of his shoulder slammed into it before the rest of him, crunching in an exceedingly unhealthy way and making him close his eyes against the pain. He wanted to swear, just to release a bit of anger – but all of a sudden, Louis was pinning him against the dirty wall, and they were kissing, hard. It was not the friendly, innocent brush of lips that he had anticipated, that he had planned for, that he could brush off as a meaningless experiment. This was a harsh collision of mouths and fingers curling in hair and anchoring themselves there, and in the rare moments where Harry had to tear his mouth away to breathe, Louis was ravaging his neck and jaw with desperate, almost vicious kisses, nipping frantically at the skin. Awkwardly tilting so he was practically upside-down, Harry stole a couple more kisses from Louis’ mouth and then hauled him forwards and continued pressing their lips together with a need so intense that it was almost embarrassing. He would have been begging on the floor if Louis had chosen to stop even for a second.

They were both breathing heavily while taking it in turns to snatch kisses from each other’s mouths, and Harry knew that if someone walked in right now, this would look every bit as sordid and weird as he had been so desperate for it not to. It had stopped being a tentative experiment and become a kind of assault – although Harry had no idea who was assaulting who any more. Every time he even considered stopping, Louis growled and started relentlessly tugging on his lips again, and how was Harry supposed to react to that? Groaning resignedly, he let his hands find a place on Louis’ back and grabbed two handfuls of his shirt, and he didn’t plan on letting go any time soon.

The soft, warm heat of Louis’ mouth was encouraging, and he melted into it, useless in Louis’ arms, helpless beneath his kisses. Thankful for the wall behind him, he gave his weight to it, because he wasn’t sure he could hold himself up for very long any more – his knees were alternating between wobbling dangerously, and locking at inopportune moments when Louis kissed him too hard or held him too tight…he loved it. Wildly uncontrollable and half-crazed with desire, this was a Louis that he’d never seen before; a Louis who belonged wholly to Harry. He had done this; admittedly with a little extra help, but the victory was his all the same – Louis was gasping his name between kisses, holding his hair between his fingers while he kept him pinned against the floor, and Harry felt ridiculously proud of that fact.

Still, all good things have an inevitable demise, and this one came far too quickly. The almost panicked kisses dwindled into soft, light ones, quick touches of lips and sparks dancing between them, until eventually all traces of passion faded.

The last kiss was achingly brief, but slow, as Louis captured Harry’s lips one last time and pulled them away with an amount of care that was touching; Louis honestly cared about this as he poured all of his emotions into the final kiss, pressing his lips to Harry’s forehead before he stepped back, anxiety written all over his face, like someone had scrawled on him in permanent marker. He also looked guilty, which Harry couldn’t understand – what possible reason could there be to feel bad for something as painfully wonderful as that had been?

Louis rubbed his eyes and hid his face in his hands for a few moments as he tried to remind himself who and where he was, and exactly why he had to stop before he lost himself to his younger male
best friend. Harry watched him wistfully, biting his swollen lips as he reluctantly admitted that making Louis kiss him again would be breaking his own rules a bit too thoroughly – basically screwing them up and throwing them in the bin. He stayed silent, feeling guilty himself, which was weird. He didn’t regret the kisses one bit, not after they had been so incredible, but having to mess with Louis’ head to get them? That, he definitely regretted.

“God,” Louis said wearily, wiping some of Harry’s saliva away from his mouth, “we shouldn’t have done that.”

That was when Harry stepped in and intervened before Louis could get upset or even worse, angry, and start panicking and spoiling that most perfect of moments with insistency that they had done something awful. Terror was simmering under the surface of his mind like a pan of water coming to the boil, and Harry had no desire to see it overflow. Reaching out, he touched Louis on the elbow, and sent a strategic wave of mental fatigue towards him. Rather than literally making Louis tired, he simply tricked him into thinking he was tired – and then Louis’ eyes slowly closed and he fell backwards, and Harry had to catch him before he hit the floor.

He carefully supported the older boy in his arms, brushing his hair out of his eyes and kissing him carefully on the forehead. Then he struggled over to the bed and gently lay Louis down on it, arranging him in a neat and hopefully comfortable position on top of it. Once he’d done that, he realized that there wasn’t actually very much room left for him to lie on the bed as well, but that was just as well, because he’d just shared a series of passionate kisses with his best friend, and sleeping with him as well? That was probably a little too much.

Of course, there were things to take care of – such as erasing Louis’ memory so he would remember none of this. It was easier than Harry had expected, seeing as he’d done it before, and he made a far neater job of it as he wiped the kiss from Louis’ mind, like it had been written on a whiteboard and he’d wiped it clean. Once he was done, he nodded to himself and then dropped to the floor, lying down flat.

I am a horrible, selfish, disgusting person.

He had forced Louis to kiss him – forced him to find Harry attractive, to grab him by the elbows and hold him close and fervently move their lips together in the single most precious and perfect moment of Harry’s life. He had ordered Louis to embrace him and kiss him and love him when Louis wouldn’t have done it voluntarily, certainly not at that particular moment in time. The best moment of his life had been a farce – just a lie, and one that he had made himself, that he had forced into existence.

But one thought comforted him as he closed his eyes – Louis had kissed him back. He hadn’t forced that out of him. He’d initiated the kiss forcefully, but Louis had returned it out of his own free will. That gave Harry hope.
Chapter 22

They had to eat, of course – Niall would have forced the issue even if nobody else had agreed – and after a few quick excursions (in other words, Harry heading off to the bank and persuading the cashier to allow him to withdraw a large percentage of his own savings without any form of identification) they found the local supermarket and started gathering food supplies. Liam had to go and supervise Niall, in case he bought the whole shop, but otherwise they headed out on their own. Louis began naturally gravitating towards Harry, of course, but Harry quickly melted into the background and vanished, where Louis couldn’t see where he had gone. Shrugging, Louis headed off on his own – and so did Zayn.

He had his own ideas of what sorts of food he wanted, and he had no intention of letting anyone else interfere with his plans. The freezer department was cool – just like him, he thought with a chuckle, and then rolled his eyes because he couldn’t believe he’d just had that thought – and it felt good, bearing in mind that they spent so much time being boiling these days. Even when he wasn’t on fire, Niall’s skin was like an open furnace; even being within a few inches of him caused heat to lick your whole body and sweat to start prickling down your back if it was reasonably warm anyway. The heat didn’t seem to effect Niall, but everyone else certainly noticed it. It was overwhelming! They all loved Niall; it would be pretty much impossible not to, but they certainly didn’t love his ridiculous amount of body heat.

Zayn quickly found the kind of food he wanted; some people would have called it ‘junk food’. He called it ‘heaven’. Just a pizza, but he was seriously contemplating tearing the box open with his teeth and attacking it instantly; he hadn’t eaten a pizza in ages and he was pretty much desperate. Still, if there was one thing he was more fiercely determined about than that he was going to get his pizza, it was that his dignity would remain intact if nothing else did, so he carried on up the aisle and turned onto the next one.

Biscuits were next on his list, but annoyingly, his favourite kind were on the top shelf. Yeah, Zayn was tall, but not that tall. Huffing in irritation, he folded his arms and tapped his foot impatiently on the floor, waiting for an assistant to come along and help him get them down, because he was pretty damn sure he wasn’t wandering around looking for one.

It was annoying that nobody seemed to be coming, and Zayn waited for a couple more minutes, but he wasn’t in a particularly patient mood. All he wanted was biscuits! They should have been on a lower shelf, really. Who could reach them from all the way up there? His eyes scanned the bulging shelves, taking in brightly coloured packaging and cellophane and patterns so colourful and eye-catching that they gave him a mild headache. Zayn scowled and walked around in a little circle, and then he started tapping on the shelves. Still nobody came. He was starting to lose his temper.

As if they were taunting him, the biscuits he wanted stayed maddeningly out of reach; his fingers would just about brush the edge of the shelf they were on if he stood on tiptoe. A frown fixed itself across his forehead as he struggled, feeling pretty embarrassed to be messing around grabbing at shelves like this. To be fair, it was kind of humiliating to be at the mercy of a shelf simply for the sake of a few inches of height. It wasn’t a problem under normal circumstances because he was pretty tall anyway…which only meant that when he came across height-related problems they became all the more annoying.

Zayn couldn’t be bothered waiting any longer. Rolling his eyes, he glanced around to make sure that no one was watching, and then focused intently on the packet of biscuits.

It took a fair bit of precision to slide them off the shelf with only the power of his mind, but Zayn had
been practicing, and after a few frowns, grumbles and a lot of twitches of his hand (which he found helped him to direct things more easily, although he wasn’t quite sure why) he managed to guide them into the empty air above the shelf and they slowly began floating downwards and towards his outstretched hands. The whole thing was very careful and calm, and Zayn felt pretty pleased with himself, even allowing himself a smug little nod as they landed in his hands. He grinned at the packet.

He’d thought that he’d checked thoroughly enough that no one was around, but a sharp intake of breath proved him wrong – whirling around, he found himself looking down at a young woman who was a good head shorter than him, and gaping at him in awe. All Zayn saw was white-blonde hair cascading over her shoulders and a pair of bluish-grey eyes before he realized what had just happened and the first survival instinct kicked in. It was fight or flight, and Zayn chose flight. He didn’t even waste time spitting out the stream of swearwords that sprang to mind – he just made a run for it, dashing in the opposite direction and sprinting for the end of the aisle.

Skidding around the corner, Zayn bit down hard on his lip and thought **Harry!** hoping to God that Harry was listening – he didn’t know how this whole mind thing worked, after all. How did he make Harry hear him if Harry wasn’t in his head already? Like he had any idea! So he continued calling Harry’s name inside his mind, just praying that Harry would hear him.

On the polished floor behind him, he could hear a pair of brand new trainers squeaking as they pounded on the ground – the girl was giving chase. Zayn spared a moment from his mental pleas for Harry’s attention to curse her and her existence on the planet, and then rushed down another aisle, doubled back and sprinted back the way he had come. He could hear her inhaling and exhaling heavily as she rushed forward in pursuit, but she still remained hot on his heels.

Shit, shit, what do I do, what the hell do I do? Zayn thought frantically. Spotting a huge pyramid of cans, he ducked down and squatted behind it, cowering behind the pile of metal cylinders and eyeing them warily in case they fell on him. He was struggling to catch his breath quietly so that the girl wouldn’t hear him. Looking down, he realized that he was still clutching the packet of biscuits that had caused so much havoc in only a couple of seconds, and he almost felt tempted to laugh. How could he have been so stupid as to get caught making a packet of biscuits fly?

Either Harry wasn’t listening, or Zayn was doing something wrong, because no response was coming and he couldn’t sense any kind of mental pressure which suggested that Harry might be trying to communicate with him. It looked like Zayn was on his own, for now at least. Placing the troublesome biscuits on the floor, he took a couple of deep breaths to steady himself in preparation for his next run. Right now, he would have given anything to swap powers with Felix, who could have teleported away ten times over by now – but if he had Felix’s power, he wouldn’t even need to escape. Licking his lips worriedly, Zayn started to stand up, warily bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet as he peered around the tower of bean cans, waiting for the girl’s pale blonde head to appear.

Temporarily, he seemed to have lost her. Breathing a sigh of relief, he skirted around the beans and began jogging down the next aisle to begin his hunt for the boys so he could tell them how stupid he’d been and they could leave quickly, or Harry could do something with the girl’s mind and undo the damage Zayn had done. Unfortunately, the shelves ran on until they reached a wall, and Zayn pulled a face at the dead end. He turned to head back.

The blonde girl ran straight into him, tripped over his feet and yelped as she started to fall over, and Zayn had to hastily reach out and grab hold of her arm to stop her from falling flat on her face.

Moments later, he realized what he’d done and instantly let her go, but by then she had steadied
herself and was standing on her own two feet. Her eyes were wide with excitement and shock; he stared with momentary interest at the odd swirls of blue and grey in her irises, and how they worked well with the carefully applied eyeliner she had neatly pencilled in around her eyes. The pale colour of her hair made her skin look delicate, almost like porcelain, and her cheeks were delicately flushed from exertion. Her hair was loose and fell around her shoulders, dishevelled from her run. She wore mismatched clothes; a thick woollen grey jumper and denim dungarees that were too big for her, and dirty black Converse sneakers. There was an overflowing red folder clasped to her chest, and it rose and fell with her breathing.

The girl’s chin was pointed and her face a little round, which looked odd especially as she had very visible cheekbones. She had an unusual combination of features, but when combined, she was actually quite pretty – in a strange sort of way.

Zayn found his mouth curving into an instinctive smile and he smirked down at her; she grinned back at him, and that was when he realized what he was doing and backed into the wall, horrified. He was borderline flirting with a girl who had just witnessed him doing things which were clearly abnormal, and he was allowing her to get a good look at him! Police descriptions! Wide-eyed with panic, Zayn grabbed at her and she gasped a little, stepping back in shock – he took advantage of her surprise by shoving past her and making a run for the end of the aisle which he knew didn’t lead to a dead end.

“Wait!” she called after him.

“Not likely!” Zayn muttered as he sidestepped one of the shop assistants – oh, great, now they were hanging around! – and hurried down the home baking aisle.

“He ignored her.

“Please!” she tried again. “I know what you are! I just want to help you!”

That made Zayn stop dead; he paused and turned on her with a dark expression unfurling across his face like a flag, and the girl squeaked and skittered back a few steps like a nervous animal, clinging tightly to the red binder she was holding against her chest. Advancing on her, Zayn’s expression was not the most comforting he’d ever worn, or the most charming, but after that first initial moment of alarm, she stood her ground.

“Excuse me,” Zayn demanded, glaring down at her, “what was that?”

She stammered “I – um –” and blinked like a rabbit caught in the headlights, her mouth falling open in dismay at his obvious display of hostility. Her words had most definitely not been received in the way she had intended.

“You know what I am,” he repeated disgustedly, his fingers forming imaginary quotation marks around the words as he stared down at her. “Do me a favour, then, and enlighten me; what am I, exactly?”

A pointed pink tongue flicked out and wet her lips as she licked them anxiously. “Supernaturally gifted,” she said quietly. “I’m a paranormal researcher. I study this kind of thing. I saw what you did and I want to help you.”

“I don’t need help!” But his curiosity was roused. “How do you plan to ‘help me’?”

That stumped her. Flustered, she blinked at him as she struggled for an answer to his question.
Without even waiting for her to come up with a satisfactory answer, Zayn said “Exactly. Thanks, but we don’t need anyone’s help.” With that, he turned and started to walk away.

“We?” she said quietly.

For the second time that day, Zayn cursed her to the deepest recesses of hell and wished her a very slow and painful death just for being such a bloody good listener.

Louis was just too damn sexy. That was the problem with him. It just made Harry uncomfortable, having to hang around with someone so gorgeous and feel lots and lots of inappropriate urges towards him and know that doing something about it would be wrong, whereas not doing something about it was slowly but surely driving Harry into the welcoming arms of insanity.

He seemed to exude a kind of aura of attractiveness that poured off him in enormous and irresistible waves, and Harry was helplessly enthralled by even the tiniest movement of his ‘best friend’ – although Harry had begun to secretly refer to Louis as his own personal hell on earth; Satan in sinfully tight trousers and with hair that was just begging to have fingers run through it. Those kind of thoughts were the exact reason why Harry had rushed off so quickly; he needed to clear his head, and having Louis up all close and personal with his usual cheerful disregard for everyone else’s personal space was not exactly going to make matters any better. Or clear some of the mess from Harry’s innermost thoughts. His brain was already clogged up with far too many thoughts of Jesus Christ, he’s hot as it was.

It was so distracting, in fact, that he had no idea what section of the supermarket he’d rushed into. Reaching for a box of highly priced cereal, he examined the nutritional values on the back without really caring about them. Harry wasn’t that bothered about what he was putting into his mouth so long as it tasted all right.

A hand landing on his shoulder made him squeak and he spun around in shock, brandishing the cardboard box like a deadly weapon – Louis smirked and caught hold of it before Harry could whack him over the head with it, and he seemed amused, judging by the look on his face. Gently pushing on the box to lower it so that he wouldn’t get smacked in the nose with it, Louis raised his eyebrows at Harry.

“What on earth are you doing with that? I didn’t think you like muesli. How come you took off so fast, anyway? Anyone would think you were trying to avoid me.” He grinned.

Harry burst into horribly forced laughter, and between fake chuckles he mumbled things like “Trying to avoid you, haha, that’s a good one!” and “you’re such a joker,” and “Oh, you! Hahaha”. It killed him how stupidly guilty he sounded, and he could feel his ears starting to burn. He could only hope that they weren’t visibly turning as red as they felt.

“Harry.”

His awful false laughter cut off immediately and Harry’s face fell as he blinked at Louis, staring right into a pair of deep blue eyes that almost seemed disappointed with his terrible attempt at lying. Blinking stupidly, Harry bit down hard on his lip as he met Louis’ gaze and knew that if he couldn’t hold it, if he looked away first, then Louis would know for sure that he’d just told an extremely unconvincing lie.

Yet just as he was about to blink and convince the older boy of his guilt forever, Harry heard Zayn’s voice chanting a string of profanities that Harry had never heard used in quite such a vicious
combination before in his life. Closing his eyes, he pressed his fingers to his temples so he could concentrate more, trying to work out where the noise was coming from. The connection was faint and hazy, Zayn’s voice was quiet and echoed weirdly, bouncing off the inside of his head so that he struggled to pinpoint the source. Frowning, Harry listened intently as he tried to figure out where Zayn was and what could be making him feel the need to swear so unrestrainedly.

“Harry, what –”

“Shhhhh!”

Harry swatted him impatiently away – he didn’t need Louis distracting him right at that second. Switching his perspective to see things through Zayn’s eyes, he started looking around from the viewpoint of his friend in order to get an idea of whereabouts Zayn might be – and the first thing he saw directly in front of Zayn was an unusual but pretty-looking blonde girl, who was looking at him with her head tilted to one side and an odd expression curving her lips upwards into a slightly unnervingly hopeful smile. If Harry had been using his own eyes, he would have rolled them; it took a supreme effort not to send Zayn’s deep brown irises rolling skywards at the sheer predictability of the situation. It simply wasn’t very helpful. He was pretty sure that the supermarket didn’t have a ‘cute blondes to flirt with’ section. This being the case, he flickered Zayn’s eyes quickly from side to side, scanning the shelves for a clue – he barely spared a moment to worry over why the girl had caused such a stream of profanities to cascade so loudly through Zayn’s head. Or to wonder why he had suddenly heard all of it, like Zayn had been trying to contact him somehow and the message had only just gotten through.

The girl seemed a little alarmed at the sight of Zayn’s eyes flickering from side to side, but Harry wasn’t bothered. Let her think Zayn was weird. It wasn’t like she’d be seeing him again anyway. Zayn’s eyes roved up and down, left to right…and then Harry spotted a bulging bag of flour from the corner of his eye, and his heart leapt. Instantly he summoned up a memory of his own local supermarket back home and what section the flour had been in there.

Flour, flour, flour, flour, flour, flour, flour, flour –

“Home baking!”

Harry’s eyes snapped open just in time to see Louis staring at him with a completely bewildered expression on his face.

“What?”

“Come on!” Impatiently, Harry reached out to grab hold of Louis’ wrist and found that he had seized his friend by the hand. Only moments later he realized the full impact of what he’d just done and looked down at his fingers where they were intertwined around Louis’, and was stunned by how right they looked, larger fingers curled around small ones. It did something funny to him, twisting his insides around in his stomach. If he let go now, he would have to go through the whole awful rigmarole of dropping Louis’ hand and uncomfortably explaining what had happened, and there would have to be shuffling and mumbling and horrible awkwardness – and he didn’t want to let go of Louis’ hand! It felt nice. So he simply thought,To hell with it! and with a swift tug, started dragging Louis forwards as they sprinted hand in hand down the shop, Harry’s eyes on the signs dangling from the ceiling as he looked frantically around for the printed lettering that would indicate the Home Baking section of the shop.

“Harry, what the –”

“Come on!” Harry insisted, and as he spotted the sign he was looking for, he hauled Louis down the
appropriate aisle.

It was a great testament to Louis’ faith in Harry that he didn’t force the issue or demand to know why they were suddenly rushing down the section of a store dedicated to making cakes when they didn’t even have electricity in the house they were staying in, let alone baking facilities. Harry yanked roughly on Louis’ hand and they sprinted forwards – and then Harry skidded to an abrupt and unexpected halt, running straight into Zayn as he did so.

When Zayn whirled around and realized who had just crashed into him, he relaxed instantly, and he was visibly calmer as he turned to face the blonde who was looking anxiously from Harry to Louis to Zayn and back again, as if she were afraid of them. Her teeth were sinking into her bottom lip as she nibbled it, and the red folder she was crushing against her chest like a lifeline was starting to bend in her grip.

“She knows,” Zayn said grimly, and his relaxed expression was gone. “About what we can do. She saw me levitating something.”

He had expected either Harry or Louis to yell at him, but neither of them did – they just looked at the girl with new eyes, appraising how much of a threat she was likely to be and whether she was going to start shrieking about flying biscuits or leap at them and claw their eyes out from fear.

The girl looked pleadingly at them, and she stepped forwards, one hand outstretched. “I just want to –”

“Whoa! Don’t move an inch! You stay right there.” Louis held up his hands warningly and the girl’s eyes widened as she quickly inched backwards and pressed her back to the wall, leaning away from him. Clearly she was intimidated by the threat of what he could do to her – even though in reality, the worst damage he could do would be to pelt her with force fields that would bounce off her head and would usually be an annoyance at best.

“Oh kay,” she said diplomatically, “okay, I’m staying here.”

“Good.” Louis checked her up and down. “What do you want? Who do you work for and what do you know about us?”

“I don’t work for anyone! And all I know about you is that one of you can make inanimate objects fly and that another of you would appear to be threatening me.” She said all of this very calmly, but she looked pointedly at Louis’ hands as she did so.

He made no effort to apologize or to lower his outstretched hands. “Why would you be sneaking around supermarkets and watching Zayn if you didn’t know anything about us? Why would you be staring at him?”

The girl reddened a little, but stood her ground. “Maybe I was checking him out.”

Zayn couldn’t help but grin a little bit at that.

“Maybe you were,” Louis conceded, “but I doubt it. You must have had some kind of motive!”

While Louis was carrying out his verbal interrogation, it was an ideal time for Harry to begin extending his mind towards the girl’s and trying to investigate her mind. It was a good distraction, having Louis battle with her using words while Harry probed her inner thoughts for some kind of clue. Disjointed thoughts started drifting towards him, hard to decipher or to grab for too long because they kept scattering, and that which he found was in bits and pieces like shards of a broken mirror. They didn’t cut him, but they made him dizzy when he tried to examine them. He’d never
seen a mind like it. Either the girl was mad, and her mind was twisted and didn’t work like other people’s, or she was doing it on purpose – Harry was inclined to believe the latter.

Almost desperately snatching at her confusing menagerie of thoughts, which were flitting around madly inside her head like caged birds trying to escape, Harry fought for information that was determined to elude him. Her name was one of the few scraps he managed to get: Eithne, which he’d never heard before but he was fairly sure was Irish or something. Another was that she was single – a thought which she seemed to associate with thoughts of Zayn. Harry rolled his eyes. Typical.

It wrecked his head trying to make sense of the jumble that was her mind. She seemed almost smug, like she knew exactly what he was doing – or trying to do – and was intentionally stopping him. Harry was annoyed. And that was putting it mildly.

“That’s interesting,” she told Harry, “what you’re trying to do. It won’t work. I spent a couple of years in intensive mental training so I could protect myself against this kind of thing. You’re pretty good, though. For an amateur.”

So outraged was Harry at being patronized by a girl who was shorter and probably younger than him, and at being dismissed so quickly just because she had some fancy training to learn how to block him out, that he decided he might as well play the one card he had and said “So I suppose an amateur is the exact opposite of what you are, isn’t it…Eithne.”

Her face flushed in acknowledgment and he watched her grip the folder even more tightly against her chest, but other than a curt nod she gave no affirmation that he had been right – even though he knew he was. “If you want to stop threatening me, then maybe I’ll explain to you a bit more about how I know about all this kind of stuff, and why I’m not running and screaming right now.”

“You’re not running and screaming because we’re threatening you,” Louis said shortly. He looked at Harry. “You get anything?”

It stung Harry’s pride to admit “Name. Her favourite colour is green. Right now she’s hungry and craving Doritos. That’s about it. I can’t get anything specific; she’s…..” He paused, hovering distastefully over the words before he said sourly “…blocking me.”

Louis was shocked, which only made Harry feel worse for disappointing him. “You mean people can do that?”

“Only with a lot of fancy training, apparently,” Harry murmured, “but yes. Zayn had a good go at keeping me out once, but nothing on this scale. I can’t get a fix on anything before it slips away from me.”

“Okay,” acknowledged Louis. He looked at Harry. “What are we going to do with her? She’s seen too much, but if she’s blocking you I don’t suppose there’s any chance of erasing it.”

Ridiculously pleased at having his opinion asked by Louis, Harry struggled not to beam as he said “Chances are I’d end up swiping blindly at her and trying to erase bits and end up removing the wrong thing. God knows what could go wrong if I got rid of something she needed.” He hesitated thoughtfully. “I say we take her somewhere – not where we are. Somewhere else. To keep her until we know more about her.”

Nodding, Louis offered “You want me to contain her?” He flexed his fingers meaningfully.

Harry shook his head quickly. “Not yet. I think we should try and keep our abilities from her for as long as possible. The less she knows about us, the better.”
“Well then,” said Louis, “I suppose we’d better get moving, hadn’t we? I hope you have somewhere in mind for us to take her, Harry.”

Chapter 23

It was very lucky, really, that his bluff didn’t fall through. It was also very lucky that there were lots of empty garages on the road behind the house they’d commandeered, and it was ten times luckier that when Harry tried the door of the very first one, it was unlocked, empty, and surprisingly fit for human habitation. Therefore even though all of the boys knew that Harry had just been praying to get lucky, Eithne still had no idea. Which meant that she feared their organizational skills if nothing else, when in actual fact their organizational skills were non-existent and therefore probably the least frightening thing about them.

Still, Harry felt that he ought to point out that they hadn’t laid a finger on the girl, even though it would have been a great deal easier just to put her into a force field and roll her down the street. There would have been a lot less complaining. Yet they had been perfectly polite and carefully led her into the dimly lit garage, and after a lot of surreptitious shuffling so she couldn’t see what he was up to, Niall had lit a couple of things on fire so that they could see.

They were planning an interrogation, of sorts, and Harry could tell already that he was going to be completely and totally useless – as was Zayn, who was too busy dreamily admiring the girl’s profile as she sat stiffly in the old deckchair they’d pulled up for her. Louis was looking imposing but it would only be a matter of time before he did something which proved once and for all that he was just a fun-loving idiot who couldn’t hurt anyone or anything even if he’d possessed a power that allowed it. Niall was trying to set fires without making it obvious that they were starting from sparks that fell from his fingers, and he was suitably distracted that he wasn’t going to be much help either. So with Harry’s ability to pluck her thoughts from her head rather rudely disabled, it looked like it was left to Liam to get everything out of her.

For a while, Liam sat and stared at her with his fingers pressed together and a frown creasing his forehead, which ought to have unnerved her after the first few unblinking minutes, but she made no sign of being uncomfortable with his scrutiny. In fact, it was Harry who grew tired of it first; he tilted his head to one side and started whispering to Liam, inside his mind. It was the first time they’d ever made contact in that way, but Liam’s mind was like Liam himself – friendly, welcoming, safe. Harry had no qualms about entering it, but he was careful not to stray far from the edges. He didn’t want to intrude on another friend’s privacy.

Liam? He wished his voice didn’t sound so tremulous, so hesitant, because it could hardly be reassuring.

Liam gave a little start, and then said slowly, …yes?

The response lightened Harry instantly, and he stopped fearing outrage or disapproval. In fact, the only reason he was afraid was that he was scared he might go too far, from dancing on the brink of a friend’s mind to kissing him so fiercely it was bordering on insanity – in fact, it was insanity. But Liam? No, he didn’t feel those things for Liam. Just friendship.

You getting anything?

Pausing, Liam hesitated, scanning through his haphazard flashes of intuition, and Harry felt awed by the sheer amount of skill there was in Liam for him to be able to interpret all that information so clearly: he was seeing both five minutes into the future and ten years on almost simultaneously, and having to carefully filter through them all to find the right sort of thing. Some of it was clear, some of it was blurry; Eithne’s face would appear to show up several times in the near future, but he didn’t appear to be getting anything particularly specific. Harry couldn’t be sure; Liam’s rapidly changing
mind was making him feel sick as vision after vision filtered through and he calmly examined each one before moving on to the next. Dizzily extricating himself from the conundrum of Liam’s thoughts, he chided himself on his impatience and awaited a response.

…No, Liam responded carefully. Nothing…useful, anyway.

Frowning slightly, Harry went to investigate, but almost as if Liam knew how deep he’d been about to delve and what he’d been about to do, he gave Harry a warning look, and Harry backed off in shame, blushing. Of course Liam knew. He’d probably foreseen it. Awkwardly pushing back several stray, loose curls away from his forehead, he looked down at the floor and then back up at Eithne, who seemed to be radiating smugness at their lack of success in discovering her secrets.

So you did find something? Harry asked suspiciously. Just not something useful.

After a moment of hesitancy, Liam nibbled his lip and shot a sideways glance at Zayn, then one at the silent and motionless Eithne. Harry’s impatience once again got the better of him and he started running through hundreds of scenarios inside his head; did Eithne have powers that contradicted Zayn’s, that were the polar opposite and were therefore stronger? Was she going to hurt Zayn, or somehow coerce him into harming one of the others? Louis was the first person to spring to mind, and he spared a panicked glance for the older boy before returning his gaze to Liam, who almost imperceptibly shook his head.

This strange girl meant no harm to Louis, then. That was reassuring, and Harry felt relief pouring through him like warm water cascading down his back as he nodded in response, acknowledging Liam’s reassurance.

What, then?

Eyes flickering around like the whole room was privy to the conversation that was occurring between their minds and their minds alone, Liam licked his lips nervously and then swallowed – and then he presented Harry with a future memory; a faint, hazy one, meaning that it would happen sometime quite far into the future. A memory of Zayn, an older, more mature Zayn, with wiser eyes, who was squashed up in a chair with his arm thrown around the shoulders of a sleepy, smiling blonde girl with her hair in loose waves that cascaded over her shoulders. With eyes that were tired but filled with fondness, and looking straight at Zayn. A blonde girl who was quite clearly Eithne.

Wha – ?! Harry stared at him in utter shock, not certain whether he ought to be horrified or amused. Tell me that’s a joke.

That’s just what I can see, Harry. When I look for her in my mind, try to connect her with the future like I do when I try to predict things for other people, I see so many things like this…I see Zayn and I see this girl. I see them together. It makes no sense…I’ve been seeing this ever since I first set eyes on her, ever since I first looked. It scares me, Harry. How can this girl that we’ve only just met be the love of Zayn’s life?

Harry almost snorted at that, but contented himself with raising an eyebrow. The love of his life?

Embarrassed, Liam gave a tiny shrug. I see them falling in love, getting married, having kids, and dying in each other’s arms. What other definition is there for love?

All Harry could do in response was gape, shocked. You mean to say you know how Zayn dies?

Liam met his gaze head on. I know how we all die, Harry. It’s not a pretty thing, this gift of mine. Why would you look for something like that?
I didn’t look, Harry. Every time I go to sleep, I see things…I have control over what I look for when I’m awake, but in my dreams at night, I see things I never wanted to see, things I never wanted to know. I know how my whole life pans out, and I never wanted to know that.

The future can be changed, Harry said softly. I’ve watched enough crappy science fiction movies to know that.

Only parts of it. Some things are fixed. There’s times when I see different options, different endings to each scenario. My death won’t change; Zayn’s won’t. But…Niall’s could. I’ve seen Niall die in at least six different ways and none of them were particularly nice. There could be more to come. I haven’t looked. If it doesn’t come to me, I don’t have to see – and you won’t catch me searching.

Hesitating, Harry looked at Niall and then bit down hard on his lip, because the thought of Niall dying horribly didn’t bear thinking about. But his next thought, selfishly, was of what Liam might have seen about him, and he wasn’t sure whether or not his embarrassment quite outweighed his curiosity.

What have you seen about…about me?

Liam hesitated, too, freezing as he looked at Harry, his gaze conflicted. It could have been Harry’s imagination, but for one almost invisibly fast second he thought he saw Liam’s eyes flicker towards Louis. Something which most definitely wasn’t his imagination was that Liam suddenly looked very awkward and Harry felt his expression tighten in suspicion – and then he carefully slipped into Liam’s mind knowing that Liam had no idea what it felt like and wouldn’t know he was there, and that was when he saw it.

Himself and Louis, hiding behind a stone pillar and embracing – not just embracing, kissing, hungrily, almost desperately, fierce kisses that involved fingers twisted into curls and hands on waists and low gasps as the two boys exchanged frantic kisses like they were using up their dying breaths to give them.

Struggling not to blush, Harry wrenched his mind away from Liam’s.

Nothing specific, Liam lied quickly, but…you know. Probably will see a few things at some point.

Yeah, agreed Harry, probably. He coughed, and then said but Eithne and Zayn, what? How does that happen?

Liam shrugged. “I don’t know for sure, the first inkling I’ll have of it is walking in on the two of them in the bathroom in quite a compromising – oh, shit!” He clapped his hand over his mouth when he realized he’d spoken the words out loud rather than inside his head.

All four of the other boys stared at him, more shocked by the fact that yep, Liam Payne just swore than the idea that he was talking about walking in on two people in some kind of intimate situation in a bathroom. But by far the most interested person was Eithne, who was uninterested in what Liam had been talking about and more fascinated by the way he had phrased the sentence.

“The first inkling you will have?” she mused. “And yet you already know…”

“Shit,” Liam said again.

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“Supernatural researcher, huh?”
“Yes.”

“And what does that involve?”

Surprisingly, Eithne was perfectly patient as she replied “Believe it or not, researching the supernatural.”

It was safe to say that Louis had been made to feel incredibly stupid incredibly quickly. Attempting not to look as embarrassed as he felt, he made a decidedly sheeish noise and then looked quickly away, and Eithne looked incredibly amused by his discomfort.

“They do courses for that kind of thing?” asked Niall. “I mean is it like an actual job, or is it just a hobby? No offence!” he added hastily.

“None taken,” she replied cheerfully, “and yes, it’s an actual job. I found an obscure little university in America and took a class with a load of conspiracy theorists and yeah, it was tedious at times, but it was nice to find other people who believed in that stuff, people who could prove that it was real. And now I’ve found proof of my own! It’s just great!” She beamed happily and then scrutinized all five boys with a mixture of suspicion and delight. “So. One of you levitates things. One of you reads minds. One of you predicts the future.”

Niall instantly opened his mouth to correct her but Harry silenced him with a look. Until they knew one hundred percent that they could trust this girl, he’d rather keep as much from her as possible, just to be on the safe side.

“I don’t suppose you’re going to make things easy for me by telling me what the other two of you can do?” she asked lightly.

“You suppose correct,” Louis said. “Where would be the fun in that?”

“True. So what now, then? Do I have to guess, or are you all just going to keep demanding answers and giving me none in return? It’s hardly fair, now, is it?”

“No one’s forcing you to answer,” pointed out Niall, which won him several glares that caused him to back down instantly, embarrassed.

“Again, that’s true. But you are threatening me, albeit in an extremely un-threatening way, and I’m being co-operative and hoping that you’ll repay me by giving me the answers I want in exchange for the ones I’m giving you.” She looked up at Louis in a way that only a girl with porcelain skin and an elfish expression ever could, and blinked her pretty bluish-grey eyes at him.

Louis laughed at her. It took everyone by surprise, that short burst of amusement, and they all stared at him as he shook his head and looked at her with one eyebrow raised and his lips pressed together to suppress mirth, as if her very existence was funny.

“Well, really,” he said amusedly, “you couldn’t be expected to know, of course. I shouldn’t laugh. But so much for women’s intuition! Oh dear.”

For the first time, Eithne looked annoyed. “Have I done something funny?”

“Yes,” answered Louis honestly. “You blinked those pretty little eyes at me and bit your lip, and looked at me like you wanted me. You expected me to reciprocate. I’m sorry to disappoint you, but that’s one tactic which definitely won’t work on me. No offence.”

“Oh? And why not?” she demanded crossly.
Louis shook his head, his amusement only growing. “Wrong team, love,” he said gently. “Sorry to break it to you, but I’m gay.”

That revelation in itself would have been enough to make Harry dizzy, causing his head to spin. It would have been enough to snatch all of the moisture from his mouth and leave his tongue feeling like sandpaper. All of that would have been enough to ruin him even if Louis hadn’t looked straight at him and made direct and unflinching eye contact as he said it.

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“Why did you tell her that?”

Harry stumbled over the words like he’d stumbled over his feet when he left the room, abruptly exiting because he knew he couldn’t control his expression. They were alone now, he and Louis – stood in the shadows being cast by an overgrown bush, and there was no one to hear their words – no one but Harry who would listen. Probably nobody else who cared.

Looking at him sideways, Louis said calmly “Because I am.”

Instead of saying hopefully ‘Are you?!” like he wanted to, Harry said weakly, “You didn’t have to tell her!”

“Why shouldn’t I? It worked, anyway. She won’t be coming on to me again in a hurry.” Louis was oddly satisfied; he thrust his hands into his pockets and examined the sky, avoiding Harry’s anxious stare.

For a while they were silent, and the silence was worrying; it had Harry nibbling on his lower lip while he waited for Louis to say something else; to make a joke or a silly quip, and when no response was forthcoming, he simply stood and twisted his fingers together and started at them as if they would give him answers, until Louis grew irritated with the silence and demanded irritably, “What’s the matter with you?”

Harry gave up on everything at that moment; he hurled himself at Louis and grabbed him by the shoulders, and he glared right into his eyes and silently pleaded with him to understand, and Louis just blinked at him in utter shock with the wind ruffling his hair and the light making his eyes dance.

His biceps were hard underneath Harry’s hands, and he seemed almost afraid of the ferocity in Harry’s expression – not that Harry could blame him; he felt mad, so he didn’t even like to think about how he must look. His fingers dug hard into Louis’ shoulders and Louis stared at him like a stranger was clinging to him, like there was someone he barely knew glowering at him through Harry’s eyes.

“You,” Harry said fiercely. “You are the matter with me.”

Then he moved his hands from Louis’ shoulders to the collar of his shirt, and he yanked Louis forwards and pulled him slightly up so that they were at the same height, and he furiously jammed his lips down on Louis’ and kissed him like it was the last thing he would ever do, the only thing he wanted to ever want to do, and he expected Louis to grab him and fight him and push him away, but Louis didn’t fight – shockingly, he pulled Harry closer and kissed him back, just as hard and with just as much raw emotion leaking out into the kiss, and Harry wasn’t sure whether he ought to panic because Louis was doing this voluntarily and he didn’t know what to do, or whether he should just go with it because this was what he wanted and it felt so right, and he never ever wanted to let go or for Louis to let him go.

He didn’t understand why Louis was kissing him, but whatever the reason, he was hardly going to
dispute it. One of his hands found Louis’ waist and the other soon followed, and then he was supporting the small of Louis’ back while they held each other and their heavy breathing mingled together into a sound which seemed like a roaring in Harry’s ears. Inside his veins, his blood was shooting around and pulsing wildly through him with every second that he and Louis held each other and poured out all of their desperate frustration into each other’s mouths, and he was almost afraid of how the two of them were reacting, how frantically they were grabbing at each other’s clothes and hair, and how clearly they were both struggling not to lose control of themselves completely. Harry wasn’t sure who was more insane: Louis, whose lips were rapidly turning pink and swollen with every desperate kiss; or perhaps it was himself, because every time their mouths parted for them to take a quick, much-needed breath, he had to snatch Louis against him once more and kiss him again, almost as if he had no choice in the matter.

What frightened him most was that although he had initiated this, he wasn’t maintaining it – all of the wildness and the longing was coming completely from Louis, and Harry had no control over it whatsoever.

Louis pushed him up against the wall and his mouth explored every inch of Harry’s neck, leaving little red marks that would soon turn purple and leave his pale skin bruised like battered pieces of fruit, and Harry found himself moaning helplessly and arching his neck to give Louis better access, and his hands were tugging at Louis’ arms and pulling them more tightly around him, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt just for something to grab onto, and in those rare moments where he opened his eyes between gasps, all he could see was tanned skin and waves of caramel brown hair, and it made him feel dizzy and exhilarated. Louis growled his name in that ridiculously sexy voice of his, and Harry could only cry out in response and hope that his wordless pleas would convey his desperate need for more.

Only unfortunately, Louis’ usually silky voice was not the only one saying his name – that raw, sexy edge to his voice could not be mistaken, and it was not him alone who was calling for Harry’s attention. Niall’s loud voice could clearly be heard, summoning him, and Harry shook his head as if Niall could see it and burrowed his face into Louis’ shoulder.

A tangle of swearwords ripped their way out of Louis’ mouth, hopefully directed at Niall, who was after all the source of the interruption. He nipped purposefully at Harry’s collarbones, which sent Harry weak at the knees and all but whimpering against Louis' neck, something which only encouraged Louis to bite down harder. The marks he would leave would be hard to explain, but Harry would willingly take the awkwardness and the lies he would have to tell about the bruises if it meant that he could live through the ridiculously pleasurable sensation of Louis putting them there.

“Harry!” yelled Niall again.

This time, Louis was far more vocal; his profanities were tangible this time, and Harry wasn’t sure what was making him blush more, the kisses or Louis’… _extensive_ vocabulary. He felt almost ashamed to be hearing the words coming from Louis’ mouth.

“Harry!”

“Harry…”

“Louis,” Harry half-wailed in response to Louis’ plea, and astonishingly he found himself beginning to push Louis away, hands on his chest and showing an amount of restraint which shocked him. It was Louis who was refusing to let go now, growling his name while his lips whispered against Harry’s skin. “Louis, he’s going to see –”

Ignoring him, Louis just intensified both his struggles and his efforts to kiss Harry twice as hard as
before. But Harry was determined that Niall wasn’t going to burst through the undergrowth and find two of his best mates snogging behind a bush, so in a movement that was becoming almost disturbingly familiar bearing in mind that he was supposed to be avoiding it at all costs, he mercilessly thrust himself into Louis’ mind.

*Stop, Louis!*

Just like that, Louis stopped. Not because he wanted to, but because he had no choice. He looked beseechingly at Harry, and his pleading expression was almost enough to knock Harry’s defences down immediately, but if there was one thing Harry could do, it was warp people’s perceptions.

*This never happened. Step back, close your eyes, turn around. Forget this. Forget this kiss, Louis; if you start to think about it, I want you to think about…something else. Anything else. Think about cake! That’s it. If you start to remember this kiss, you will think of cake, do you understand me?*

“This!”

Niall exploded through the bush and staggered over to them – and he instantly threw a lazy arm around the shoulders of a slightly dazed looking Louis, a Louis who looked confused and off-balance and a little bit sick, his skin ever so faintly green.

“I was wondering where you two guys got to. Sneaking around here in the bushes, huh? Anyone would think you were up to something,” Niall teased, playfully nudging Louis in the ribs with one of his sharp elbows.

Louis jumped, and stared at him with a slightly bewildered expression, like he’d just resurfaced from a dream and couldn’t quite believe he was standing there with the two of them. He blinked a couple of times. It took every single ounce of willpower Harry had not to start tampering with Niall’s mind, too, the only one of his friends’ minds who he had thus far left untouched – but somehow he managed to calm himself down enough to not start messing around with people’s minds any more than he had already.

“Come on, guys,” Niall said lightly, “we’d better go back in there, or the others are going to start kicking up a fuss. Liam’s already getting edgy without having Lou there to contain that girl if she starts making trouble.”


Louis licked his lips dazedly. “I’m starving,” he murmured, more to himself than anyone else – and then he began almost drifting towards the entrance to the garage.

Shrugging, Niall pulled a jokey face at Harry and then the two of them sauntered after Louis.
Chapter 24

Their kisses tasted like midnight; like secrets blurring together as their lips whispered in unison, thinly veiled in shadows and moonlight. The world around them was silent; the only noises were the sounds of their own heavy breaths as they gasped into each other’s mouths. Harry lay on his back on the garage roof, Louis hovering over him and pressing insistent kisses to his shoulders, neck and chest, and every so often Harry would tilt his head so Louis could more easily reach a certain spot, and every now and then he would sigh or, embarrassingly, groan, because it all felt so sinfully good.

Louis was holding himself against Harry without giving him his weight, their bodies pressing together; they were both unashamedly turned on and grabbing helplessly at each other’s clothes, hair, skin, anything they could seize a handful of. A particularly heated bite on Harry’s collarbone had him crying out in unrestrained pleasure, and he bit down hard on Louis’ neck to muffle the noise that just refused to stay inside of him, that seemed to feel it needed to be heard.

Their caresses were fierce now, so fierce that Louis’ hands tugged Harry’s thick curls and brought tears to his eyes, and Harry desperately raked long nails down Louis’ back hard enough to leave bloody, stinging furrows down his spine. Neither of them were being gentle or taking things slowly; tonight was about raw passion, need, the fire that burnt between them every single day that neither of them dared to act on. Some nights were spent in conversation and only ended in kisses; some were loving and gentle. Tonight they were desperate and tonight they would not leave their impulses to be denied. Tonight they played rough, and they both loved every second that they spent clawing and biting and rolling roughly around as they gripped each other’s hips and tugged at each other’s mouths as if they’d been waiting for these kisses for one hundred years and this was the only chance they would get.

It was a routine of theirs, now, not that Louis knew it. Almost every night, Harry would encourage Louis to sneak onto the roof, and then he would begin his advances – and they lost themselves in passionate embraces and the kind of burning kisses that seared themselves into Harry’s brain forever, the kind of touches that were so hot he thought they might both catch fire. Sounds that could not be held back, instincts that could not be ignored, and all in blissful secrecy that nobody knew about – in fact, only one of the participants would know after tonight. These magical encounters, achingly perfect nights, would stay in Harry’s mind forever; he was incapable of forgetting a single detail of even one of them. They were all inscribed into his brain with breathtaking clarity. Louis, however, would never remember – not if Harry had anything to do with it.

It wasn’t that Harry didn’t want Louis to know, because he certainly did. He wanted it so much that it was almost painful, that a resounding ache began in his chest every time he removed the memories from Louis’ mind. He just wasn’t sure how he ought to explain it; where he ought to begin. Oh, he’d tried – the very first time he’d brought Louis up onto the garage roof in the dead of night, on top of the place where they were hiding Eithne, it had been to explain how he’d felt. They’d stood and looked at each other, eyes wide, wind playing in their hair, and Louis had said “Go on, then – why did you bring me up here in this mysterious way? What can’t be said down there where the others might hear us in their sleep?” And when faced with that perfect, mischievous grin, Harry had been too flustered to summon up a proper explanation. Scarlet-faced and confused, he’d blurted out “I don’t want to be your friend any more, Louis.” The expression on Louis’ face had been bewildered, and when Harry hastily clarified “I don’t want to be your friend because I think I’m in love with you,” the confusion had only intensified. Louis was completely baffled by Harry’s attempt to explain the feelings that even he didn’t quite understand, and even Harry could see that it had all gone awfully wrong, and he would never be able to make things clear after he’d fucked up his explanation quite so well. So he darted forwards, placed a hand on Louis’ elbow, and then he was wiping it all
away, erasing his stupid mistake, and once again Louis was teasing “Why did you bring me up here in this mysterious way? What can’t be said down there where the others might hear us in their sleep?” He looked so ridiculously gorgeous that Harry flew at him and kissed him violently – and once he had finished with that, and figured out that perhaps that wasn’t the best approach he could have chosen either, he had Louis forget that too. That was about the point where he realized that he didn’t have to explain; he could just have Louis with him over and over until he got his head straight and could make his feelings clear – and it hurt that every kiss was their first for Louis, and he would never remember any of them. But he was too afraid to let it be any other way.

At the end of every blissful evening, when the torrent of passion and the need for sensation had died down, or when they were simply calmer, tired and wanted sleep, Harry would take Louis’ hand and lead him back inside the house, to the bedroom they shared – and they would pause just outside the door. He always gave Louis one last, lingering kiss on the cheek – and as his lips grazed Louis’ skin he erased every moment they spent together, every perfect second. Then he released Louis and watched him walk into the room, spent a few seconds fighting to calm himself; then he would follow, and he had to lie down beside the boy he loved in the bed that they shared and try not to think about how much he wished they could sleep in each other’s arms, and how afraid he was of that ever being able to happen.

Harry sat up, pushing Louis off him, and then he pressed a finger against the other boy’s swollen lips, silencing his protests. They were both panting; breathing heavily, and Harry could feel that his face was flushed, his chest rapidly rising and falling. It took him a few seconds to begin returning to sanity, but once he had started the trip, he quickly returned to the senses he had abandoned the moment he had pounced on Louis that night.

“Let’s go to bed, Louis,” he said softly.

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Harry walked into the kitchen and spotted Louis standing and staring absently out of the window. As was quickly becoming his habit, he placed his hands on Louis’ waist from behind – Louis whirled around, a surprised cry bubbling on his lips, and then Harry quickly kissed him right on the mouth, almost simultaneously reaching into Louis’ mind and pulling lightly at his perception, tugging the still forming memory straight out of his head. The moment he had snagged the memory and removed it, he was taking his hands away and turning to the sink, as he began filling the kettle ready to make himself a cup of tea. A quick visit to the closest electricity provider and a stop off at the council’s offices on the other side of town had caused electricity to be rerouted to the house once again, entirely free of charge, and the water supply had been switched back on – both with absolutely no record of the fact, and both completely devoid of expense of any kind. A smirk tugged Harry’s lips upwards slightly. Niall was still struggling not to light himself on fire whenever he got pissed or stressed out, Louis still couldn’t usually produce a tangible force field under pressure, Liam was still having difficulty getting clear or specific visions, or even useful ones, and Zayn was still inclined to send the furniture flying around his head in his sleep – he, Harry, appeared to be the only one who had gotten completely to grips with his power. The best part was that nobody else knew quite how effective and finely-tuned his abilities had become.

“Where’s Niall?” he asked without looking away from the mug as he dumped a teabag into it.

Louis blinked dopily at him, and Harry felt a twinge of guilt as he realized he’d gotten a little too overconfident. Something he’d discovered fairly quickly was that if he wiped away Louis’ memories too quickly, it could leave him disoriented, dizzy and with a killer headache. Whether or not it was specific only to Louis was unclear, but Harry still felt a bit mean for not remembering to be a little more delicate.
“Hmmm?” Groaning, Louis rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, and Harry allowed himself another moment’s regret before turning back to his cup of tea.

“You okay?”

“What? Yeah, I’m…” Louis hesitated; all of a sudden his eyes seemed inexplicably drawn to Harry’s lips. They lingered there for a moment, then scanned his jawline, flickered over his eyes and paused – and he and Louis stared at each other for a few seconds. With a visible effort, Louis swallowed very hard. “Fine,” he said loudly. “I’m fine.”

For a moment or so Harry was slightly concerned that he might have messed Louis’ head up a little, but he quickly banished the thought, because awareness was filtering back into Louis’ expression along with an exceedingly sheepish smile – he’d been daydreaming again, probably. Harry rolled his eyes fondly.

“Where’s Niall?” he asked again, more gently this time.

Louis shrugged. “God knows. Did you check the garage? It’s his turn to watch Eithne, isn’t it?”

“That’s why I’m looking for him,” Harry said grimly. “We were meant to swap over at least ten minutes ago – if not fifteen!”

Just as Louis was about to respond, Liam came wandering cheerfully into the kitchen – and when he saw Harry, his eyes narrowed slightly. “What are you doing in here?”

“Looking for Niall,” was Harry’s slightly defensive response.

“Well if you’re looking for Niall, who’s looking after Eithne?” Liam demanded, as close to being irritated as Liam Payne ever was.

“No one,” said Harry sharply, but before Liam could start having a go at him, he interrupted “but I waylaid Zayn on the way and told him to go keep an eye on her, so we’re all right for now. I don’t know what the hell Niall thinks he’s playing at, though. Do you think someone should go and look for him?”

Louis snorted. “Don’t bother. He’ll turn up soon enough. It’s almost lunchtime.”

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Niall was a little hurt that not one of the others had noticed him slipping away, but he supposed it made his job a little easier. Tugging the collar of his coat upwards a little to hide his face better, he slipped neatly past a crowd of French tourists and looked up at the enormous ferry boat, stunned by the sheer size of it. He always was. It had been years since he’d travelled from Ireland to England, or vice versa (whilst conscious, in any case) and as an awestruck six year old boy, he’d been struck dumb by his first sight of the enormous ship – he was just as shocked now, and he was eighteen years old. Although, he supposed he was young at heart, which had to count for something.

Even the sight of the ocean churning beneath the boat made him feel a little dizzy; he’d always been a little wary of water, although the feelings of anxiety he’d had were so much worse now, filling him with dread at the mere sight of the sea hundreds of feet below him. Perhaps it was the fact that now he had power, and his power resided purely in flames – which water could extinguish. The thought of himself plopping into the water with a sizzle made him shudder, and he pulled his coat more tightly around himself, licking his lips. He wasn’t going to fall. Still, in order to reassure himself he raised a hand to his face and summoned a spark, which cultivated into a tiny flame; he nursed it in the palm of his hand for a moment, then let it flicker and die. Comforted, he closed his hand and
shoved it into his pocket. The ocean couldn’t get him as long as he didn’t fall into it, and that was something he had no intention of doing. Unless someone forced him, he wouldn’t even go near it – which in itself was the most reassuring thing of all; even the idea of someone attempting to make him do something was laughable. He could burn anyone he liked until they were blistered and screaming without even thinking about it – and had been known to do so when he panicked – it was safe to say he was not unduly worried about the possibility of being ambushed.

A part of him wished he’d had the presence of mind to bring Harry with him; not that Harry would have consented to come, but in ideal circumstances, Niall could have had a free boat ride over to Ireland. Of course, that would never have been a likely occurrence; even if Harry wouldn’t have disapproved thoroughly of this plan of his and gone tattling to Liam immediately, Niall could never have dragged him away from Louis.

He knew. Oh, yes, he most definitely knew. He had his suspicions that Louis didn’t, or at least didn’t know the full repercussions of the time he spent with Harry, but Niall had seen enough of the adoration in Harry’s green eyes to know that the youngest boy was completely smitten with the oldest. How cute.

Inconvenient, though, bearing in mind that Niall would have enjoyed the company on this journey he had undertaken. Now that he thought about it, if he’d had the presence of mind to think about things rather than rushing off before any of his friends could foresee his plans or effortlessly pluck them out of his head without him realizing it, he could have used the knowledge that Harry was messing around with Louis’ brain in some way and blackmailed him into helping. It couldn’t be helped, though, so Niall reached for the ticket he’d bought and prayed to God that he wouldn’t be asked for a passport.

It appeared that for once, God was listening. Niall sailed through customs without so much as a glance and was soon happily seated...well, perhaps not happily; he still felt pretty ill, but he was as comfortably seated as he ever would be. With a roar of engines, the boat coughed into life, and Niall closed his eyes and waited for it all to be over. Oh, and hoped that it wouldn’t be too tricky to find his way from the port to his home in Mullingar – it had been a while since he’d done it, after all.

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Liam’s head snapped up and he blinked rapidly several times, his eyes focusing and un-focusing as he struggled to steady himself and at the same time interpret the events that he could suddenly see unfolding before his eyes. Beside him, Harry looked on worriedly and a concerned Louis started heading across the room, an anxious query on his lips. Before he could reach their grimacing friend, Harry put a hand out to stop him and warningly shook his head as an indication to stay back.

“Idiot,” Liam groaned, and they both cast him injured looks.

Louis muttered “Thanks for that,” with a slight frown.

Liam waved a hand dismissively. “Not you,” Harry translated. “Not me, either.”

“Who, then?”

“Niall,” hissed Liam, rubbing his closed eyes. “What the hell is he doing, the idiot?” Pause. “Oh, God. I wish I hadn’t asked.”

“What’s up?” asked Louis with dread.

No answer came from Liam, so Harry explained with a growing sense of horror, “He’s gone to
Mullingar to tell his family where he is and that he’s okay – you’re right, he is an idiot. What on earth is he doing? If they know where he is they’ll call the police to have him taken off the missing persons list, and that means that Felix and Cheren will know where we are – Jesus, that puts us all in danger! Especially now we’ve got to make sure that we keep our eyes on Eithne and take her with us as well –” Harry swore. “Liam, can you not get anything clearer?”

“No, I can’t!” snapped Liam. “I get what I get, and this is it. All I know is that Niall’s going to get on a ferry in about ten minutes which will take him to Ireland, and then he’s going to find his family and get us all caught by the invisible and teleporting minions of a party of thuggish nutters!”

“What are we going to do, then?” demanded Louis.

“I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” Liam said. “We’re going to get out there, all five of us, and we’re going to drag his stupid backside back to reality before he gets us all into trouble. I don’t know how, but we’re going to do it.”

“You know that for certain?”

Liam’s chin came defiantly up and he looked Harry straight in the eyes. “I do,” he said confidently. “After all, according to all other possible outcomes I see, either we bring him back, or we get brought back – by the police, into some kind of scientific research lab where they try and figure out what the hell is wrong with our biochemistry, whether it’s life threatening and whether or not it’s possible to replicate it.” His expression hardened. “There may or may not be some kind of dissection involved.”
There was silence all around; it caused the air to thicken and become stifling, so that it felt like they were all wading. Their progress was slowed and they struggled to move, to even breathe properly, each inhalation catching in their lungs and lingering there before being released in a low gasp at various different times. Liam thought he might choke on his. Forget a lump; it was a screwed up ball of paper and someone had jammed it down his throat – and covered it in superglue so it couldn’t be dislodged.

Mere moments ago Niall had been swaying dazedly in the middle of the hall, his pupils dilated, eyes wide with shock, mouth hanging open slightly, struggling to focus as the girl with the impossibly dark hair and glossy red mouth trailed her pointed nails down his chest, watching the longing shudders rack through him with something caught between amusement and contempt. The Irish boy had been shaking all over, and Liam could only feel sympathy towards him – aching sympathy radiating through his chest, because pure lust was racing through Niall’s whole body and he was quite literally shaking with the effort of not collapsing at the girl’s feet.

The ridiculous thing was that she wasn’t the prettiest girl any of them had ever seen. Her mouth was too wide and her eyes too dark, the veil of mascara on them too thick so they she looked a bit like a raccoon when she fluttered her eyelashes. She was wobbling slightly on her stilettos and her backcombed hair was falling out of its style slightly, disintegrating into a floppy dark mess. In fact, the harder Liam looked at her, the more she looked like a thirteen year old trying to look sixteen, and that was when he began to wonder whether her beauty was quite so unearthly after all.

There was an odd confidence to her stance, like she expected them to react so strongly to her, and Liam blinked and frowned because either she was extremely overconfident or she had reason to believe that they were all going to fall at her feet. Liam could only think of one reason for that; she had some kind of power that would control them, and that made a lump of ice settle heavily in the pit of his stomach.

He watched the girl trail her fingers down Niall’s chest again, and she took a couple of steps around him, appraising him and seeming pretty pleased with what she saw. Her plucked eyebrows raised and her pointed pink tongue flickered over her lips, making them glossier so that she started to look like she had carefully anointed her mouth with blood. It was somewhat disconcerting, actually, especially because her pointed white teeth gave her a distinctly wolfish look, and Liam felt a little afraid of her. Scanning the room to see everyone else’s reactions, he felt a mixture of worry and relief over what he saw.

Harry had his arms folded across his chest and was looking extremely unimpressed, his shrewd green eyes fixed intently on the girl, his nose wrinkled in displeasure, like he didn’t much like the look of her. Once he got past the dizzying rush of emotions his body was having towards her, Liam could wholeheartedly echo the sentiment. She was too pleased with herself, and her features were either over-exaggerated with several unnecessary layers of make-up (her extremely boldly outlined eyes and bright red lips) or paled into insignificance beside the rest of her (she appeared to have an unnaturally small nose). In fact, Harry seemed to be more interested in Louis; his eyes kept anxiously flickering over to the older boy’s face as if he were trying to judge his reaction to the girl. Feeling a stab of sympathy for him, Liam wondered whether Louis really was as oblivious to the fact that his best friend was ridiculously in love with him as he would appear to be.

That diverted his attention to Louis, who had a mixture of expressions on his face; confusion that his body was reacting so intensely to a girl when he’d been cheerfully and unrestrainedly gay since as
long as he’d been old enough to start wondering why girls were suddenly important and to him they were only as relevant as they’d ever been – in other words, not very. But Louis was blinking with huge eyes at this girl, half of his body straining towards her while the rest of him inched away, and Liam wondered how it would feel to so desperately want something that you were completely sure you should have had absolutely no interest in.

Eithne was hanging onto Zayn’s wrist in what looked like terror, seeming as unaffected as Harry by the girl, perhaps more so. Zayn seemed to be struggling to focus on the blonde girl rather than the dark, gritting his teeth – and as Liam watched, he took Eithne’s hand and tightly squeezed her fingers, so hard that the girl winced and it wouldn’t have been surprising to hear her hand break.

Liam’s attention was snagged by a strange gurgling noise from Niall; his head whipped back to the blond boy only to realize with horror that the dark haired girl was lazily caressing his neck with a razor, tapping it lightly on his skin. Where she had produced it from was a mystery, but Liam was kind of busy watching with an odd, terrified numbness creeping through his limbs as the girl touched Niall’s neck with the sharp edge, smirking in derision as she watched Niall tremble with every stroke of the icy metal on his skin. She was taunting him, and as Liam watched the sweat bead on Niall’s forehead and his blond hair begin to stick to his clammy forehead, for the first time in his life he felt that he truly hated someone. He despised this girl for teasing Niall so viciously, for playing such a deadly game – and, shuddering as he was, Niall was incapable of stepping away from her. Apparently, he was incapable of doing anything. On the other side of the room, Louis was frantically flexing his fingers and trying to create a force field around him, but not even the faintest of violet frameworks was bubbling protectively around the Irish boy. The panic trickling through the room was tangible.

Niall’s breath came in shuddering, choking gasps, like he was struggling not to start screaming in the girl’s smug face. Liam was beginning to have that problem himself. In fact, he was struggling not to punch her. Or grab her by the hair and slam her into the ground. By nature Liam was a gentle person, but when someone he cared about was threatened, he could be dangerously impulsive – he was determined not to lose his temper, but it was proving to be shockingly difficult.

An ugly laugh echoed throughout the room; a hideous sound that delighted in the fear on Niall’s face and his wide, scared eyes. It was as awful as it was mesmerizing, and they all turned to stare at the source of it; the girl with the black hair was laughing at them, laughing as she traced another steady line across Niall’s throat.

At that precise second, Niall panicked – he cringed, flinching so hard that the razor which had been brushing his skin slightly flashed across his neck and cut a deep, ugly gash into the pale skin of his throat.

The whole room was filled with gasps, but Niall stayed wide-eyed and silent as he clapped his hand to the cut, and pressed very hard. Thick, sticky red spurted through his fingers and started cascading down his hand, and he blanched at the sight of it, shuddering horribly as he staggered backwards away from the girl, who threw a disgusted look at the razor in her hand before hurling it away, like she hadn’t actually intended to cut him. Maybe she hadn’t. Niall’s teeth dug into his lower lip, turning that as white as the rest of him, and as his mouth started trembling as much as the rest of him, they all realized that he was shaking like a leaf. His fingers were scarlet and they were a horrible, garish contrast to the rest of his face, which had all the colour leeched from it. Shock registered, but little else seemed to be on his mind – not pain, although his eyes suddenly filled and there were tears trembling like diamonds at the corners of his eyes, ready to spill down his face in a waterfall as steady and fast as the blood pouring from his throat.

Liam stared fiercely at Niall, refusing to allow his own fear to show, because if he let Niall see that
he was afraid; he, who had always been strong, unflinching, who had always been there to care for Niall, for everyone, who had always been a pair of supportive arms to hand out a hug and who had forced a brave smile onto his face for the sake of everyone else. The leader, Liam Payne, who never would admit to being a leader but guided them all from the sidelines, in the shadows, steering them all onto the correct path while never allowing them to realize what he was doing. Who was content to shy from the spotlight and make sure that he always took care of everyone. His eyes stung, but he met Niall’s petrified gaze with a calm one of his own, and he prayed that his eyes would convey the message that he couldn’t communicate, because his mouth was sealed shut so that he wouldn’t cry out.

In the end, Harry passed on the message for him, lifting it from his head and conveying it powerfully through the room. Some of Liam’s calmness seemed to have found him; even as a couple of horrified tears trickled down his face, ran down his neck and dampened his shirt, Harry seemed to absorb some of his friend’s determination and responsibility, and general composure, and exuded an aura of serenity that crept through the room. Harry’s mental voice was almost too calm to be reassuring as he uttered the words Liam wished Niall could hear, and they all paled at the sound of them, because although Harry was coherent, his restraint was not enough to keep his words private between his and Niall’s head.

There was a terrible sadness in his tone as he said softly, Be brave.

Niall choked, an awful, hacking cough that came deep from within his chest, and they all saw the first trickle of blood begin dribbling from the corner of his mouth, dripping sickeningly down his chin, and he reached up to wipe it away, smearing it across his face. A low whimper slid from between his teeth, and the trembles that were making his whole body quiver uncontrollably.

They all stared at him, aghast, as the blond boy desperately let his wide-eyed cerulean gaze flicker from face to face, lingering longest and most sadly on the deep blue eyes of the girl who had sliced the gaping hole like a second mouth into his neck. And then Niall’s knees gave way, his legs crumpled beneath him, and he fell to the floor with a low moan as deep red began oozing across the floor, forming a terrible puddle as Niall’s life ebbed out of him with the thick scarlet liquid.

Liam lost control of himself for the first time then; his hands flew out with a cry and he staggered forwards, a sound almost as terrible as Niall’s cough tearing from his throat as he cried out and lurched towards the boy’s still body, desperate to help in some way, any way, even though there was nothing he could do –

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That very same cry came exploding from Liam’s mouth as he jerked into a sitting position, grabbing hold of a metal handrail to support himself. Releasing it, he groaned to himself and buried his face in his hands, shaking his head and berating himself for his moment of panic, glad that no one else had been around to see him yelp like that. To see Liam, the unafraid and untouchable Liam, reduced to a gasping mess by a nightmare would have scared them all.

Seven, he said grimly to himself, and he wiped his clammy forehead and turned around to make sure that he hadn’t awoken anyone else with his gasp.
Harry was the first who Liam knew for certain was asleep; his head was tipped back against the seat and his mouth wide open, and he was snoring softly, although it was a comforting sound rather than an annoying one. One of his large hands was lying close to Louis’ thigh beside him, gripping the lining of his pocket like he couldn’t bear not to touch him, but was afraid to be more bold, to touch him more openly. That made Liam feel impossibly sad, because he was sure that if it was comfort Harry sought, Louis would happily of given it to him. If it wasn’t… well, from what Liam had seen of the future, Louis wouldn’t mind giving him a bit more than that, too. He grimly shook his head to rid himself of the mental image – and filed the new vision away for future reference. When they next bought themselves adjoining rooms in a cheap hotel with thin walls, he would be taking the room furthest from Harry and Louis’. If he had his way, the memory of the sounds of colliding skin and cries of pleasure leaking through the walls would just be a memory.

Louis was a more silent and dignified sleeper, eyes and mouth both neatly closed, although his whole body was tilted slightly towards Harry as if the longing he disguised so well during his waking hours was finally being revealed in sleep. A frown creased Liam’s forehead as he wondered why the two weren’t already together when it was so clear that they felt such strong adoration for each other – but when he thought about it, things that were obvious to everyone else were often incomprehensible to those involved. One day, Harry and Louis would admit how much they cared for each other; he would watch them hold each other every night and smile to himself, because in a world as cruel and confusing as theirs had become, it was nice to see people who had someone to hold. It made him wonder if maybe, however awful the world could be to them, it always did something to compensate, to make things right.

Harry and Louis deserved each other, and Liam smiled right then as he thought about just how right they were for each other, and he couldn’t wait until the day that they both plucked up the courage to look each other in the eyes and admit it.

Eithne was curled up against Zayn, her head lolling on his shoulder, long blonde hair falling across his chest so that it looked like he had a long golden beard sprouting from his chin. That sight amused Liam even more; while he’d been feigning sleep in order to give them privacy, Eithne had been making shy conversation with the Bradford boy, and he had responded almost laughably easily. Flirtation had progressed into a full-blown silly conversation, Liam sometimes struggled to keep the smirk off his face every time Zayn said something stupid and inwardly kicked himself, and Eithne giggled every time. In fact, Liam had just been waiting for them to kiss, and was half disappointed when they didn’t. It felt like he spent all his time waiting for his friends to pluck up the courage to make a move on each other these days, which really seemed pretty pathetic when he thought about it. But they had fallen asleep before he did, before he dared, (Liam the protector had to outlast the others, stay awake to watch over them for the sake of his own sanity; it was kind of like his self-appointed job) and he had only had the satisfaction of seeing them snuggle up to each other as they slept. For once, Zayn was revealing openly what a massive softy he was, and it brought another smile to Liam’s lips.

Smiling was something Liam felt awful for doing, bearing in mind the vision he’d just had forced upon him. Drawing a shaky hand across his forehead, he exhaled heavily, swallowing down his panic. It always shook him up when he saw something like that, something which made him feel quite so useless and weak. But seeing it meant that he could prevent it, and prevention was good.

One day, Liam was going to present Niall with a list of situations to avoid in order to thwart several horrible deaths, and that list was growing. Truthfully, Liam wasn’t completely sure it was the right thing to do, to change Niall’s future, but with every death vision growing more horrible and traumatic than the last, he was now just waiting for a spare ten minutes to sit down and write that list.

Drowning; fleeing in a panic from the Irish police, who waved their tasers at him and threatened him
with electrocution if he didn’t stop running at that exact moment. Knowing that his one defence, to burn them, would never be enough, and not having the heart to try. Too kind to disfigure them, and afraid of the consequences if he allowed them to catch him. He would climb the railings overlooking the ferry port and throw himself over the edge, just so that they couldn’t force answers out of him. The water would suck him down, extinguish the flames that licked his body as he panicked, and Liam would watch from above, holding Harry back as he screamed Niall’s name. He didn’t know where Louis was, why no force field came and blossomed around Niall, why there was no one to save him. All he knew was that if he could intercept Niall’s journey to Mullingar before it was too late, he could stop it from happening.

Hit by a lorry as he ran across the street. It was for the stupidest of reasons; a small girl was about to step into the road and grab the ball she had dropped, and a car was heading towards her. Being the incredible person that Niall was, he couldn’t watch her die – he rushed straight at her, ready to knock her back onto the pavement. Only the ridiculous thing was that the car wasn’t even going to hit her. It was turning left, down another street. And little Niall, the small Irish one, who had never been very large or very visible... high up in the cab of his enormous delivery lorry, the driver didn’t even see him. He ran Niall straight down. This time it was Louis who started screaming first; Harry had already dropped to his knees and buried his head in his hands, and he just crouched on the pavement shaking, because no one could survive that.

Electrocution. A horrible accident, made all the worse by the fact that Zayn caused it. He lost his concentration while levitating, and sent Niall shooting straight up through the power lines of an electricity pylon. The sound of sizzling as that small body was fried would haunt Liam forever, the soundtrack to his nightmares – and hauntingly, nobody screamed that time. Or if they did, the sound was drowned out by the sound of Niall’s whole body burning with a type of fire that he was not immune to; the electrical kind.

Shot, by a skinny soldier with acne who’d only just managed to get into this rank and who was terrified by the idea that a blond boy the same age as him had been classified a dangerous threat and was apparently on a level that he barely had clearance to deal with. Almost paralysed with fear, the boy had been unable to move any part of his body other than his shaking finger – and he’d used that finger to squeeze the trigger as Niall ran past him, whirling around and burying a bullet into his brain. He followed that atrocity by shooting Harry as well, and Liam had never heard Louis make a more horrific noise than the one he made at that moment, when Harry went down. He had never seen a bigger or more fiercely explosive force field as the one that burst from Louis’ fingertips when Harry fell with a cry into the snow – it was so insanely uncontrolled and powerful that it hit the soldier with the force of a ten tonne truck and broke his neck in a second. It was that kind of response that terrified Liam, that had made him almost afraid of Louis, that had showed him just how much Louis loved Harry. He had woken with tears in his eyes and dread in his heart.

Captured by the government and then cut open and examined for the purposes of medical science. He died on the operating table. Liam wasn’t exactly there for that one – he just remembered looking up and seeing on the news that the body of eighteen year old Niall Horan, missing for eight months previously, had finally been released to his family so that they could mourn and bury him with some form of dignity. Harry had warped the mind of a very influential and connected official in order to find out the details and fill in the gaps.

Stabbed. That was perhaps the most brutal of all, because it had nothing to do with Niall’s powers. He was walking down an alleyway late at night when a group of six teenagers tried to attack him and steal his wallet. Niall wasn’t having any of it and was ready to fight back, but they had already stabbed him and run off before he could frighten them off. That was Niall’s problem – he was too kind. Too slow to react because he was loathe to hurt anyone. Liam could do what had to be done, but Niall? He abhorred violence; could never lay a finger on the most disgusting criminal in the
And now this new atrocity; having his throat slit by this ridiculously alluring girl. Nausea bubbled in Liam’s stomach and he struggled to keep his breakfast safely grounded in his stomach. It seemed insanely cruel that he should have to be tormented by visions of this nature about Niall, for God’s sake.

Shuddering, Liam closed his eyes and hunched up in his seat. He’d never slept well on planes. Somehow, miraculously, Harry had gotten them a flight on a plane which he’d had commandeered for the very purpose, and he’d also had all the ferries to Dublin which Niall could possibly have boarded stalled for at least three hours. Their plan was to cut Niall off before he could make his way to Mullingar – or, not that Liam had mentioned it, before he could arouse the suspicions of the Gardaí (the name for a group of Irish policemen, a piece of information which Zayn had offered off with an extremely smug look on his face) – an idea which in theory was simple, but in practice was far from it.

Too tired to even attempt to look for the possible outcomes of the day ahead, Liam drifted off into an uneasy sleep, but he was by no means comforted by the lack of visions for the rest of the night. Seeing misfortune made him sick to his stomach and painfully worried, whereas seeing nothing at all made him edgy and paranoid. By now, he was getting used to knowing what was coming. Besides, he’d never liked surprises.

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Niall knew he looked shifty. It was almost embarrassing, the amount of times he checked over his shoulders for pursuers, took little detours to make sure no one was following him, and got lost several times in the convoluted corridors of Dublin ferry port. Still, if he could successfully lose himself, that meant that it was more than likely he’d also lost anyone who might be tailing him, so that was something at least. The back of his neck was still prickling, though, as if he’d tied a hedgehog inside the collar of his shirt. Crowds made him uncomfortable, and the unshakable feeling of someone watching his every mood did nothing to lessen the feeling.

It was lonely, travelling on his own. Everything was far too quiet at all the wrong moments, and he was reluctant to catch anyone’s eye in case he brought curiosity crashing down around his ears. A couple of people’s gazes alighted on him in moments of boredom, but Niall solved that problem by moving quickly and ducking out of sight every time he caught someone looking.

The ferry had been delayed, adding another couple of precious hours to his journey. The others couldn’t have failed to notice his disappearance by now; they would be formulating plans, and quickly. Niall feared and despised Louis and Liam’s organizational skills at that moment; they could be catching the next available ferry to come and head him off right at that precise moment.

Perhaps he had been selfish, haring off to Ireland on his own. After all, it wasn’t as if the others weren’t missing their families as well. Louis had four little sisters at home, and he missed them like hell. Harry mumbled nonsense about his mum in his sleep, in between bouts of snoring. Zayn had a battalion of younger siblings, too, and Liam constantly worried about his own parents, wondering whether they were coping without him. Niall had a mother who he hadn’t told “I love you” anywhere near enough, a father who’d always been quietly supportive and brilliantly funny and never failed to crack a smile onto his son’s face, who had wanted to call him Niall because it rhymed with “smile” and he wanted a happy little boy. He also had a brother who he’d only just really started
to like, and Jesus, Niall missed him too. He missed all of them.

Truthfully, the others were just stronger than he was, and they all had something else to keep them going. Harry had his love for Louis, which burned more brightly every day and made the fiercest of Niall’s flames seem pathetic in comparison. Louis had…well, a certain protectiveness for the curly haired boy if nothing else, and surely it was something more, even if he wouldn’t admit to it. Liam had his urge to care for them all, his instincts to look after all the boys like he was their mother. Now Zayn had Eithne to focus on. And Niall was just a lonely little boy who kind of wanted his mum, and what lonely little boy wouldn’t abandon everything for the chance of seeing her?

He bought cheap coffee that tasted like liquidized cardboard, and sat delicately drinking it in the cafe, uncertain of why he was dawdling other than that he didn’t really know what he was doing next. The drink made him feel sick after a couple of sips, so he left it to cool in front of him, as if it would taste better cold, and sat brooding with his chin resting on his hand.

A blonde girl with a grey beanie crammed over her head was making the mistake of ordering the same coffee that he had, and he pitied her for it. She wore a denim skirt, purple tights and a black jumper which clearly belonged to a guy, and he watched her curiously, his eyes playing idly over her dirty black Converse sneakers without really registering. Weird clothes. Was she doing it on purpose to make a statement or did she just have an appalling sense of style? It was hard to tell.

The girl turned, and he made the terrible error of looking straight into her eyes, which widened enormously. She whirled around and made a grab for someone beside her, and then Zayn appeared out of the crowd and suddenly he was staring at Niall too, his brown eyes drilling straight into him so that colour splashed across his face like someone had thrown bright red paint at his cheeks.

Hastily pushing his chair backwards so that it squealed harshly on the floor, Niall began attempting to make his exit, head spinning, trying to work out what to do next. He needn’t have bothered. A hand landed on his shoulder, gripping firmly, and he closed his eyes in resignation. Caught. He recognized the familiar hold, which was both reassuring and a little awkward. There was a wistful moment where he wished that it had been someone else’s hand, because truthfully, Liam was too sympathetic and he would be nice and try to have some empathy, and that would just make Niall feel guilty.

He couldn’t stand there with his eyes closed all day. Might as well get it over with. Sighing heavily, Niall opened his eyes and slowly revolved around to face the disappointed brown eyes he had known would await him, and found that Liam was indeed stood there, flanked by a very critical Louis and apparently thoughtful Harry, who was looking quizzically at Niall and apparently, for once, not seeming to notice their oldest friend. It was more than a little bit mortifying to find himself being stared accusingly at by three people, and Niall blushed hotly.

“Well,” said Liam disapprovingly, “someone went a long way to buy milk.”
“What the hell were you thinking?” Liam demanded. He turned on Harry. “What was he thinking?”

“Hey, I’m staying out of this,” Harry insisted, and Liam scowled at him but let it slide, because inconvenient as it was, he respected Harry’s desire to leave his friends’ privacy as intact as he could under the circumstances.

“I can’t believe you lied to us, Niall! We’re supposed to be your friends! You told Zayn you were going for milk and then vanished off to Mullingar, what on earth did you think you were playing at? Anything could have happened!”

“I just wanted to see my mum,” Niall mumbled, his eyes glued to the floor.

“We all want to see our parents; doesn’t mean Harry went swanning off to Holmes Chapel and Louis hopped off to Doncaster the moment I turned my back! You need to learn a bit of restraint. Do you know what I saw, Niall? Do you know what I saw happening to you the moment I realized you were gone? Do you have any idea?” Liam’s voice had risen to a level which, for him, was shockingly loud. They all cringed away from him.

Speechless, Niall swallowed and slowly shook his head. His eyes were wide, almost pitiful, and he almost seemed to be a little afraid of Liam. In that moment, they all were. However Niall in particular was so stunned by the sight of his gentle best friend’s fury that the sparks which usually danced at his fingertips when he was frightened were nowhere to be seen. His shock had extinguished them when nothing else could.

“I saw you die, Niall!” Liam yelled, and then he turned his back on them and buried his face in his hands, shoulders shaking as he struggled to regain control over himself and his fear because that was what Liam did best – that was how he coped; forcing himself to remain calm for the sake of everybody else. After a few seconds and a lot of deep breaths, he had his restraint back, and he turned around and faced the Irish boy head on. “I watched you die. The Gardaí chased you off the pier in Dublin and you jumped into the water and drowned rather than let them catch you. It could have happened, Niall! It would have happened.” Liam wretchedly grabbed two handfuls of hair.

“They thought you were dangerous. You! It’s beyond belief.” He laughed.

“I’m sorry, Li,” Niall whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well you’re not dead, so you don’t have to apologise. But if you were, I’d be heading over to your grave and demanding an extremely sincere apology from you, all right? That might be something to bear in mind if you ever die properly.” A precise nod and the slightly unwilling smile that crept across Liam’s face told Niall that he was forgiven, and he breathed out in relief.

“Hey,” Louis said, “I have an input, if anyone cares.” He stepped forwards, and Harry came with him, his ghost, hands fluttering behind him as if to place a hand on the small of his back, but afraid to do so.

“Uh…” Niall responded inadequately. “Right. I suppose you’d better get it over with, then.” He braced himself in readiness for an onslaught of verbal abuse, another severe telling off from one of his friends. Resentment didn’t even occur to him; he’d earned this, really. And if they yelled at him enough, he’d definitely think twice before doing something so unexpected and stupid again. Perhaps even three times, if it was a particularly idiotic plan.
“You’re an idiot,” explained Louis. “But you’re all right, so I suppose that’s something.” He paused. “Hang on, where’s Zayn? I’m sure he had something he wanted to say…he wanted to yell at you, too. He had this whole little speech planned out and everything.”

“That’s a good point, actually; where is Zayn?” asked Liam.

They all turned to look expectantly at Harry, who, after recovering his embarrassment at being caught hovering quite so closely to Louis, abashedly closed his eyes and reached out his mind to try and establish some kind of link with Zayn. They all saw two bright pink patches flare up on his cheeks, and he quickly opened his eyes again, looking mortified.

“Yeah, you…really don’t want to know the intimate details.”

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Truthfully, even Zayn was wondering whether their relationship might be progressing a tad quickly. It had only been a couple of days since he’d met the girl – four, to be exact – and now they were pressed up against the kitchen counter in a less than empty house, Zayn holding her face in his hands while she hung onto him with nervous hands that lightly gripped his waist as if she was afraid to get a proper hold of him. Fair enough, he’d had faster encounters than this, but most of those had only spanned the duration of a night, and he’d never planned on meeting the other person ever again. Eithne was very real; very blonde, very soft, very girly, with her hideous dress sense and dirty shoes and her coy shyness that made her so appealing. She wasn’t some shadowy stranger who was blurred around the edges with alcohol and smelt like the club he’d plucked them from. Which was…different, to say the least.

She was sweet, too. Caring. He’d deduced that fairly quickly, from the way she’d caught at his sleeve while the rest of them filtered in aggrieved silence through to the living room to give Niall a stern telling off. They had stopped and looked at each other for a while.

“You really were worried about him, weren’t you?”

“Of course I was! He’s my friend. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, he has powers, doesn’t he? He can take care of himself.”

“Niall?” Zayn snorted in disbelief. “I doubt it. The only thing he can take care of is the contents of the fridge.”

Eithne giggled, one dainty hand flying to cover her mouth, and he found himself grinning broadly at her, pleased that she’d found him funny. All of a sudden he was advancing on her, and one of his hands was on her waist, and then she was serious. They stayed like statues for a while, Zayn gently pressing her against the kitchen counter in a grip loose enough that she could easily wriggle free of if she was so minded – which apparently she wasn’t. Her tongue flickered out of her mouth to wet her lips, and she blinked, her grey eyes glittering slightly in the dim lighting. How clichéd; when Louis hit the lights on the way in, he didn’t turn them all the way up, so the room was subdued, and they were both drenched in shadows, bathed in darkness. Eithne’s pale and pointed face looked even more unusually pretty in the odd lack of illumination.

“I think you know what I’m about to do, don’t you?”

“Of course,” she replied softly. “It’s what I’ve been waiting for.”

“Are you sure about that? You could stop me, you know. In fact, you probably should. I’m not natural, you know; I’ve been drugged up to the eyeballs. I’m pretty much a mutant.” His lips grazed
her neck as he whispered “At the risk of sounding like a Twilight rip-off, I’m kind of dangerous.”

She laughed quietly. “Oh, very Edward Cullen. You have similar hair, I must admit, but your powers are far cooler than his. Plus you don’t sparkle. I don’t like things that glitter; they’re ever so tacky. He’s like a walking disco ball. And unless you have very flattering custom-made clothes, you’re not round in any way, shape or form.”

“Well, not that I’m aware of.”

Then, all of a sudden, he lost it a little and by the time he’d resurfaced enough to figure out that he’d moved, he realized that he was holding her by the arms and kissing her, and not gently, either. His hands glided up to her shoulders and took hold of her face, and that was the point they’d reached right now, their lips whispering together in the almost-darkness. Zayn was starting to lose track of time, and, weirdly, his concept of holding onto gravity; they had risen a few centimetres off the floor, and were floating.

Or at least, a few centimetres was all it felt like. When Zayn bumped his head on something, dragged his lips away to yelp in pain, then glared upwards and discovered that he’d just hit his head on the ceiling, he worked out that it had perhaps been a little more than that.

Eithne tilted her head in confusion as to why he had stopped – then she looked down, and her mouth fell open in surprise as she gave a little gasp of shock. Zayn swallowed sheepishly, and he couldn’t help the embarrassed grin that quirked the corners of his mouth upwards into a guilty smile like a naughty child. His hands moved from her face to her back, as if to make her feel more supported, and she clung to him in shock.

“Whoops,” he mumbled.

She stifled another giggle. “Well, this is certainly…different.”

“It was an accident!” he assured her, “I didn’t mean –”

“I know you didn’t. Don’t worry about it. We’ll never be short of a way to spice up the love life, I suppose,” she teased.

He blushed, which was quite unusual for Zayn; he specialized in being cool and unruffled at almost all times. “True.”

“Whoa, whoa! Jesus Christ, Zayn, what the hell are you doing up there?” Niall had poked his head curiously around the kitchen door and now his eyes were wide, almost falling out of his head. Zayn could imagine how the bluish-green orbs would drop out of Niall’s eye sockets and roll madly around on the floor, and he almost laughed at the thought.

“Oh, you know, just enjoying the view,” he said.

“Yeah, so am I,” muttered the blond boy, quickly averting his gaze. “Eithne, you might want to, um…hold your skirt down. It’s kind of breezy up there.”

Her face glowed bright pink and she caught at her skirt, pinning it against her legs with one hand while clinging to Zayn with the other. It would have been a little less mortifying if her tights hadn’t got rather damp while they were walking in grim silence down the pier, and she hadn’t taken them off – blushing almost as much as she was, Niall prayed that the mental image of her Betty Boop underwear would vanish from his mind almost as quickly as the finer points of Liam’s lecture had.

Zayn asked defensively “Why are you looking?” and scowled disapprovingly down at him, clearly
not at all impressed by the idea that someone else had caught a glimpse of Eithne’s underwear before
he had. “That’s kind of inappropriate, Niall.”

“Says the one who’s snogging her on the ceiling. Get down from there; Liam’ll have a fit. I don’t
think the roof is really the safest location for a quick snog, do you?”

“Who’s snogging on the roof?” asked Harry excitedly, sticking his head round the door and nudging
Niall so that he staggered into the room. Glancing upwards, Harry’s mouth formed a neat little ‘o’ of
excitement and he grinned. “Wow. Score, Zayn. I’ve done a lot of things in my time, but I’ve never
snogged anyone whilst pinned to the ceiling.”

“I’m sure that can be arranged,” grumbled Zayn darkly, “now get lost, you lot; we’re kind of in the
middle of something.”

Harry opened his mouth with a laugh and yelled “EITHNE AND ZAYN ARE ON THE
CEILING, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

“Where?” Louis staggered into the kitchen, tripped over Niall’s feet and had to be neatly snagged by
the arm by Harry so that he didn’t fall flat on his face. Squinting upwards at Zayn and an incredibly
embarrassed Eithne, he said “Wow. Well that’s a new one. Never seen that before.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“Well come down, then!”

“No!” He shuffled with embarrassment. “Can’t. Not with all of you lot looking at me.”

“Have you tried?”

“Yes. It won’t work. I’m stuck. Now stop staring at me and go away so I can get us down!”

Grinning, Louis leaned against the kitchen counter with an amused look on his face. “Not a chance.
I’m rather enjoying seeing you stuck up there. Sorry, Eithne, but you have to admit this is comedy
gold. Zayn’s stuck on the ceiling! This is brilliant! Hey, Harry, come over here and laugh at Zayn
with me!” Reaching out, he tugged Harry towards him by the sleeve and put an arm around his
shoulder, and pulling Harry against his side, laughed uproariously at Zayn.

Stunned but delighted, Harry surreptitiously snuggled into his side and laughed right along with him,
and a few seconds later he started up another rousing chorus of “EITHNE AND ZAYN ARE ON
THE CEILING, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!”

Joining in, Louis flashed the flushed Zayn a cheeky grin and added, “FIRST COMES HOVERING
THEN COMES HEIGHT, THEN SHAGGING ON THE CEILING ALL THROUGH THE
NIGHT!”

“Shut up for a minute!”

They all blinked and turned towards the doorway, in which Liam was stood, wild-eyed, hair
standing on end like he’d been raking his fingers through it, pale and stunned. Distracted, Zayn
wobbled, and then with a yelp he and Eithne started plummeting through the air – it was lucky that
Louis’ reflexes were so extraordinarily good, because he whirled around, splayed his hands and
caught them in a force field before they were anywhere near the ground. Lowering them carefully to
the ground, he turned back to Liam only to see that Niall had caught him by the elbows and was
waving a hand back and forth in front of his face, looking anxiously at Liam’s unfocused and
unblinking expression.
“Li. Snap out of it, Li. Liam?” Niall carefully snapped his fingers in front of his face. “Liam.”

Liam’s hands were clumsy as he made a grab for him, fingers closing around Niall’s wrist as if it was the only thing he could see, the only thing that he could feel. Clinging to his hand with such a tight grip that Niall winced, Liam hung on, still gazing blankly above Niall’s head with an almost creepy, glassy-eyed stare. Except all of a sudden, Liam made a noise – the most fragile and broken of noises, a kind of whine, and they all flocked around of him all of a sudden, even Eithne, each desperate to put a hand on him as if they each believed that only they could comfort him. Still, it was Niall that Liam clung to, and Niall whose anxious eyes he met as he let out another of those feeble cries.

“Liam? Come on, Li; it’s all right. Sit down, come on, everything’s going to be okay. Come on, come and sit down –” Niall started leading him towards one of the kitchen chairs, but Liam yanked on his wrist and Niall stopped dead, blinking in shock.

“Dead,” Liam croaked.

“No, no, Liam, I’m not. I’m all right; I’m fine, see. I’m here. Liam, Liam, look at me, I’m okay –”

“Not just you! Everyone. All dead…” His head shook violently back and forth like he was trying to shake the thoughts out of his mind. “All dead…”

“Nobody’s dead, Liam, we’re all here –”

“But you won’t be!” cried Liam hysterically. His head snapped up and eyes locked on Harry’s. “I saw it. You all died, all of you, I saw it, I saw it, I saw it…"

“Liam, look at me.” Harry knelt down in front of him, grabbed his hands and squeezed them tightly in his own. “The future can change, remember? We discussed this.”

“No all of it. Not all of it, Harry; it doesn’t all change. I’ve looked and I’ve looked, and I can’t see anything else.” He turned and looked at Louis first, staring at him very hard. “They’ll kill you first. She will. She picks up a knife and she stabs you with it, right there.” He jabbed Louis very hard in the chest, right over his heart. Then he turned back to Harry, his eyes dull. “Right through the heart, just for the irony, would you believe it? Because she knows. She kills him first, because she knows it’ll hurt you the most.”

Louis’ eyes widened, and he stared at Harry. “Why? Why would it hurt him the most?”

Ignoring him, Liam continued “Then Niall. She’ll kill Niall next, because she knows how much it’ll hurt all of us, hearing him scream. The future’s changed in that respect; she was going to kill him first, but she changes her mind because she hates Harry so much. So she kills Louis and then Niall, and then she kills Eithne and Zayn at the same time. It makes her laugh because they thought they’d be together forever, do everything together, so they might as well die together too. She leaves Harry almost to last because she likes hearing him scream for Louis; likes hearing his pain. Bitch.” The expletive horrified them all more than the rest of what he was saying; they all flinched at the cold, hard hatred behind it. It sounded so wrong coming from Liam’s lips. “But she kills me last of all because she knows that I look after people and she knows it’ll kill me, watching you all die and doing nothing. She knows us all so well; they’ve watched us all for so long. And she knows how to hurt us, so that’s what she does. She knows what hurts more than death and that’s what she does.”

They were all chilled by his words, as if he’d poured icy water all over them. But urgency, and terror over the possibility of the prophecy coming true and Louis dying in front of him had Harry losing all thought of leaving Liam to recover a little from the shock, and he grabbed him almost brutally by the shoulders, shook him to wake him up a bit and snapped “When, Liam? And where? Who the hell is
she, and when will she come? We need to be ready, we need to –"

“Now.”

Horrified silence. “What?” Louis asked hollowly, actually distracted; his eyes stopped roving over Harry’s terrified face and trying to decipher the meaning behind Liam’s words, why it would hurt the youngest boy more than anyone to see Louis die first, and he turned back to Liam and licked his lips, hoping and almost praying that he’d misheard.

“I believe he said ‘now’,” came the helpful answer; a lilting voice that had all of their heads turning to stare at the source, which was coming from the window which nobody had realized was wide open, a draught blowing through. A figure stood there, blocking out the light, black hair blowing wildly in the breeze as if there was an electric fan behind her causing her hair to flutter around her shoulders. She wore a long black trench coat that hugged her torso and then billowed out way past her knees, cascading almost to her ankles. Her mouth was a red that wasn’t even the gory shade of blood; it was more deep crimson than anything else, like a poppy coming towards the end of its beauty, the petals just beginning to curl at the tips. She had dark eyes, a pale face, and a sultry expression, and teeth the colour of clouds on a beautiful day.

Everyone in the room fell in love the moment they clapped eyes on her.
Chapter 27

For almost the first time in recorded memory, Louis’ powers actually worked under stress. Perhaps it was the sheer shock of falling so instantly and helplessly in love with a complete stranger, especially as he was gay anyway and had never had the slightest hint of attraction to any woman before in his whole life. Maybe it was some strange chemical imbalance caused by the sudden strong emotions bubbling inside of him; lust being one of them, terror being another, because how the hell could someone be that gorgeous? So when his fingers flexed almost automatically, something shredded through his panic, and an enormous force field blossomed around them.

There were two problems; one of them being that in his panic, he’d thrown the walls of the bubble out so far that the ridiculously beautiful girl, the girl he would go insane without, who was so ridiculously fit that he had to touch her, trace her curves with one finger, kiss her hard, whose lips looked so kissable and soft, who was so beautiful that she was wrong - she was caught inside it too.

The other problem was that even as he did it, a pale hand landed on his shoulder, and as he whirled around with a hiss of shock, he saw a familiar smug smirk, felt a horrible, nauseating yank somewhere in his abdomen, and then they were teleporting.

It was just as awful as it had always been; the world blurred around them, and then the excruciating pain came and began dancing through his body, flitting through his veins in a way that he’d hoped to never have to experience again. He thought he might be sick; a giant hand had punched through his abdomen and seized his stomach, tearing it out and wrapping his intestines around each other; plaiting them, and threading them through his eye sockets. And all the while, he was burning; he was taking a shower in molten lava, feeling it pour over him, cascading down his shoulders, flaying his skin off with the sheer heat of it, plucking every hair off his head one by one. Razor blades slicing every millimetre of his skin into ribbons, fraying his skin into slices so thin he could barely feel them, each strand screaming…Now he was hallucinating; fantastic. It was so much worse than last time; he had a feeling that there had been at least some effort to protect them the last time this had happened, and now that protection had been revoked. Felix saw no need to be careful with them now that they didn’t trust him anymore. Strange colours and distorted shapes snatched at his vision, what was left of his stomach started churning, and the only real, substantial thing in the world was Felix’s hand, clamped down hard on his shoulder. He hated that; out of all the people in the world who could be clinging onto him, and it had to be Felix.

Why couldn’t it have been, say, Harry?

But Harry was screaming.

They were all screaming. With what was left of his ears, he could hear their various voices: Harry’s, raspy and grating, low and agonized but he was desperately attempting to hold it back, like the sound was being ripped through his teeth against his will. Zayn’s, even lower, but less controlled; more shaky, like he’d lost the will to fight against it. Niall’s was a whimper, because Niall apparently saw no need to even try to hold back the noise, whereas Zayn’s bravado was for his girlfriend, and Harry? Well, clearly Harry had some motive for trying to stay quiet. Liam was the quietest of all, moaning rather than crying out, trying to keep it together for all of their sakes. Eithne held nothing back, screeching almost hysterically in shock, the way that girls did, crying out for help. His own scream was more of a sob, a helpless noise, and he thought – thought, mind you; it could have been another of his hallucinations – that he heard Felix chuckle. Laughing at their agony, the bastard. Louis wanted to rip away from the black-haired boy’s grip, tear that slender hand off his shoulder. God, he hated him. Harry was screaming, and he was laughing. He’d never hated anyone so much in his entire life.
Pain shot through his knees like he’d fallen onto a pair of knife blades, and his hands slammed into the floor to catch himself before he fell, before he could collapse, fall flat on his face. The hand had left his shoulder, and he breathed shallowly as he fought to keep the contents of his stomach where it belonged. It was a struggle, especially with the sounds of his friends coughing and groaning, struggling not to splatter their own breakfasts onto the cold, stone floor. But after a few more seconds, he carefully sat up, scanning the room with narrowed eyes.

The girl – that gorgeous, incredible girl, god, if he could only touch her, if her lips would only brush his, if their skin could make contact, he had to touch her, he would die if he didn’t touch her – was sitting on a table in the corner, swinging her legs, leaning back against the wall with her chest thrust out. It oughtn’t to have made the slightest impact; he liked a nice bum better than a straining shirt that pulled over a girl’s chest. Short hair was nicer than long. Soft lips were better than sticky ones; sticky with lipgloss that tasted sickly and left a weird taste on his mouth. He knew from experience. He’d kissed girls before and it hadn’t left much of an impression. Certainly not a good one, anyway.

But he wanted her. Right there and then; on that table; on the floor; up against the wall; he wasn’t really fussy. And that, that was probably the most disturbing thing he’d ever felt; attraction to a girl when the only interest he’d ever had in girls was hanging out with them, trying to meet hot guys. Oh, and the occasional chick-flick. He did love a good chick flick.

Felix’s sneakers made a soft padding noise on the floor as he walked up and down several times. A quick glance across the room told Louis that Eithne was clinging to Zayn, grabbing his shirt with both hands, as if anchoring him in place. Stopping him from making a run at the girl. So clearly Louis wasn’t the only one struggling to control himself; Zayn was clinging hard to Eithne, but his whole body was straining towards the dark girl. Liam was gravitating towards Niall – unsurprising; they all knew about the vision he’d had where Niall died by the hand of the attractive girl perched on the table, looking coyly at them through her mascara-coated lashes. Harry? He barely seemed to have noticed Louis. In fact, their eyes locked as Louis looked over, and Harry slowly blinked at him in wordless communication.

“This is cosy.” Felix’s voice echoed through the well-lit room. They appeared to be in a large room in some kind of museum; paintings hung on the walls, and there were glass cases pushed up against the walls with vases and strange artefacts inside them. Louis was confused, to say the least. Felix, however, seemed amused by the situation.

Strangely, Louis didn’t really see the funny side.

“Yeah, but not really, though,” he replied icily. “You’ve kidnapped us and brought us to a mysterious museum where a pretty girl is sat on an expensive table showing off her legs and sticking her boobs out to try and distract us in some weird, totally objectifying way; ‘cosy’ isn’t quite the word I would have used.”

“Actually, I think having a pretty girl waiting for you is actually an extremely cosy way to spend an evening. And Deino really doesn’t mind being objectified, do you, babe?” Felix cast a look over at the girl, who, right on cue, fluttered her manicured fingers at them and looked smug. It was… well, it was rather revolting, actually. Louis wasn’t sure whether it was her arrogance or her stunning body that none of them could tear their eyes away from which was giving him such an irrepressible urge to vomit.

It made no sense, but she was so beautiful, so stupidly perfect, that she made him feel physically ill. The contents of his stomach was twisting and churning at a rate far beyond anything he’d ever felt before; to the point of physical nausea. He swallowed.

“Boobs don’t impress me; I’m gay, you see,” Louis said blandly. “So perhaps you should try another
tactic. If, of course, you have one.”

Felix’s smile widened, flashing a mouthful of white teeth. “Oh, but I knew that. It’s hardly hard to figure out, with an arse like that.” He gestured at Louis, who glared at him, uncomfortable with the thought that Felix, of all people, had been looking at him in that way. “But the point is, it doesn’t matter to Dee-Dee, whether you’re gay, straight, bi, pan, asexual, or any other variant you care to name. I can see the way you look at her. It’s the same way I look at her – the same way everyone in this room is looking at her. Even Blondie.” He gestured carelessly at Eithne, who still clung to Zayn’s shirt with both hands. “Must be quite a shock, finding herself turning lesbian when her boyfriend is right there. Still, you could always put on a show for the lads, couldn’t you, sweetheart?” His grin was sleazy and disgusting, and Eithne shuddered, feeling horrible merely from the sordid tone of his voice.

“Fuck off.” Her voice was clear, calm, unafraid…and Felix’s smile widened even more. His face would split in two if he smiled any more.

“If you can find me someone called ‘off’, then I will. Until then, I will have to decline. Sorry, and all that. I digress; my point is that no matter what your sexual orientation, you will fall in love with Deino on sight. You just can’t help it. She’s irresistible.”

Leaping off the table, Deino twirled around in a circle like a simpering child, holding out her coat and pirouetting neatly in her high-heeled black stilettos, tilting her head onto one side so that her sleek, carefully teased hair ruffled in the breeze she created as she turned. It was one of the most sickening things Louis had ever seen in his life; a teenage girl probably around Harry’s age, maybe a little younger, twirling around and showing off like a three year old girl. He almost expected her to whip off the black coat to reveal a bright pink tutu underneath and start flitting around and pointing her toes, clad in a pair of ballet shoes, singing cheesy show tunes from a second-rate low-budget musical.

“Charming, isn’t she?”

“Again, not the word I would have used.”

“Oh? Enlighten me, then; what word would you have used? Since you apparently have such an enviably extensive vocabulary at your disposal?” Felix paced up and down the room a couple of times, but his black eyes never left Louis’ face, searing into his irises.

“Sleazy,” Louis told him almost uninterestedly, and he had the satisfaction of watching Deino scowl and Felix’s dark eyes narrow harshly at the criticism.

“It’s all a matter of taste, I suppose. No one else seems to be objecting.”

On the contrary; Harry was most definitely objecting, for a start. His hands had clenched into fists and he would appear to be one of the few people in the room whose gaze wasn’t lingering on the girl’s boobs. In fact, he was scowling straight into her eyes, his expression thunderous, like he wished he could hit her. Liam was frowning too, struggling apparently with some internal conflict; his gaze was gooey and adoring, but his forehead was furrowed deeply as he glared at her as well. By his side, Niall was shaking, and he was looking more terrified than anything else. As for Zayn, he had buried his face in Eithne’s hair so that his expression was indiscernible, and Eithne’s expression spoke for him; she looked completely disgusted.

“Depends on your definition of ‘objecting’. Perhaps not aloud.”

“Well, if any of you do feel an urge to voice any objections, I probably ought to warn you that Dee-
Dee here doesn’t take too kindly to criticism, and I won’t be held responsible for any… mischief that may befall you on her behalf.” He gave Louis a challenging look that bordered on being menacing, eyebrows raised, and beside him, Deino put a hand on her hip, leaned heavily to her left and gave him a very fiercely judgemental stare that was so sassy it was almost painful. It was a mistake; Louis was, to put not too fine a point on it, the queen of sass. Challenging him to a battle of who could be the most patronizing was most definitely a mistake. He could already feel himself readying a good dose of scorn to inflict on her.

Perfectly calmly, simply as clarification, Louis asked him, “Is that a threat?”

“I believe it is. Whether you need to be worried about it or not, I could even begin to hazard a guess. But if she reapplies her lipstick, I’d be very careful about how you handle the situation. She’s an excellent snogger. I can personally vouch for that.” He smirked. Then, once more, his expression hardened as he appraised Louis for a moment. “In answer to your question; yes, that was a threat. And if, by some miracle, Dee-Dee doesn’t knock you from here to the end of next week, I probably ought to warn you that if you don’t shut up pretty quick, then I’ll do it for her.”

There was a nasty silence while they all contemplated the connotations of that. Before anyone could say another word, Harry tore his repulsed gaze away from the dark-haired girl, coldly walked across the room and went to stand beside Louis. He stood a few inches in front of him, leaning forwards, his stance almost protective – and when Louis moved to stand beside him, he reached out with one arm without turning around and swept Louis defensively behind him. There appeared to have been no visible prompting behind the action; no reason why he had decided to do it. He just…did. Not a single hint of emotion flickered across his expression, but when Louis reached out in gratitude and momentarily grasped his wrist, a small smile twitched his mouth upwards and he glanced fondly at Louis, nodding in acknowledgement.

“Is this what they call an impasse?”

It was a new voice; equally sarcastic and perhaps even more obnoxious than Felix’s – but similar enough in tone. Sure enough, when they all turned to look, Cheren stepped out from behind an enormous display case containing a mannequin draped in loose, old-fashioned clothes, and he gave them all an insultingly blank stare as he headed across the room to join his brother.

The three of them stood there; Felix flanked by Cheren and Deino, with the girl on his left and the boy on his right. With their dark hair, unfriendly expressions and upright, stiff stances, they could have been triplets rather than twins and a completely unrelated girl.

Until, of course, Cheren ruined the image by snagging Deino by the waist and planting a disgustingly wet kiss right on her mouth. They all pulled distasteful expressions; Niall even turned away with a groan of protest, and the moment the two of them had separated, an outraged Felix grabbed the girl by the wrist, tugged her around so that she faced him, and he kissed her too, not to be outdone by his brother. In fact, this kiss lasted twice as long and was almost indecently intimate, not the kind that was really acceptable in public – so much so that Harry started up a noisy coughing fit in an attempt to distract them. It was a valiant effort; it didn’t seem to make much of an impact, but Louis appreciated it, at least.

When the two of them finally drew apart and turned back to face Niall, Liam, Zayn, Eithne, Louis and Harry, the reaction was almost instantaneous. Tugging Eithne by the wrist, Zayn instantly walked over to stand behind them, quickly joined by Liam, who reached out to pat him on the back and ended up turning it into a kind of stroke instead, rubbing Zayn’s spine as if to comfort him – perhaps as a reminder that he could have been a little gentler. He was squeezing Eithne’s small hand so tightly that her fingers had turned white, aside from her very pink fingertips. Swallowing, Zayn
loosened his grip a little. Niall was the last to join them, and Zayn reached out with his free arm and tucked the blond boy underneath it, so that he had a blonde head on each side of him, and Liam stepped even closer, his hand still resting on Zayn’s spine.

Harry and Louis stood a little way away from them, taking the lead, almost, and Harry was at the very front, standing defensively in front of the slightly shorter man. Reaching out, Louis touched him very lightly on the arm, and Harry looked anxiously down at him before retreating slightly so that they were level with each other. Nodding, Louis turned back to face their adversaries.

“Well, as I’m sure you understand, we didn’t actually consent to coming here, and we were kind of in the middle of something. Well. Zayn was.” He couldn’t help but smirk slightly before controlling his expression. “I hope you won’t take it too personally if we leave. It looks like you’re busy; we’d hate to intrude, wouldn’t we, Harry?”

“Oh yes,” agreed Harry, “that would be absolutely awful. In fact, I think we probably ought to leave right now. We’re being incredibly rude, taking up so much of your time like this; let’s leave and we’ll say no more about it.”

“What, so soon?” asked Cheren, flicking his jet black fringe out of his even blacker eyes. “But we haven’t even got to the good part yet. We were looking forward to having some fun with you, weren’t we, guys? Deino was especially keen to get to know your little Irish lad over there, weren’t you, hon?”

“You lay one finger on him and you’ll regret it.” None of them had ever heard Liam talk like that before; his voice was like an icy razorblade slicing across skin, and every single one of them flinched at the pure venom in it. It was terrifying to hear Liam sound so harsh, so vicious, so… uncontrollable. He’d channelled his terror into anger, and that anger was being directed straight at the girl he had watched kill Niall with nothing more than a careless slip of her hand.

“That’s not very nice. I thought you were supposed to be the cuddly one?” Cheren mocked.

“Tell you what; come a bit closer and I’ll demonstrate. Only cuddling can have a very loose definition, so I hope you won’t mind if I smother you,” Liam snapped.

Wide-eyed, Zayn grabbed his arm to hold him back. “No, Liam,” he hissed urgently. “Stop it.”

“You didn’t see,” Liam cried, wrenching his arm away, eyes brimming with tears. “You didn’t see her taunt him, and then slash his neck open and leave him bleeding on the floor. You didn’t see,” he cried wretchedly, and buried his face in his hands.

“What’s that they’re saying?”

“I get the impression that Dee-Dee here killed someone, Cher.”

“Our Dee-Dee? Never! She couldn’t hurt a fly, could you, Dee-Dee?”

“Never in a million years,” replied Deino, batting her eyelashes innocently.

“Shut up,” growled Harry.

They all squealed in mock horror, hands flying to their mouths – and then they started speaking, twittering irritatingly like three annoying little birds, chirping annoyingly just to set their teeth on edge, and oh, it was working so maddeningly well.

“Did you hear that?”
“I did!”

“He told us to shut up!”

“He did!”

“Are we going to stand for that?”

“I don’t think we should.”

“Manners are important, after all.”

“Mm. Very. I think we should teach him some, don’t you?” Deino asked petulantly.

“Most definitely. Would you do the honours?”

She didn’t even answer – just walked forwards, stilettos clicking on the floor like an eagle’s talons with every step, and Liam cringed, sweeping Niall backwards with one quick slide of his arm, and Zayn and Eithne followed. They all retreated backwards, away from the girl. Harry’s eyes flickered momentarily after them, but after checking to make sure that Louis hadn’t shifted, his jaw flexed, tightening with determination, and he stayed where he was, locked by Louis’ side.

She reached Harry first, touching him with one fingertip, a long nail running across his cheek and leaving a deep red scratch that he barely felt, but which looked horribly deep to any bystander. He shuddered at the feel of her painfully cold skin, but she mistook it for either fear or lust, and flashed him a sickly grin. Beside him, Louis was shaking, both with longing and anxiety, and Harry glanced at him, raising his eyebrows to show that he was okay; he wasn’t in pain, she hadn’t really hurt him…although, when he looked at her, it seemed like she was rather keen to change that.

“He’s pretty,” she breathed, “which is good news for me. Not such good news for him. I like to play with pretty things – plain things are so boring. No fun. They take and take and take, and give nothing, and then they cry when I take their lives in return.” She pouted. “I don’t think this one would cry, no matter how hard I tried to make him. There’s too much pride locked away in there…too much bravery. I can see it in his eyes.” She lightly tapped the side of his head.

Hatred burned in his expression and he stood still, unmoving and refusing to react to her taunting. Dissatisfied, she leaned a little closer so that her breath tickled his cheek.

“I wonder whether you’d scream, or sob?” she mused. “I like to see that. I can never decide which I prefer. You see, when they scream, I know that they’re desperate – they can’t take it anymore, so they scream out loud and beg for mercy like sheer volume is going to make a difference. I like to know that they’ve broken them and they don’t even have enough pride left to say silent as they plead with me. But on the other hand…when they lie whimpering on the floor, I almost think that might be even better. Because that means that they’ve given up, that I’ve broken them into such tiny pieces that they don’t even have the strength yet to scream, to put up a fight…there’s nothing left in them. All they can do is endure…” She said it delicately, drawing out the word, and Harry’s face twisted in disgust.

For a while they were silent, and the only sign that Harry had even heard her was the way his nose was wrinkled in distaste of her words. Clearly, she was unused to not getting any kind of reaction, and a slight frown creased her forehead as she moved a little closer, breathing so heavily that she ruffled his curls, attempting to put him off guard; in all honesty, he found it rather off-putting. Like she was breathing down his neck. He wriggled, disliking the way she was so close, and for the first time she seemed more pleased by his reaction. Her body was so closely pressed against his that he was surprised they hadn’t fused together.
Her lips parted and pressed lightly against his cheekbone, leaving a flushed pink mouth-shaped imprint on his skin. She murmured against his face, so that he could feel the slick stickiness of the lipstick, “Which would you do? Would you cry…or would you scream?”

Defying her expectations, it was Louis and not Harry who snapped at that moment; lunging for the girl’s hand where it fluttered lightly against Harry’s hip, Louis snatched her hand away from the other boy, tugging her backwards to prevent her from touching him. “Get your hands off him!” he growled, shoving her away from them both so that she staggered – the moment he touched her, his cheeks flared bright pink, as if her skin was some kind of invisible link to his blood supply. In reality, it was probably related to her power in some way, but Harry hated seeing Louis become so flustered just from a simple touch…couldn’t help but wish that he could have that kind of instantaneous reaction in Louis.

“Feisty!” she cried delightedly, “someone’s possessive! I wonder what you’d do, hmm? Would you cry? I can’t see you being the screaming type, to be honest, but I wouldn’t know, would I? At least…” the words slipped silkily from her lips, caressed by her pointed tongue. “Not yet.”

It was Harry’s turn to see red right then; he grabbed Louis by the arm and wrenched him away from her, wondering if it was as blindingly obvious as it felt that he couldn’t bear to have Louis near her. In fact, he was almost tempted to slap the girl across the face, especially given the way Louis was struggling so blatantly to cope with the attraction that everyone but Harry appeared to be feeling towards her. Feeling an intense urge to drag Louis to the opposite side of the room from her, Harry stood shaking with anger and fighting to stay calm on the outside.

“What’s going on here, then?” cooed Deino, raising her eyebrows in interest. “Have you two got something going on between you, is that it? Because you’re very protective of each other…”

“No!” Harry flushed bright red with humiliation and glowered straight at her. “I think you’re struggling to realize that maybe, just maybe, real mates protect each other from witches like you. Stop you from poisoning us, because we care about each other. Bros before hoes, did you never hear that saying? I’m just looking out for him – like he’s looking out for me.”

“Well maybe,” she began, “he doesn’t want you to look out for him. Judging by the look on his face, I’d certainly assume that to be the case, wouldn’t you?”

“No,” Harry answered politely. “Actually, I wouldn’t. Especially as I happen to know that you’re twisting his mind to persuade him to fancy you. Like he said, he’s gay, which is how I know full well that none of this is his decision. So I’m going to assume that I know better than you do about what my best friend wants, and I’m going to tell you again to get the hell away from him.”

Deino was caught halfway through a laugh of derision when Harry’s command became tangible; the horrible, harsh, hacking sound of it caught in her throat and her eyes widened in surprise as she blinked at him, struggling to understand. Her hand reached out towards the shuddering Louis, to pluck at his sleeve, but veered off course halfway through, jerking away from Louis and dropping back to her side again. Shocked, she stared down at it, then reached out again to flick his fringe off his forehead.

I said get away from him! Harry snarled. All of those ancient, primitive instincts to protect things had been unlocked, and he was in serious danger of losing his temper at the mere thought of her scrabbling hands touching Louis’ skin. In fact, he was almost ready to fly at the girl and throw her to the ground and make her regret so much as looking at Lou – and this desire seemed to shine through in his command, because it was so much sharper than usual, and when she obeyed, which of course she had to, she obeyed far much more clumsily…and far faster than anyone ever had done before. Harry’s anger made him formidable.
With a sharp cry of shock, Deino staggered back, looking horrified by the complete lack of control she had over her own limbs. In response, Harry jerked Louis backwards so that he was even further away from the girl, and had the satisfaction of watching the girl stumble clumsily, wobbling in her stiletto heels. She flailed at the air, struggling to correct herself, catching herself before she fell, and her eyes darkened and burned fiercely when she realized that Harry was responsible, that he had almost knocked her off her feet with simply the power of his mind. What seemed to infuriate her the most, however, was that her own powers had very little effect on him whatsoever, if any effect at all. He simply disregarded the attraction that everyone else had towards her, brushing it aside like it was nothing more than a flimsy, barely perceptible cobweb in the very corner of his concentration…like it wasn’t even worthy of his attention. Stunned, she stared at him in utter shock, blinking like a startled rabbit.

“Dee?” concerned, amazingly, Cheren took a step forwards, arm outstretched.

*Stay back! Get back, and keep walking,* Harry ordered.

Almost as shocked as Deino, Cheren started walking slowly backwards, retreating with a little more dignity than she because of his more sensible footwear, looking completely taken aback with how easily Harry shunted him into place, like he was a toddler with a train set and Harry was patiently trundling each train back into the engine shed. Backing into the corner, Cheren didn’t stop until his shoulder-blade had rammed into the wall and he cried out in pain, physically unable to go any further. Relenting, Harry lessened the pressure slightly and then turned his attention to Felix.

*Walk over here,* he ordered, *but don’t stare at me like that because your face annoys me. And that expression makes you look like a goldfish.*

Outraged but helpless, Felix stiffly walked across the room, much to Deino and Cheren’s dismay, and he stood obediently beside Harry with his face turned towards the wall. Nodding grimly, Harry reached for Louis’ wrist and placed Louis’ hand on Felix’s arm. Gesturing towards the others, he patiently waited for Eithne, Liam, Niall and Zayn to shuffle across the room and lay their hands on Felix’s arms and shoulders. Once they’d all got a reasonable grip on him, Harry walked across the room to face Deino.

He placed his fingers on his temples and closed his eyes, as physical contact made the process easier, and barely restraining a weary sigh, he plucked at the threads of her consciousness, locating a specific memory; the memory of where their safe house was. Patiently, he began painstakingly unravelling them, removing the parts he didn’t want her to remember and not even bothering with his usual thoroughness; he just left huge, ragged gaps in her memory. It would annoy her, and perhaps a little pettily, the thought of her storming around clutching her head and trying valiantly to summon memories to fill the gaps gave him a kind of vindictive pleasure which curled in the pit of his stomach like a sleeping animal and lay there, the comfortable weight settling him and making him feel warm inside. It was one of the unhealthiest pleasures he’d ever had, enjoying someone else’s discomfort, but how could he help it?

When he was done, he let her crumple to the floor and caught her just before she crashed to the ground, clumsily lowering to the floor by one slender wrist. Then he stepped over her and wandered across the room to where Cheren stood quivering in the corner, breathing harshly in and out.

Rather than bothering with the pleasantries, even *attempting* to be slightly gentle the way he had with Deino, Harry seized him by the arm and yanked him forwards, and as he did so, he gave a vicious tug at Cheren’s memories, not even bothering that he might have been damaging the rest. He was just so *tired,* and he really didn’t give a damn! Harshly snapping at any mention of their home, he severed each and every cord, every memory line, with a kind of bitter resignation that showed he just
didn’t care anymore. Louis, Zayn, Niall, Liam and Eithne watched in silence from the other side of the room; Felix’s face was still facing the opposite direction to Harry’s so he couldn’t tell whether the obnoxious boy was watching his brother’s memories being ripped out of his head or not. Trembling fearfully, in case Harry might decide to wipe his memory totally on a whim, Cheren stayed on his feet until Harry released him with a sniff of disgust; after that he dropped uselessly to the ground, wrapped his arms around his knees and sat in stiff silence, running his hands through his hair and concentrating fiercely, as if he was checking that all of his more vital memories were where they should be. Nastily, Harry felt a moment’s satisfaction in knowing that in his clumsiness he might well have, if not damaged them slightly, definitely shifted around some of Cheren’s memories inside his head so that they would be harder to find – but seeing the boy’s panic, he felt cruel. It was a vicious thought and he took it back.

“Are you lot ready?” he asked curtly, turning back to his friends and Felix.

He was met with a series of swift nods, but it was Louis’ confirmation that he waited for; Louis’ deep blue eyes that his locked onto as he quickly crossed the room, scanning them all up and down to make sure that nobody was hurt. According to his inventory, everyone appeared to be fine, but it was Louis he examined the most thoroughly, Louis he was the most worried about. Then again, with him, it usually was Louis who he worried about. It felt like it was hardwired into his DNA to worry about Louis – second nature now, after all the time he’d spent doing it. Almost as if he was expecting to see Harry’s anxious eyes on him, Louis was staring straight into his face, and he gave Harry a jerky nod not dissimilar to the rest of them. Still, that was the only nod that really counted for Harry, the only nod that made his heart leap out of place in his chest and begin thudding discordantly in a place in his chest that he was sure it was not supposed to be…the only nod which had him placing his own hand on Felix’s shoulder and preparing to warp his mind. Eyes squeezed tightly shut, Felix was sweating in panic, trembling at his touch.

I’m not going to hurt you, for God’s sake! Harry snapped. When he saw the younger boy flinch at the harshness of his tone, like he didn’t believe that one bit and was just waiting to get hit, he felt, oddly, a pang of sympathy.

Look, you don’t have to be scared of me, all right? I’m not going to hurt you. As soon as I’ve gotten you to take us home and wiped your mind, I’ll send you right back where you came from.

Felix avoided his gaze, and at first Harry thought he didn’t believe him and was about to reassure him again, until he remembered that he’d kind of ordered Felix not to look at him. Shaking his head, he got a better grip on the younger boy’s bony shoulder, and allowed himself another glance around the room to make sure than nobody was going to intervene.

Cheren was lying glassy-eyed in the corner, gripping two handfuls of his hair, fingers sifting shakily through the thick, silky blackness; he was fiercely shaking his head as if he was trying to make sense of the new gaps in his memory. Deino sat stupidly where Harry had left her, blinking over and over again, and looking at the floor. He was confident that if they ever recovered quickly enough to remember that they were supposed to be stopping him, they’d never pick themselves up off the floor in time. Regretfully, he nibbled his lip. Perhaps he’d been a little rough.

Right, he told Felix sternly, you’re going to take us right back to where you came from, understand? His gaze flashed over to Louis, who was anxiously watching him. “Louis?” He made an explosive gesture with free hand.

Concentrating, Louis held his hands out in front of him and frowned at the air between his fingertips. Grasping at the thin air, he almost seemed to pull outwards as if the air was an elastic band that he was stretching – and then the air was rippling and twisting, contorting between his fingers, and Harry watched as a shimmering bubble blossomed around them, catching them all inside of it with ease.
Prodding Felix’s mind, he searched for the nerve impulses that controlled Felix’s powers, and gave them a nudge. He watched Felix jerk in shock, saw his eyes widen – and then he tore them apart, and the whole world spun like a roundabout as they vanished into thin air for the second time that day.

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One of the first things that Harry discovered from controlling Felix was that the reason he was unaffected by the pain, nausea and crippling dizziness experienced by the others was purely because he selfishly made no attempt to shield them from it, focusing all his efforts on taking care of himself. Harry was determined to change that; he coerced Felix into extending his own calm serenity to the rest of them, so that for the first time, none of them actually experienced what it was like to be reduced to atoms, blasted through the air and then reassembled on the other end. They quite literally blinked, and then there they stood, back in the kitchen, exactly where they’d been snatched from in the first place. Almost as if the abduction had never occurred.

Groaning, Liam slid to the floor, clutching his head. “God.” He shook his head fiercely. “Ugh, that kills. Oh, God, that’s horrible, I think I’m gonna –”

Dropping to his knees beside him, Zayn grabbed him by the arm as if to steady him, forgetting Eithne for a moment in his urgency to reassure his friend, who had turned the dirty greyish colour of an old white shirt that had been through the wash a few too many times. “Liam? Are you okay, Li? Liam!” He shook Liam by the shoulder, careful not to jostle him.

“Harry just completely rearranged all of our respective futures,” panted Liam, “I didn’t even see it coming. He made the decisions too fast. I had no idea what he was going to do; he kicked all of our futures around and bent them to suit him – that’s a killer. Ow. I’m going to be feeling the aftershocks of this one for a while…didn’t even know it was coming. Not a flash.” Rubbing his eyes, he leaned weakly against the kitchen counter. “I think I’m going to sit here…for a while.”

Zayn blinked. “Huh?”

Kneeling interestingly beside Liam, Eithne examined him with her head tilted to one side. “Mm. Looks to me like he gets some kind of backlash if the future changes significantly from the paths he’s foreseen…now that is very interesting.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

They all turned to stare at Felix, who had managed to grind the words out through gritted teeth. He looked terrified, as if he was certain that they had some kind of dreadful punishment in store for him. He needn’t have worried; nobody was going to lay a finger on him. Not that Harry wasn’t tempted, because really, he was – but honestly, he was completely exhausted.

For the first time, he’d discovered something: he could feel something tugging at his mind, and when he listened carefully, he discovered that it was a link. Previously, he hadn’t noticed it, but now that he was paying attention, he discovered that every mind he touched, whilst fused with his, created a bond with him. A bond that weakened with every passing day and yet was strengthened each time he issued a command. Harry could only feel these bonds now because they were throbbing with exhausted energy; he’d extended a few too many. Everyone in the room had been touched by his mind, and many people in rooms that were hundreds of miles away, and he could feel them all yanking him in different directions. Actually, he was quite confident that the headache brewing around his temples would soon be one to rival Liam’s. He could feel his own pallor becoming similarly ashy.
The strongest pull he felt was towards Louis, whose mind he had tampered with almost too many times to count. His whole body shifted towards the older boy as he met Felix’s gaze and coldly told him, “I’m going to erase your memory of this place, how to find us, and maybe, if you’re lucky, I’ll let you keep the rest.”

Felix paled, but Harry left him no time to panic. Throwing out several coils around the boy’s mind, he squeezed like a boa constrictor, tightening his hold, feeling Felix scrabbling and wriggling as he fought to break free of the intrusive grip that Harry made no effort to disguise as he slowly, slowly strangled every last bit of resistance out of Felix’s mind. The whole process took mere minutes – usually he could have done it in seconds, but he was completely burnt out. His limbs were shaking, and he just wanted to lie down and fall asleep, and possibly not wake up again, ever. Making a grab for one of the kitchen units in order to support himself, Harry snagged the corner of Felix’s memory where it fluttered inside his head, and he tugged.

It unravelled like wool, like stitches being pulled undone. Despite his threat, he was careful not to remove any memories that exceeded the last forty-five minutes – it had been forty-five minutes since they had been snatched! How time flew. Again, he didn’t see much need to bother with any particular kindness; he left seamless, gaping holes in Felix’s memory rather than taking the necessary time and effort required to mend them and leave him without any realization that his memory had been modified at all. Truthfully, he just wanted to get it over with. Perhaps that was why he was rushing so clumsily over the whole process.

By the time he was done, he was sweating and panting, feeling ridiculous but unable to help himself. He made his way over to the table and pulled himself up a chair, which he thankfully collapsed into before turning his attentions back to Felix, who stood with a glazed expression exactly where Harry had left him.

Go, he thought wearily. Just…go back to your brother and that…girl. When you get there, you will have no recollection of coming here, and every time you think of it, or of us, you will have such a splitting headache that you can’t possibly keep thinking of us anymore. Now please…just go away.

Of course, Felix numbly obeyed. Harry managed to keep his eyes open for long enough to see the Adam’s apple in the boy’s pale, skinny throat bob up and down before he vanished – and then Harry slumped exhaustedly to the table with a crash as his forehead hit it. The others cried out, but he barely felt the impact; soundlessly, he slid down the table, lying his head down flat so that his cheek was pressed against the cool, battered wood.

“Harry!”

Feet clattered on the kitchen floor as Zayn, Niall and Eithne rushed across the room with cries of shock. Louis, who was already stood behind him, started rubbing his back concernedly, leaning down to whisper into his ear, feeling curls tickling his lips. Harry ached to listen, but the other voices drowned Louis out, so he just lay still. On the floor, Liam was peering anxiously up at him, but any attempts to move sent the room spinning, so he wisely stayed put.

“Jesus! Is he all right?”

“How hard did he hit his head? Did you hear the whack?”

“Might have knocked some sense in,” Harry croaked, eyes still closed and head still flat against the table, but he couldn’t manage to muster any kind of volume and his voice cracked so that all that came out was a faint, incoherent mumble that was lost in the buzz of frenzied conversation floating
around above his head.

“What happened? He was fine a second ago!”

“Maybe it was all too much. He’s messed around with an awful lot of people’s heads lately, and he had to control Felix’s powers as well; that’s got to take a hell of a lot out of you, –”

“Shit, is he breathing? Oh, it’s okay, he’s alive. I can feel his pulse.” Niall’s voice was almost uncomfortably close to his face as he leaned in close to feel Harry’s laboured breaths on his cheek, fingers wrapped around Harry’s skinny wrist. “He doesn’t look good, though. Whoa!” Snatching his hand away, he exclaimed, “he’s burning up!”

Niall’s fingers felt icy against his skin, and he was dimly aware that for some reason that wasn’t a good sign, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember why –

“Good god, how hot is he? Your body temperature is at least four degrees higher than anybody else’s; if he feels hot to you, he must be practically on fire!” Hands fought to touch Harry’s face and his burning hands, and cries of dismay echoed through the room as they each felt the blazing heat pouring off his skin.

He could feel each and every mind tugging irritatingly at his, refusing to let him rest even now. It hurt so badly; he could feel the string connecting him to each and every one of them, and somehow knew that each mind he had touched would go back to how it had been the moment he severed the contact. It was like he had a handful of balloons and he had to choose which ones to let go, which strings to cut…and he was going to have to cut an awful lot of strings before he could cope with it again. Before it all faded into the background instead of dozens of voices chattering away inside his head, plaguing him relentlessly.

Feverishly, Harry shivered and then began scanning through each mind.

Snip. The woman, Rachel, who had been on the reception desk at the Aristo Nobelle, who he had made fall in love with him and turned into a borderline crazed stalker at the same time, simply by overkill whilst toying with her emotions. He dimly felt a pang of outrage emanating from her as all of a sudden, she sat bolt upright, shaken out of yet another wistful dream involving Harry’s eyes, and realized that the man she’d been lusting helplessly over for weeks and almost lost her job over had in fact been a skinny, dirty teenager with curly hair and big eyes, not her taste at all. He felt her confusion echoing through him as he released her, and then she was lost, and her mind was closed to him.

Sweet, sweet relief. The pain in his head dipped considerably with just the one released mind.

Snip, snip. The man whose clothes they’d stolen, who suddenly found himself wondering why the hell he’d happily let some kid walk into his room and take most of his clothes, something he’d never questioned before. And the woman Harry had forced to kiss him, too; he felt her shriek in disgust at the memory that she had never had cause to regret before.

Snip, snip, snip, snip, snip, snip. A crowd of strangers he’d barely remembered, one of whom suddenly recalled that he’d seen Harry Styles, a missing boy who’d been on the news, walking down the street with four other boys about a week ago. A large majority of the staff working for both an airline company and a ferry company in Dublin, who suddenly discovered that they remembered stalling a large number of ferries for several hours and lending a plane to a curly haired boy and his friends.

He carefully skipped over Deino, Felix and Cheren. He needed their minds intact and still under his
control; he couldn’t release them.

Snip. Eithne, who he had never really established a fully fledged link with in the first place.

Snip, snip, snip, Liam, Zayn, Niall, Louis –

Louis.

Harry wasn’t sure which of them gasped louder as he acknowledged his mistake; he rocketed off the table, whirling around with his hands thrown out as if to make a grab for the older boy who had cringed away from him and was now standing a few feet away with his head in his hands, staring in shock at the floor. His eyes were wide, and even as Harry fearfully extended a hand to him, hoping and praying that Louis wouldn’t be as furious as he was expecting him to be.

It was a hope that came in vain.

Staring at him in complete shock, Louis demanded, “Harry, what the fuck have you been doing?”
Chapter 28

“No…” said Louis slowly. “No, that’s wrong. What the fuck have we been doing?” Horrified, he looked up at Harry, who was stood a few feet away, quivering in shock, his green eyes wide and frightened. “Jesus Christ, Harry, what the hell have you done to my head?”

“Nothing!” Shaking his head frantically, Harry desperately attempted to deny it, expression fearful. He had no idea what else to do other than pretend that it wasn’t happening, still racked with exhaustion-induced shivers that were also being contributed to by the panic rolling over his head now that Louis had so suddenly realized what he’d been doing for the last few blissful weeks. His happy little facade of a relationship was crashing down around his ears, and he had no idea how to salvage it. In fact, he sensed that if a bit of the detritus of their relationship – and possibly their friendship – fell too hard, it might crush him.

“Bullshit.” He’d never seen Louis so angry; his blue eyes were stones, and the rest of his expression was almost as hard. “Don’t even try to fob me off with excuses, Harry. You think I don’t know what you’ve been doing? What did I tell you all those weeks ago, Harry? Months, maybe! I told you that my mind is the one sanctuary I have, and you violated that!” Disgustedly, Louis shook his head.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What’s going on?” Niall demanded, not having the sense to retreat and leave them to it, like Liam wisely had, already shuffling out of the room on his hands and knees to get out of the way so that they could argue it out in peace. “What did he do?”

“He’s been dragging me onto the roof and snogging me every night!” Louis hissed, “and then wiping it all out of my memory so I wouldn’t remember. What kind of creep does that, huh? What kind of creep?” Furiously, he turned on Harry, even though secretly he wasn’t sure whether he might be more upset that he’d been lusting after Harry for so long and had lost all the memories without ever knowing it had happened. Harry didn’t have the right to take that away from him! The fact that he’d tried outraged Louis more than anything else, and he was revolted.

Tearing up, his eyes growing wetter and more pitiful by the second, Harry staggered a few steps forwards and cried with a voice that shook like someone was rattling him around, “It wasn’t like that, Louis! I didn’t do it to be pervy or anything!”

“Yeah? Well, that’s not what it looks like. You sneak me up on top of the garage every other night and get off with me, and then you reach inside my head and scoop all the memories out, or paint over them with something else, and then you act like it never happened!” Louis’ eyes narrowed. “In fact, you’ve done it other times, too. Everywhere. And I don’t even properly know the full extent of what we’ve done because it still hurts to think about it and I’m fucking starving —” Groaning, Louis bent almost double and wrapped his arms around his stomach. “I’ve been craving chocolate cake constantly for weeks, and I didn’t even know why. But it’s you, isn’t it? More interfering in my head!”

“Please.” Harry had given up on all attempts at either dignity or reasoning with Louis; he stumbled towards him with his arms outstretched, like he was going for a hug, and Louis quickly sidestepped in disgust. “Please, Louis. Don’t be like this. At least let me explain!”

“No. I don’t want to hear your voice ever again. Not now I’ve heard it like that!”

“Like what?” whispered Harry. The first tear trickled down his face and plopped onto the floor, where it shone like a splinter of broken glass. Feeling horribly guilty, Louis hurriedly tore his gaze
away from it, as if it would vanish if he didn’t look at it.

“Like…” He waved his hands inadequately. “Saying my name. Panting my name while you’re making me kiss you, and making me touch you, and while you’re touching me back, and —” Cutting himself off, he shook his head.

“You make it sound so wrong!”

“It is wrong! We’re supposed to be mates, Harry! Practically brothers, after all we’ve been through. And instead of explaining to me how you felt, you thought it would be better to skulk around and force it all out of me? I don’t understand, Harry; if you felt that way, why couldn’t you just tell me? Why did you not give me an opportunity to talk to you about this?”

Zayn’s hand landed on Niall’s shoulder, and he gave a little squeak, flinching visibly. Making a gesture to indicate that the Irish boy should give the other two some privacy, he tugged carefully on the blond’s shirt, and after a moment of reluctance, Niall tore his wide bluish green eyes away from the sight of his two friends standing in the middle of the room, one glaring, one with very wet eyes, and tactfully, they slid out, leaving Harry and Louis alone.

Usually, Harry would have been making good use of their alone time, but now? He wanted them to come back again, so he didn’t have to be alone with Louis’ anger and the fury that burned in his blue eyes. They were sharp and hard and cool, and he felt them burrowing into his skin like someone was injecting diamonds into him. It made him feel uncomfortable, miserable, but most of all, horribly guilty. Not to mention the twisting in his stomach which was making him feel decidedly sick.

“We need to talk.”

“I know that.”

“It was a bloody stupid thing that you did, Harry.”

“I know that, too!” Taking a deep breath, Harry buried his face in his hands, but he didn’t quite dare to turn away — according to the venomous expression on Louis’ face, despite his calm tone, he was apparently contemplating murder, and Harry at least wanted a change to explain before he got his face rearranged. “I know all of that,” he said miserably, speaking through his fingers so he didn’t have to look at stony-faced Louis. “I just…didn’t let myself think about any of it.”

“Well you should have!” exploded Louis furiously. “It’s not that I object to you in general, Harry, because I don’t! I’m gay anyway, and sure, we’re close. Something might well have been able to happen between us, if only you’d asked!”

Might. Huh. That was a stupid thing to say. He knew full well that he’d been ridiculously attracted to Harry for weeks; maybe even months. It hurt sometimes, with the effort of not touching him. In fact, he found himself memorizing silly little things about the boy, such as the way the skin creased around his eyes when he laughed, and when he was concentrating his forehead puckered and several loose brown curls dropped over his forehead just so, and he absently flicked them out of his eyes. Sometimes he just wanted to pin him against the wall and kiss him very hard, and not let him go until both of their lips were bruised and they were both panting for breath. He dreamt about it some nights — often, he would wake up sweating, damp and uncomfortable, from a dream far more explicit than that. The thought that he’d had some of that and that Harry had tried to take it all from him, snatching away memories that he would have cherished forever…even now, they were distorted and he struggled to think of them without suffering from a blinding headache that felt like his skull was splitting open. It hurt to think that Harry had removed them from him without a moment’s hesitation — not to mention the way his ears were burning at the thought of how he had cried out, raking
lustfully at Harry’s skin, nipping at his neck, twisting frantic fingers into his curls. He had been Harry’s plaything, cloaked by the night with no one to hear his gasps, and Harry had been his. Shame coloured his cheeks; he couldn’t remember the specifics, but the sensation of his lips on Harry’s hot skin was clear enough. It scorched into his mind and left him flaming with embarrassment.

“I tried to ask! But you didn’t understand. And I tried to start over, but I was too impatient; I just wanted to touch you, but I’d have had to explain first – and I could never find the words. I was always going to explain to you eventually…I just didn’t know what to say! So I thought I’d just make the most of spending time with you, and kind of got to grips with the whole thing, then maybe it’d be easier. I love you, Louis.” His expression was earnest, and Louis could feel himself weakening, losing himself in the intricate mossy swirls of those incredible eyes. He gripped the table, which he’d taken refuge behind, with both hands, his tanned knuckles turning white. Only a few days outside and he’d already picked up a lovely golden-brown tan; he tanned so easily. It was great. Harry was pale and perfect, like a snowflake, and he was staring pleadingly at Louis, who was quickly forgetting his anger. It was ebbing away more quickly, the longer he spent staring at Harry.

But anger was hot, and snowflakes have a tendency to melt.

“That’s not good enough! That isn’t an excuse! You used me, Harry!”

Harry’s mouth fell open in shock; the conversation wasn’t going the way he had intended, the way he had hoped…the way he had always envisioned it in his mind. “I was scared! I didn’t know what to do!” His lower lip was trembling.

“You forced me into something without my consent. That’s practically rape, and I think you’ll find you can get arrested for that.”

“What?” Harry couldn’t help it; he let out a stunned laugh at that. “You can’t be serious. You’re going to have me arrested now, are you? What then? Experimented on? Dissected? Grow up, Louis. It was the odd kiss in the darkness, not non-consenting gay sex.”

“Yeah, well it was a kiss that I didn’t choose to have, and that you made me forget about afterwards because you knew it wasn’t what I wanted! Come on, don’t even pretend that you found some other reason for erasing my memories! You knew that I hadn’t consented to it, you knew I would never have let you skulk off and pretend it didn’t happen, so you forced me.” He rubbed his eyes wearily.

“I don’t know if I can forgive you for this, Harry.”

The silence stretched between them like an elastic band, straining as far as it would go, ready to break. Harry kept his eyes firmly trained onto Louis’ face, refusing to drop his gaze. He wasn’t entirely sure why he was staring quite so fiercely, but he had a strange sort of idea that he shouldn’t stop, like his lingering look was the only thing keeping the older boy from storming out. Breathing thinly through his mouth, Louis’ expression was stormy, his forehead furrowed, lips pressed together, and his arms hung loosely by his sides, fingers twitching oddly. Nervous, Harry waited and resisted the urge to bite his lip. If he did, he might bite down hard enough to draw blood, and he didn’t really feel like having a split lip to contend with on top of everything else.

“Is this it, then?” he asked tersely. “You’re…breaking up. With me. Our friendship, I mean!” he hastily clarified.

“I don’t know. I’m confused. And I’m angry and I don’t think I can deal with this right now.”

“It can’t wait, Louis. I won’t wait. I need you to tell me what you want me to do, because I’m in love with you, and if you can’t deal with that then maybe I’m better off on my own.” The words were
hollow; he didn’t actually mean them. His intention was to shame Louis into acting. But really, he ought to have known by now that Louis liked to defy his expectations.

“Go on, then.”

Shock had him choking; gasping for breath and eyes watering as he stared in absolute horror at Louis, blinking like a frightened child at the cold, emotionless words. “What?” he forced out past the icicles that had formed in the back of his throat like the frozen bars of a prison cell.

“Go. If you think you’re better off alone, then maybe you should leave. I don’t think I can ever look at you in the same way, Harry; you’ve betrayed me, and…” Louis swallowed and licked his lips. “I don’t know if I can trust you ever again. Not now I know what you’ve done, and what you could do again. Every time I look at you, I think about what we did…”

“But Louis…”

He had fallen apart the second Louis had spoken that first syllable, but he was still grabbing desperately for the pieces of himself that were rapidly detaching and plinking to the floor like shards of glass. Shudders rippled through him, starting somewhere around his shoulders and pulsing through his entire body right down to his toes. Something inside him had broken and he felt like he was struggling to breathe, as though his lungs had filled with water and he was drowning from the inside out. But the worst part of all was seeing Louis stand there, looking at him as if he was a stranger who he had just watched commit and awful crime – as if he didn’t even know him, but was completely disgusted by him anyway. The words caught in his throat and he locked them away – better to have at least his dignity to take with him when he left. Because he would leave now; he would have done anything Louis asked, and this was no exception. If Louis wanted it, Harry would give it to him, even if it killed him to do it…which it might. His face was wet, and it only added to the sensation that he was drowning.

Stomach churning, he dimly wondered if he was going to be sick. A part of him made the conscious decision to aim away from Louis if he did happen to throw up; Louis was disgusted enough with him as it was, without suffering the indignity of Harry vomiting on his shoes.

There was one question bubbling inside him, reverberating through his whole being, causing him to ache all over like he had the flu; could he leave? Could he actually turn around and walk away, and leave Louis standing there glaring after him? Could he face the thought of never seeing Louis again, let alone the reality? Was he strong enough for that, or would the mere effort of leaving have him curled up on the floor screaming until he ripped his internal organs to shreds with nothing but the force of his agonized howls? Lips pressing together, he held back a whimper, just in case it became a scream.

Fresh tears fell, and he despised each and every one of them for being another little trophy of his own weakness, his own pathetic lack of restraint. The contempt on Louis’ face wasn’t lessened by his tears; he probably loathed Harry for being so wretched, so pitifully weak that he couldn’t even hold back his upset for something which he himself had done. Knowing that he’d brought it all upon himself by no means made Harry feel any better, nor did he want it to. It wasn’t as if he deserved to feel good about himself any more, after this betrayal, this stupid display of cowardice, his lack of restraint. And now Louis hated him.

His love slowly bled out of him with every disgusted scowl Louis threw his way, and as the older boy began pacing up and down the kitchen with his hands clasped behind his back, Harry quivered with cries that remained muted; he refused to let them be heard. To make up for his weakness before, he would be strong now. Louis hated him enough – he didn’t think he could bear to be any more despised.
“We slept together. I slept in your bed. What were you thinking through all of that, Harry? Huh? Were you thinking of all the things you could do to me, that you could make me do to you? Did you think, ‘hey, this is a good opportunity for a’ –” he cut off just before he could spit out the final vicious word, apparently unable to force it out even though he was as angry as he’d ever been. It made Harry want to moan in misery at the very thought that even now, Louis couldn’t manage to be that cruel. It hurt almost as much as the word itself might have done.

Louis began circling him, prowling slowly around him like an angry cat, his blue eyes narrowed sharply as he walked around Harry’s shaking body and looking him up and down, as if he could judge the severity of their previous activities just by looking at him.

“Did you think it was funny? Make Lou kiss you because he’s gay, he won’t mind – and then leave him all fuzzy so he knows that you did stuff but can’t properly remember how much? I guess it must have been hilarious to you, right?”

_I love you_, thought Harry, but he didn’t dare to say it out loud, or to project it into Louis’ head. That would only make matters so much worse.

“I don’t know what makes me angrier – that you thought it was okay or that you thought you could just make me forget! What the hell is wrong with you, Harry? You just threw our friendship aside like it was nothing so that you could make out with me! What kind of person does that?”

He couldn’t explain – couldn’t tell him that he hadn’t forced him to kiss him, or touch him, that everything but the memory wiping had been entirely of Louis’ own volition. The words wouldn’t come, and he was scared that it would only make Louis angrier. Truly, Harry didn’t know what to say. The logical course of action (and, hatefully, the first course of action that came to mind) was for him to erase this, too, and then go straight to Louis and explain what had been going on, and maybe then he wouldn’t hate him quite so much. But he was still shaking all over with exhaustion, barely able to move, let alone start controlling someone’s brain, especially because he would have to do something to Zayn, Niall and Liam too, to stop them from ever telling Louis what had happened. He couldn’t modify Eithne’s memories, so there would always be the risk that she would snitch on him, and make Louis ten times more furious than he already was. If he lied again and was found out, he thought Louis would be so angry that he might quite literally attack him. So all he could do was useless stand there, feeling everything drain out of him, digging his fingernails into his palm with the force of not bursting out with every panicked thought that sprang to mind—_IloveyouI'msorryI'msorryfuckIloveyoufuckfuckIloveyouI'msorryIloveyoufuck._

Louis raged at him for what felt like an eternity, bringing up things which Harry would rather forget. Secrets that Harry had whispered into his ear in the dead of night, when they’d been alone, just talking about nothing because it eased the loneliness, the fear, the anxiety. They’d been locked in a darkened room together for close to a week, and then been sharing a room whilst on the run for months after that. The things that Harry had told Louis while the rest of the world slept should not have been repeated to anyone, and truly, Louis told no one but Harry himself, but Harry didn’t really want to hear any of it again. It terrified him how much he trusted Louis, and it hurt him to hear his darkest secrets being parroted back at him. It hurt him even more to see that Louis showed no signs of guilt that he was effectively betraying Harry by bringing them all to light.

Voice raised, Louis started shouting, and Harry blinked at him and felt his face become a salty waterfall as he cried out what felt like every drop of moisture in his body. The argument carried on for at least forty minutes; not that it was exactly an argument, just Louis, yelling at Harry as if he was afraid to stop, hurling insults, accusations and god knows what else at the younger boy, while Harry silently stood there and took it.
When his tirade came to an end, and all he could do was stand there inhaling and exhaling, Harry gave him a very long, hurt stare, as if he was half expecting Louis to backtrack and renounce every word he’d said. Of course, Louis had no intention of doing anything of the sort, and fiercely met his gaze, waiting for Harry to look away.

Heaving a sigh which he instantly regretted, Harry turned around and headed for the kitchen door; it felt like he floated across the room on a cloud of numbness, bitter confusion, and Louis’ resentment. He couldn’t feel his feet – or many other parts of his body, other than his pink cheeks which burned with humiliation and rejection in equal measure, his sore eyes which were rapidly becoming pink and puffy, and his aching chest, which felt like it was being stabbed squarely in the centre with every intake of breath he took. His long fingers lingered on the door-handle and he turned it almost dreamily, drifting into the dimly lit corridor. Evening was falling and nobody had turned the lights on, so they were slowly heading towards darkness and his eyes struggled to adjust to it. Gaze firmly fixed on the front door, he reached it and looked back, desperately pleading to all the gods in all the heavens that had existed, or would ever exist, that Louis would be standing at the other end of the corridor, frozen, watching him leave. That at the last possible second he would sprint down the corridor, fly at Harry, pin him against the front door before he could walk out through it and kiss him hard, oozing forgiveness in every tiny movement of his soft lips on Harry’s.

But happy endings were for fairytales, and he wasn’t the handsome prince. Not even the beautiful princess. He was the villain; the witch who warped people’s minds and whom nobody liked, and who was banished from the kingdom without a second thought. And no Louis was stood sadly watching him in the kitchen doorway.

For a moment, Harry did lose control of himself a little bit, by letting out a small whimper through his teeth like a puppy in pain, which he inwardly berated himself for afterwards in case Louis had heard it, in case Louis despised him even more for being so stupidly pathetic. He knew that if their positions had been reversed, he would have hated Louis for displaying such idiotic vulnerability – for crying.

No, he wouldn’t. He could never hate Louis.

It seemed, however, that Louis was perfectly capable of hating him.

Straightening, his shoulders stiff, Harry once again pressed his lips together in a ruler-straight, unfaltering line. He closed his eyes and took several calming breaths to steady himself in preparation for leaving. Then, he summoned every tiny little bit of strength he had, opened the door and walked out without so much as a glance back, leaving Louis behind him in the knowledge that if it was what Louis wanted, then there was nothing he wouldn’t do to ensure that Louis would get it. Even if he tore himself apart in the process.
Chapter 29

Lying flat on his back on the kitchen table, Louis stared gloomily up at the ceiling, flicking force field after force field up at the lightbulb on the ceiling, making it swing wildly back and forth every time he hit it, which was nine times out of ten. He knew that if he wasn’t careful then it could smash and shower him with burning hot glass and bits of lightbulb filament, but he was too grumpy, angry and confused to care much about that.

He knew he’d kind of overreacted – it didn’t take a genius to work it out. After all, if Harry had developed a somewhat misguided crush on him, it wasn’t hard to see why. They were close, Louis was an older figure for him to look up to. And it wasn’t as if Harry wasn’t attractive, wasn’t as if Louis hadn’t encouraged him, not that he was keen to admit it. He liked Harry a hell of a lot – more than he’d ever realized he would. The other boys were like brothers to him, but Harry was something separate from that…secretly, he always thought of them as ‘Harry and the boys’ rather than just ‘the boys’ in general. In fact, he’d dreamt about being that close to Harry, as close as it turned out that they had been, maybe even closer than that, and it made him feel irritated that Harry had been… almost scared of him. Afraid to admit how he felt, anyway. Still, Louis was beginning to realize that maybe it was justified; he hadn’t exactly reacted particularly well to it.

He could have punched himself. It took a lot of courage to admit to yourself that you had feelings for someone of the same gender; he knew that better than anyone. Ten times more courage than that to admit it to someone else, especially the person in question. And what had he done? He’d been vicious, unkind, hadn’t even attempted to see things from Harry’s point of view. Empathy had been the last thing on his mind. When Louis had come out, his whole family had been lovely to him, and his friends had been ridiculously supportive, and basically as coming out went, it was one of the easiest experiences he’d ever heard of anyone having. In fact, the best thing about it had probably been that they’d gotten over it so quickly – a hug, a pat on the back, a promise that he was still the same Lou to them, and then that was it; everything went back to how it had been.

But Harry? Louis had pushed him away. He had called him names and said he was disgusting and done all of the things that, if his parents had done to him, would have destroyed him. Louis didn’t think he’d ever hated anyone more in that moment than he hated himself.

Seeing as the yells had ceased, Zayn poked his head around the doorframe and anxiously scanned the room. If he was surprised to see Louis lying flat on his back on the table hurling balls of glimmering violet energy at the light fittings, he didn’t show it. Sauntering across the room, he pulled up a chair, wincing apologetically as it scraped against the floor, and took a seat. For a few minutes, he watched Louis irritably flicking force field after force field towards the ceiling without commenting, but eventually he licked his lips and cautiously broached the subject of the argument which had just rather loudly taken place.

“Where’s Harry?”

Without taking his gaze off the light bulb, Louis sourly launched another glittering orb skywards, listening to the dull thunk as each one collided with it and sent it wildly swinging all over the place. “Out.” THUNK. THUNK. THUNK.

“And when is he coming back?”

Louis shrugged; no easy feat, bearing in mind that he was lying down. “How should I know?” THUNK. THUNK.
“He’s your best friend, Louis.” Zayn’s tone was calm and reasonable, and Louis sensed that the Bradford boy was about to talk him into something – and regardless of how much of a good idea it was, if there was one thing that Louis despised it was being talked into things. He liked to make his own decisions, thank you very much.

“Is he?” THUNK.

“You know he is. Don’t be a prat, Lou. Harry handled the situation badly, but you could have been a bit more reasonable about it. You said some pretty disgusting things to him, you know.”

“Yeah, well, he did some pretty disgusting things to me. I guess we’re even.” THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK-THUNK! In his guilt and annoyance, Louis had sent a few too many bubbles up at once and several of them collided with each other, thudding loudly, then ricocheting off each other and flying off in opposite directions. They dissipated before any damage could be done, but Zayn still flinched anyway – one of them had come within rather uncomfortable proximity of his head.

“You’re a real arse sometimes, you know that?” demanded Zayn angrily.

Rolling his eyes, Louis paused before creating the next field and met his gaze head on. “I had heard the rumour. You’re out of your depth, mate; you won’t shame me into anything. Especially not by being rude. Why don’t you give it up and go and get Liam? He’s so much better at the puppy eyes.” Glueing his eyes back to the ceiling, he flexed his fingers in readiness.

Scowling, Zayn gave him a look. The kind of look which told him that he was decidedly unimpressed by both Louis’ attitude and his unkindness. “Liam passed out on the couch because yours and Harry’s futures were swinging so wildly. I don’t think any of us know quite how his powers can affect him. With so many possibilities, his head’s all over the place, it’s got to be painful. He wasn’t making much sense, actually, but he seemed to be fluctuating between gay porn and a slideshow of your life of misery and loneliness without the love of your life before the sound of you two having a domestic shredded his head up and he fainted. Eithne is with him now and Niall’s keeping a safe distance, because he’s burning up, but he’s not really in a fit state to lecture you, if you know what I mean.” He folded his arms.

At the words ‘gay porn’ Louis had turned so pink that he was practically purple. “What – what do you mean, gay porn?” he spluttered, then wished he hadn’t asked.

“You want me to spell it out? Because he was pretty graphic, I don’t think he can help himself sometimes. He walks in on you and Harry’s little gay love nest in a room somewhere, he didn’t seem to be paying much attention to the decor, and now he’s pretty much scarred for life.”

“Are you sure that’s the future and not the past that he’s seeing?” snapped Louis. “Harry and I’s ‘gay love nests’ are completely in the past thank you very much, and completely involuntary on my part, I think you’ll find.”

“Completely?”

“Completely,” Louis said through gritted teeth.

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“Completely,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

Deino raised a finely plucked eyebrow, tucking a strand of silky black hair behind her ear and leaning heavily on her left leg, almost seeming to mock him with her gaze alone. He wanted to slap
that stupid look off her unattractive (to him, anyway) face. But he forced composure onto his face as she turned to Cheren and twittered irritatingly, “He says he’s through with his little chums, boys; that’s what he says. He’s come over to…the dark side.” How was her voice so silky and seductive, when it was so whiny and pathetic? “He says he’s completely sure.”

“Someone’s had a change of heart. Only yesterday, you were all ‘we probably ought to leave’ and getting all defensive over your boyfriend, and now you’ve come crawling to us and had us order you a taxi to your location, and here you are, coming and practically offering yourself to us as a…what? A slave of some sort?” Cheren snorted. “How naive do you think we are? Do you really expect us to fall for that? You’ve tried to throw us off guard and the moment we start trusting you, your little gang will pop up and attack us. I know how this works. You’re the bait.” He seemed inordinately pleased with himself for coming to this conclusion.

“Yeah, if only that were true,” replied Harry stiffly, trying very hard not to let his voice crack. Okay, so he was falling apart from the inside, but he didn’t need to let the three most rude and obnoxious people he’d ever met know that. Somehow, he didn’t fancy being mocked. “I’m not with my ‘little gang’ any more. I’m not welcome. So take your theory and shove it up your arse, and then tell me; do you want me, or not?”

All three of them looked at him suspiciously, although Deino scrunched up her face so badly that Harry was surprised she didn’t tear several facial muscles, and he was also surprised that none of the other guys in the room were at all creeped out by her odd expression. Clearly, they had told the truth; they were completely smitten with her, as all the other boys had been. As all the people in the room who hadn’t been irrevocably in love with someone else had been.

Harry had worked it out fairly quickly, really. He never looked at her twice because his world was already lit by a candle that blazed brighter than the sun, blinding him so that not only could he never look at anyone else, but he also struggled to look at Louis himself. He couldn’t fall in love with someone else when his head was already filled with longing and adoration for a man who apparently now hated him. It hurt, but it felt good to know that although his love for Louis had been shunned and was clearly unwanted, it was good for something. It gave him immunity now, and it had given him immunity before, helping him to rescue Louis and everyone else without being even slightly distracted. With it, he had been able to make sure that nothing happened to Louis, and hopefully could keep doing so if he nudged them away from his friends every time their paths threatened to coincide. With Liam helping the others to steer clear, and Harry making sure that they would never come within half a mile of each other, he was confident that his ridiculous, rejected, apparently useless love for Louis was good for one thing, at least: keeping Louis safe. That was all he asked of it, the only favour he needed. And no matter how much it hurt, or how many times his heart was punched to smithereens, as long as Louis was always safe, he wouldn’t complain.

Cheren, who was quite clearly the self-appointed leader of the group, didn’t look at all certain. His dark eyes narrowed and he began walking slowly up and down the room with a contemplative look on his face. The other two watched him almost obsessively, as if they would help him if they stared at him for a while. It was almost pitiful how much they depended on him.

Then again, Harry thought, was he in any position to judge? Look at how dependent he was on Louis.

It hurt to think about that; would he ever see Louis again? If he did, how much would Louis hate him? Would the other boys be disgusted as well – would they turn up their noses and turn their backs and walk away from the freak who forced his best friend to kiss him in the dead of night, and wiped his memory clean afterwards like a blackboard that he’d scribbled on in chalk?
He didn’t think Niall would hate him; Niall was incapable of hating anyone. He was a bundle of fluffy stuff and laughter and smiles and carelessness, one of those rare people who truly possessed the amazing quality of not giving a damn about anything. If it had come to a vote over whether he should stay or go, Harry was reasonably certain that Niall would have voted for him to stay. And then hugged him afterwards.

Liam wouldn’t hate him either. He was too reasonable, and too caring to turn his back on anyone, no matter what they’d done. Besides, Liam knew how much he loved Louis; he’d seen them together in the future, after all. Whether or not that would happen now was debatable, but Liam had seen it, and he hadn’t seemed disgusted – surprised, yes, and maybe a little embarrassed to have seen something quite so intimate, but he hadn’t found it weird or creepy like Louis had. Harry would have had Liam on his side, too.

He wasn’t completely sure about Zayn. For the sake of both friendship and loyalty, he didn’t think Zayn would abandon him either, but that loyalty belonged to Louis as well, and for that reason Harry wasn’t sure whether Zayn might be cool towards him, at least, if not blatantly disapproving. Unfaltering loyalty was one of Zayn’s best – and worst – qualities. As for Eithne, she would side with Zayn; he was the only one who she knew well enough to make a proper judgement, so she would most likely decide that his opinions were the right ones. Other than that, she might be a little prejudiced against Harry because of her mistrust of someone who could twist people’s perceptions and tamper in their thoughts, so there was a possibility that she would take Louis’ side.

Honestly, Louis was the only one he really cared about, and the only one he was completely sure of. Louis hated him. And that had a lump in his throat and tears in his eyes and he fiddled with the hem of his black hoodie and crushed the material in his fist to release some of the tension building inside of him.

Stepping forwards, Felix looked him up and down, attempting to seem imposing like his brother. The attempt fell rather flat, but he seemed satisfied with himself as he raised his eyebrows so high that they almost disappeared into his hair, hands shoved into his pockets, giving Harry a smug kind of look. Cheren ignored his brother and stepped forwards even further, in front of him, putting the disgruntled boy firmly in his place. The meaning couldn’t have been clearer: Cheren was in charge.

“How do we know we can trust you? We can’t control you. You’re the one who could control us! If you think we’re going to trust you, then you must think we’re incredibly stupid.”

“Oh, trust me,” Harry said dryly, “I do.” After a couple of outrage-filled seconds, he continued (thoroughly enjoying their horrified expressions) “but I also think that you need me, and therefore, we’re going to make a deal. Am I right, or am I right?”

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Liam’s head was all over the place, although obviously not in the literal sense, as his head was in one piece and not in bits on the floor. Basically, he was struggling to see straight through the double vision caused by the things he was seeing clumsily overlaid over reality, and he still wasn’t sure whether his breakfast was going to be making some sort of reappearance before all too long.

Ever since Harry’s disappearance the night before, and since Zayn’s attempt to reason with Louis hadn’t gone quite as well as anyone had hoped, Liam’s powers had been spiralling out of control. He’d been alternating between hospital death-bed scenes to romantic getaways in the moonlight, desperate apologies, Louis sobbing over a bloodstained head of limp, straggly curls that bore an uncomfortably uncanny resemblance to Harry, and a fat man with silver-flecked scrubbing brush bristles dotted unevenly on his head that must have been his hair – oh, and it had all been interspersed with the odd flash of Zayn and Eithne’s wedding and an extremely fit girl with wildly
curly hair who was walking – well, dancing, to be precise – on the surface of a river, while he watched in awe. (Danielle, future girlfriend, fiancé, wife – wedding; 30th October 2023, three kids; Harvey, Ella and Destiny, four dogs, used to work in IT sales, will be unemployed from the day I meet her). He was having a few problems finding out exactly how they would meet, despite remembering their proposal, what he got her for her thirtieth birthday and that her favourite colour was aquamarine, but he didn’t mind that so much – it was nice to have some surprises in store, at least.

The point was that he was struggling to get anything precise; Harry’s future, and therefore all of theirs, was a complicated and confusing thing. It was caught in the balance, in utter turmoil; from what he could tell, Harry was in the process of making a decision that would strongly impact all of them, and Liam got the kind of uneasy, foreboding feeling that however it turned out, none of them were particularly going to like it. Especially Harry himself.

Liam felt decidedly sick; his stomach gave another nasty lurch, like he’d been turned upside down. If he managed to hang on to anything he’d eaten within the last twenty-four hours, it would be an absolute miracle. Clinging to the arm of the sofa, he gasped for breath, feeling sweat break out on his forehead, and wiped it away with the back of his hand, struggling to focus. He was literally squinting into thin air, trying to get a clear picture, even though what he could see was fuzzy and imprecise. At the moment, the kind of images he was getting was about as reliable as the weather forecast – as in, most likely completely wrong. The decision was hanging in the balance, and so was he – stuck in limbo, waiting for something definite that would send the future clear again, like a flawless, glassy, untouched pond that was perfectly easy to read and that he could examine at leisure and absorb all of the details without feeling an overwhelming urge to throw up. Liam’s patience was waning, but there was little he could do about it other than grimly wait for the confusion to pass.

And all of a sudden, just like that, something clicked. The decision was made. And Liam was no longer grappling with nausea; he was feeling sick with dread instead.

Groaning, he hauled himself off the sofa, causing Niall, who’d been worriedly watching from the other side of the room, to jump up in alarm and hurry towards him, offering him a supportive arm. Gratefully, Liam grabbed Niall’s bicep in a painful death-grip and then began staggering towards the door, using the blond boy as a makeshift crutch. Shocked, Niall began attempting to interrogate him, trying to fight through the haze of dread and confusion into the mess that was Liam’s world.

“Li, are you all right? Come on, you should probably sit down, you don’t look good –”

“Louis.” Moaning, Liam raked a shaking hand through his hair and pushed it off his sweaty forehead. “I need to speak…to Louis.”

“L-Louis – right – OI, LOUIS!” Niall roared, making Liam wince. “Oh, God – sorry! Sorry! LOUIS, GET IN HERE RIGHT NOW, WE’VE GOT A PROBLEM – shit, sorry, Liam,” he wailed, “I’m awful at this, I’m so sorry –”

Still, his ridiculously loud yell at least served the purpose of getting everyone’s attention; when Louis came crashing through the living room doorway, Zayn and Eithne were hot on his heels, and everyone pretended not to notice that Zayn’s usually meticulously styled hair was destroyed, after having slender fingers twisting in it, and Eithne’s lipstick was smudged right across her pale left cheek. Grabbing Liam by the shoulders, Louis met his blank, unfocused gaze head on, a little fearful of the bleary-eyed, sweaty, disoriented state of his friend, who looked somewhat deranged with a zoned out expression on his face and panic in his otherwise vacant eyes.

“What’s going on, Liam?” he demanded urgently. “What did you see?”
Brown eyes flickering as he watched something that nobody else could see, Liam gave a little whimpering cry. “No, no, don’t do that, don’t do that, Harry, don’t do that—”

The sound of Harry’s name had a fist wrapping around Louis’ heart and squeezing it like a tomato, crushing and constricting so that he could almost feel the life oozing out of him in horror, but he outwardly forced an aura of calmness over himself, even though his hands started shaking where they held Liam’s broad shoulders. “Liam, come on, Liam, Liam, come on, focus, okay? I need you to focus on me. Look at me, Liam, look at me.” His tone sharpened as he stared fiercely into the depths of Liam’s confused caramel and chocolate eyes. “Liam. Tell me what you can see. Just concentrate, and then tell me.”

A shuddering breath forced its way through Liam’s teeth as he struggled to drag himself out of the confusion inside his head and back into the real world. “He’s…striking up some sort of deal with… them. He’ll work with them; do what they say…manipulate people’s minds whenever they tell him to. And it’ll hurt him…God, it’ll hurt him.”

Horrified, Louis stared at him in utter shock, already instinctively beginning to deny it; his head was shaking back and forth in refusal. He couldn’t understand, couldn’t believe that Harry would betray them in that way. His Harry, walk out of his unforgiving arms and straight into the arms of the enemy? He refused to believe it. “No. No, you’re wrong. Harry wouldn’t do that, Harry would never do that! Not to us; he could never betray us, he couldn’t just turn around and stab us in the back! Look again, Liam,” he demanded, “do it now, and then tell me that you’re making this up, because our Harry wouldn’t do that. Not my Harry.”

“That’s what I can see,” Liam said stubbornly, “the only thing I can see, so that is definitely going to happen. I told you some things are fixed, and this is one of them. Harry’s going to walk straight up to those people and ask to join them, and then he’s going to do everything they tell him to and never look back, because he thinks that’s the best way to protect us. He thinks if he can get them on his side, or make them think that he’s on theirs, he can keep them away.” He licked his lips. “And then they’re going to try and make him do too much. You saw how he was yesterday – he’ll be worse than that, and they’ll never stop, because they don’t care. They’ll keep pushing him and pushing him until he snaps.”

Louis shoved him away, unable to cope with even the thought of it – Harry had fled because he thought Louis hated him, and even now he was throwing his life away to protect him, to protect them all. It made his whole chest radiate with pain to even think of it, and he closed his eyes so he didn’t have to see them all staring accusingly at him…so he didn’t have to acknowledge that he deserved every disappointed look that they were giving him.

Harry was gone, and it was his fault.

He’d never even had the chance to say the words that he’d been fighting to keep inside for weeks, the words that Harry had desperately said to him and that he’d rejected in anger, thrown back in Harry’s face like they were less than nothing. The words that he’d barely even acknowledged, much less paid attention to. They’d punched an enormous hole right through him and he’d forced himself not to listen because he was so betrayed, so angry, so helpless, and so inadequate too, because maybe Harry had been dishonest, maybe he had sneaked around and kept things from him and gone entirely the wrong way about everything, but at least he’d had the courage to act in some way, even if it perhaps hadn’t been ideal. Louis had just stayed silent, too afraid to even try in case he screwed up.

Now he had screwed up in the worst way possible and driven away the most beautiful man he’d ever met – and despite all of the accusations, the shouting, the hatred that Louis had plastered onto his face in defence because he was so afraid of how he felt…despite all of that, Harry was still hiding on
the sidelines, quietly struggling to keep him safe even at risk to himself. Even after everything Louis had done.

Louis was in love with him, and he’d been too naive, too cowardly, too pathetic to see it. It was as if a cloud had been lifted from his vision and now he could see better than ever that Harry was the most incredible person he’d ever met.

“They’ll never break him,” he said softly. His eyes were open, but they were glued to the floor, their icy blue gaze practically burning holes into the carpet as he stared at the ground without blinking.

“They’ll never even get close. They’ll have to break me first – and I think they’ll find that I’m not at all easy to break.”

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“So we’re agreed, then? That you now answer to us, all of us, and only us.” Cheren’s dark eyes roved over his face, clearly enjoying the new hold he would soon have over Harry. There was a kind of greed in his expression, lust for power, and some other kind of malevolence in his black irises that Harry could only rather dramatically describe as evil. Idly, he wondered whether the boy’s eyes were the same colour as his heart. Holding out his hand for Harry to shake, Cheren raised his eyebrows challengingly. “Do we have a deal?”

Harry stared at the boy’s long, bony hand for a few seconds, feeling his vision blur and his throat begin to ache as he thought of a hand that he would far rather be holding – lithe, tanned, smaller than his own, almost delicate in comparison and pleasantly warm. A hand that he wished he could take and get a firm grip on and hold onto for the rest of his life. And as those unpleasant eyes burned into him, he wondered if he could actually stand to do this; to spend the foreseeable future with three people he despised and never see anyone he loved or even cared about ever again, obeying their commands and basically being their slave, and all to ensure the safety and wellbeing of a man who hated him.

But it wasn’t just Louis; it was his friends, too. And even if it hadn’t been, he knew deep down that he would happily do it ten thousand times over without a second’s regret if he had to. In fact, knowing that what he was doing kept Louis out of the filthy clutches of three of the most foul people he’d ever known, he could carry out their orders with a smile on his face, and if it killed him, he would die happy. They would lay his dead body on some rubbish tip somewhere, and leave it there, and there would still be a smile on his face. Because everything he did, he did for Louis. And he would do it for the rest of his life and be glad.

“Yeah,” Harry said quietly, taking his icy white hand and shaking it briskly. Even next to him, Cheren was astonishingly pale; unnaturally so; beside Harry’s pale skin, he looked practically dead. Meeting his hard stare, Harry told him resolutely, “we have a deal.”
“We have to find him.” Louis wasn’t accepting any form of argument on the subject. They were going to find Harry, and if anyone disagreed with him he was simply going to give them the filthiest look he was capable of, and then ignore them. If that meant that he was going on his own, then so be it – he had no intention of wasting time arguing about it.

Luckily, nobody else seemed at all keen to argue with him, which meant that either he looked as crazed and desperate as he felt, or they were all as worried about Harry as he was. He suspected that it was a combination of the two. Fingers twitching as he struggled not to start creating force fields simply to dispel some nervous energy, he began striding up and down the room with his head in his hands, miraculously not walking into any of the furniture, and groaning as he tried to come up with some sort of a plan.

“Does anybody know where the hell they’ll be?” he demanded, whirling around to face them all. “That’s the most important thing. We’ll have to find them first.”

“That’ll take time,” Eithne said calmly. One of her hands was clinging to the fabric of Zayn’s coat, but otherwise she was completely reserved, on the outside at least. As a researcher, she knew what she was talking about. She’d been trying to track down supernatural beings for almost a year, and in the end had happened upon them by accident in the supermarket. On the whole, people with what might be described as superpowers usually weren’t all that keen to be found, and they did a far better job of hiding themselves than most people did. “Time, research, and an awful lot of digging, especially if Harry’s wiping the minds of everyone they meet.”

“We don’t have time!” Louis snapped, and she flinched, cringing into Zayn, who frowned at Louis and wrapped an arm around her waist. “They could be doing anything right now, and we wouldn’t have a clue! We have to find him now.”

For the first time, Niall actually found himself taking charge of the situation. Liam was too dizzy and disorientated to be particularly helpful, Zayn was too busy cuddling Eithne, and Louis was too distraught. And Eithne’s voice was too soft for her to be a natural leader. Swallowing, Niall realized that as the only one with a clear head, it was up to him to take charge, and take charge he did – although it scared the hell out of him to do it.

Placing a hand on Louis’ shoulder, he told him, “That’s impossible, and you know it. Stop yelling at everyone and calm down, this isn’t going to help anyone.”

Wretchedly, Louis snatched away from him and demanded, “What do we do, then, genius? Because I told that boy I hated him, and I love him, and I am not leaving him to die, or to think that I hate him, because I don’t, alright? I love him more than I’ve ever loved anything in my whole life, and I was too blind to see it! And now that I’ve woken up, I know he isn’t putting words into my mouth, he never was – erasing was all he ever did, and I said the most disgusting things to him…I need to apologise, and I’ll never stop, and we need to find him.”

“I know we do,” answered Niall, “and that’s why we need a plan rather than to run around screaming at each other, agreed? And I think I might just have one.”

At his instruction, they all sat down on the sofa while he strode up and down the room, frowning thoughtfully. Louis automatically put a supportive arm around Liam’s shoulders, just for something to do while they watched the blond boy stride up and down the living room with his hands clasped behind his back, looking contemplative. It was an expression which looked odd on his usually
carefree face. Eventually, he turned to face them, looking determined.

“The way I see it, there’s one thing that we know about them – they’re determined to corner and capture us for some reason. And that’s something we can use against them.” Pleased with himself, Niall scanned them all and then said, “I think we should set a trap. One that they’ll be completely unable to resist, no matter how suspicious it is.”

“That would be great,” said Zayn bitterly, “but they’re not stupid, Niall. Not that stupid, anyway. I don’t think that’s even possible.” They had learnt rather quickly that optimism was somewhat of an alien concept to Zayn, especially when he was tired, hungry, or some combination thereof – which right now, he was. “It’ll never work; whatever we do, they’re never going to fall for it.”

Looking almost insulted, Niall reminded him, “You don’t even know what my plan is yet! Basically, it’s like this: they want us, maybe even need us for obscure reason. Which means that if they have a chance to find us, they’re going to come running. When you think about it, Harry was our most valuable asset, and they came after us anyway, even with him. He can control people’s minds, for God’s sake, and they were desperate enough to come after him anyway. Now that we haven’t got him on our side, and they have, no matter what his motives, they’re going to be far more confident. The tables have been turned; they can control our minds rather than the other way around, providing that he consents to that. There’s no guarantee that he will, but they don’t know that. They’re going to think they can get us easily. They might be right, but the point is that they’ll be far likelier to think they can win if they have him and we don’t. He’s the ace card. He’s everybody’s not-so-secret weapon.”

Yes, they needed Harry! That was something Louis had always known, and having it pointed out that they all needed Harry, and not just because he was their best friend and because Louis loved him and he’d never said…well, it did strange things to his insides. Twisting them into knots, mostly. They needed Harry, and they would all risk their lives for him – he was not only their best friend, but their main lifeline. It made Louis a little uncomfortable to think that one of their reasons for being so determined to rescue him was that they needed him. “And your point is?”

“My point,” Niall said doggedly, “is that no matter how obvious we are about it, if they find out where we are, they’ll come for us. And even if they don’t bring him with them, they’ll take us somewhere, right? To hold us. And Harry will probably be there with them, so that he can restrain us in some way, or pick our brains for information, or whatever it is that they need him for. Which means that whatever happens, we’re going to find him, right?”

There was a short silence as they all considered that, realizing that Niall was right, and noticing the excited but slightly worrying glint in his eye. It was an unfamiliar look to them; nobody had ever seen Niall look like that before, and yet the meaning behind it was inherently clear: he was plotting something, and it was going to be risky, poorly thought out and probably dangerous – Niall’s plans usually were. Yet already Louis knew that if the idea was even faintly plausible, he would jump at the suggestion even if nobody else would.

“What we need,” continued Niall, “is something completely obvious. Because if there’s the tiniest loophole that the press could use to say that it’s a hoax, they might not come.”

Zayn was looking incredibly wary, his eyes narrowed, lips pursed as if he was already intending to refuse Niall’s plan the moment it had left his lips. With the way Niall was setting himself up, hinting at a scheme that would be incredibly likely to backfire, Louis couldn’t blame him. “So what are you saying?” asked Zayn.

“I’m saying that one of us is going to have to show himself,” responded Niall calmly, steadily meeting his gaze. “One of us is going to have to go out there and give London the most undeniable
and obvious display of supernatural occurrences it’s ever seen. And not get caught by the wrong people.”

They all stared at him in abject horror at the mere implications of what he was suggesting – Liam actually closed his eyes and fell back on the sofa with the subsequent rush of images that came with that idea. However, Louis knew that the same insanity sparkling in Niall’s eyes was infectious; he could feel his own eyes lighting up with it while an enormous smile spread across his face. The boy was a genius. It was the most stupid, risky, reckless, idiotic plan he’d ever heard anyone come up with in his life.

It couldn’t possibly fail.

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“Are you ready, Nialler?”

Shivering a little in the skimpy little wetsuit he was wearing, arms wrapped around himself, Niall nodded tightly, not really in the mood for chatter. Reluctantly, he’d admitted that in order to achieve the full effect of what they were about to do, he would have to be clearly distinguishable as a human being, meaning that rather than wearing the baggy shirt and Chinos that he’d been wearing over the top of the rather embarrassing lycra monstrosity that he was now standing around in, he was wearing a skin-tight suit which showed the outline of everything. Not that he was ashamed of his body, not one bit, but it was kind of embarrassing all the same.

His hair was blowing gently in the wind, ruffling softly with the breeze, and he looked nervous. It was understandable, really, given what he was about to do. Every single one of the boys had patted him on the shoulder every now and then in reassurance, but it was Liam who would slide around the other boys every couple of minutes and whisper in Niall’s ear that it was all going to work; he could see it perfectly. Everything was going to go without a hitch.

That didn’t really stop Niall from worrying about it, though.

“Okay, Zayn, you go and stand beside him,” commanded Louis, and Zayn released Eithne and crossed the alleyway to go and take his place next to Niall. He thumped him on the back to try and make him feel better, and Niall gave a very sickly smile – he was quite literally putting his life in Zayn’s hands. If it all went wrong, he was pretty sure the others would reserve the right to break Zayn’s legs in recompense, but the thought didn’t make him feel much better.

“Don’t drop me, Malik,” he warned, his blue-green eyes stern as they bored into Zayn’s. Zayn swallowed; he didn’t much like the trust that they were all having to put in him in the first place, and Niall pointing out so blatantly that he was entrusting his life to him…well, they’d done it before, but either by accident or in an emergency, when there hadn’t been much time to think about it. Today, Niall had been given plenty of opportunity to think of all the nasty things which could happen to him if things didn’t go according to plan, and he didn’t like them at all.

With a jerky nod, Zayn wiped his clammy hands on his jeans, then stepped back and closed his eyes. It took him a few seconds to regain his composure, but once he had, he was fairly confident that things would go without a hitch. After all, he’d lifted a whole room full of people once! Niall was just one skinny little Irish boy – he could do it easily. With this mindset, he forgot his reservations, and almost before he was aware of thinking of it, Niall was shooting up into the sky like a cork out of a champagne bottle.
The only good thing about the suddenness with which the ground vanished from beneath Niall’s feet, and he was catapulted straight up into the air at a speed which took his breath away, was that he panicked instantly, as any sane person would. This meant that rather than having to consciously think about setting himself on fire, he did it instantly, little tongues of flame erupting all over his body and then enveloping him completely, until he was nothing but a human ember floating in mid-air and wildly kicking his legs, flailing his arms. He’d decided that he didn’t like this plan at all, even though it had been his idea, especially as there was no reassuring force field around him to stop him from being smashed to bits on the pavement if for some reason Zayn dropped him. The reasoning behind that had been that the lilac lights of the bubble might have impaired people’s view of him, and Louis was stood below him ready to put a field around him if he fell – but Niall was distinctly uncomfortable hovering at some ridiculous height a good few metres taller than Big Ben, which he could see on the other side of London and which was currently lower than he was in height. He kept instinctively trying to put his feet down, like he was in a swimming pool, and then stumbling when there was nowhere to place his feet. The effort of not looking down had him gritting his teeth forcefully to stop himself.

Somewhere far below him, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of violet; one of Louis’ fields, which had been their agreed signal if Niall wasn’t being obvious enough. Stomach churning, he carefully spread his arms and legs out as if he’d been caught halfway through a star jump, loathing the way that the wind was whipping the flames around him similarly to how it had played with his hair.

Once he’d decided that maybe, just maybe, he wasn’t in severe danger of plummeting to his death every time he moved, he relaxed slightly, and started focusing on showing distinctly how human-shaped he was. Stretching, looking around – he even tried walking, but his feet kept sinking several feet before finding some kind of invisible purchase, so that with every step he took there was a little drop and his stomach was snatched out of him through his throat, so he gave up on that idea.

He blazed brightly above London, a man set on fire, and wondered what he must look like to all the people below – incredible, probably. Like some kind of impossible miracle. It was dark, meaning that he was painting flames against a jet black backdrop. Only the stars helped him to illuminate the sky, and beside him, they looked like fairy-lights next to the sun. Pathetically insignificant. Niall would have been kind of lying if he’d said he wasn’t kind of enjoying the thought that he was the most beautiful and impressive thing in the sky.

They’d agreed to leave him up there until there was some kind of disturbance below, and that disturbance came in the form of a flock of distant flashes scattered all over London, catching his eye with each one like a shower of silver in the streets below that he couldn’t help but see. Below his feet, although thankfully nowhere near the boys who were keeping him in the air, people were filming, taking photographs, getting concrete proof that there was a boy on fire floating in the sky. Grimly, Niall smiled to himself. Nobody would be able to resist this – every journalist in the city would be after them, people would be trying to seek him out…but most of all, Cheren, Felix, Deino and Harry would come running, and then they would have what they wanted.

Of course, there was the small matter of how on earth they were going to persuade Harry to come with them and escape from all of that, but Niall was sure they’d think of something later. If not, they could always improvise on the day. Besides, Harry wouldn’t be too difficult to persuade; Louis would be good at that.

A particularly vicious gust of wind had Niall flinching, and then he almost tripped over his own feet, struggling to stay upright. He’d never been shy about his language, and his colourful vocabulary burst out of him like a word-rainbow as he swore venomously in a panic. The flames leapt a few inches higher, blurring the edges of his form against the sky, and he valiantly attempted to dampen
them down a little so that he would still be easily distinguishable as a human being.

The distant sound of swearing drifted down to them on the wind, and they’d all seen Niall stumble. Glancing at Louis, Zayn tilted his head to the left, and Louis nodded curtly – with that, Zayn was bringing Niall dropping down from the sky, yelling all the while in protest at the speed – when he was at around the height of the nearest house, Louis snapped a force field around him, and Zayn made the speed a little more controlled, less showy: Niall’s bare feet alighted on the pavement in utter relief, the flames going out at his command, and he staggered a little as he tried to get used to the sensation of having ground beneath his feet again.

The wetsuit was badly charred, reduced to blackened fabric clinging to his body, but surprisingly it wasn’t in rags around him; it had survived the burning extremely well. Still, Niall sensed that when he tried to take it off, he was going to be peeling cinders off his skin.

Louis went to pat him, but hastily veered away; the suit was still smoking, ridiculously hot, although of course Niall barely even felt it. Instead, Louis grinned at him and applauded in approval; it was the first time since Harry’s disappearance that he’d managed a sincere smile which hadn’t been tinged with slight madness and intentions to carry out an extremely risky plan.

“How’d it go?” he asked, as Niall started tearing bits of burnt lycra off him. The wetsuit now smelt like the brakes of a car that had tried to stop too quickly; the distinctive reek of burning rubber, and the sour smell made them all wrinkle their noses in distaste.

Niall shrugged as he ripped off the majority of the ruined torso of the suit, accepted his t-shirt off Liam and pulled it over his head, feeling far more comfortable with loose grey fabric billowing around him rather than having ashes clinging to his skin. “Pretty sure the press will have a field day; there were hundreds of camera flashes going off down there. I don’t know how the hell people have got that many cameras close to hand, unless they’re all tourists. Anyway, they’ll all be scrambling to sell their pictures to the papers; they probably got some good ones.”

“So you think they definitely saw you, then?” demanded Louis anxiously. His rudeness would have been annoying, bearing in mind that Niall was still trying to catch his breath after being levitated hundreds of feet into the air above London, but they all understood his urgency.

With a snort, Niall asked dryly, “Who didn’t see me? I made it obvious enough. I’m a human being, I was on fire, and I’m pretty sure you’d have had to be blind not to see that, unless you weren’t looking. And trust me, plenty of people were.” He turned away to finish peeling shreds of the suit off his inner thighs, and then Liam helpfully passed him a pair of boxers and his Chinos, which he quickly shoved on along with a pair of Louis’ espadrilles which didn’t fit very well, but were fast and easy to put on. Once he was dressed, Niall turned around and promised, “listen, boys, I saw a load of camera flashes whilst I was up there. Someone will have seen. Right now, crowds of people will be rushing to see where I came down. So I have a suggestion to make – another one – and I think we’d better do it. It’s a lot better than the first plan.”

Amusedly, Eithne spoke for the first time, removing her hands from her eyes (as the only girl, she’d felt it only right to cover them while Niall stripped) and asking with sparkling eyes, “Run?”

Meeting her gaze, Niall grinned and nodded. “Run,” he agreed amicably.

They all set off at a pace that their PE teachers back in high school would have been proud of, harrying around the first corner and running straight back the way they had come. Every few seconds Louis would cast a fearful glance over their shoulder in case they were being chased, but no mob of camera-waving people was hot on their heels, and eventually he diverted all of his energy into putting on an extra burst of speed so that he couldn’t be left behind. He staggered in Niall’s shoes;
they’d swapped so that Niall would have something easy to slip on for their quick getaway, but the blond boy’s feet were too big, and Louis’ shoes were too small, so that his shoes pinched Niall’s feet and Niall’s shoes were so big that he could barely keep them on.

He couldn’t keep them on, in fact; one shoe fell straight off his foot and onto the pavement, and he didn’t bother stopping to get it back. He was afraid to stop even for a moment, to slow them all down. Besides, they had more shoes at home; his bare foot slapped repeatedly on the pavement, and he hoped to god that there wouldn’t be dog poo or used drug needles lurking on the ground for him to tread on.

His shoe lay where it had fallen, the only lonely trace that they had ever been there.
Harry wasn’t even pretending to be asleep, even though he’d excused himself from the plotting and scheming of his new allies on the pretence of being exhausted. Instead, he was reclining on the bed in the room they’d shown him to the night before, staring gloomily up at the ceiling and feeling sorry for himself. Oh, and thinking of Louis, of course, but that was second nature now. Louis was rarely far from his thoughts.

He worried about him, mostly, and alternated that with lusting after him and wishing that he could talk to him. Their stupid conversations were what he missed more than anything else, even more than the kissing. It was the lack of Louis’ voice that had his chest aching most of all, and he preferred to keep his eyes closed so he didn’t have to look at a world without Louis in it. Dramatic? Perhaps. But true nonetheless.

In fact, he was just about to close them again when he saw a dark head poke through the wall, making him flinch. Felix stepped straight through the ugly tangerine-coloured wall and smirked at the way Harry visibly shuddered; he still hadn’t got used to the oddly dizzy sensation of watching someone walk straight through an inanimate object.

“Use the door, can’t you?” Harry asked irritably.

Grinning, Felix countered, “I could, but where’s the fun in that?”

He crossed the room in the blink of an eye simply for the purpose of irritating Harry, which was beyond annoying, and made Harry scowl even harder. Despite knowing that he would have a headache later if he kept glaring, Harry couldn’t seem to wipe the expression off his face. Raising his eyebrows as if daring Harry to comment again, Felix waited for a moment or so and then brought a newspaper out from behind his back, tossing it at Harry so that it landed on his chest. With an annoyed noise, Harry snatched it up and considered whether he could get away with rolling it up into a tube and whacking the younger boy over the head with it.

“Thought that might interest you,” drawled Felix. “It’s well worth a read, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t know you could read,” was Harry’s rude, if childish response.

Without batting an eyelid, Felix answered, “Actually, I was about to express the same opinion of you. Great minds think alike, I suppose.” He snorted. “That being the case, I don’t know how we managed to come to the same conclusion.” Felix sauntered over to the door, placed his hand on the door-handle, then turned around at the sound of the newspaper hitting the floor. Harry had tossed it to the ground without even looking at it. “Are you not going to read that?”

Harry grumbled, “Oh, leave me alone,” and rolled over to face the wall, although he did turn his head so that he could keep glowering.

“Whatsoever you say. Just remember that I did at least have the decency to bring it to you when you start moaning about not knowing what the enemy are up to.” With that, Felix walked straight through the wooden door without opening it, and inwardly, Harry cursed him for being such a sarcastic bastard. Well, he had told him to use the door.

The newspaper lay on the floor for a few minutes while Harry picked at the peeling orange paint on the walls with his fingernails, determined to resist the urge to read it simply because Felix had suggested it. Eventually, boredom and unwilling curiosity won out; he wanted to know what the boy
meant by ‘the enemy’. Sighing heavily, Harry rolled over again and without getting up, felt around on the floor beside the bed for the magazine, wondering whether Cheren was sat around watching him do it. It was an occupational hazard of having someone invisible wandering around; you could never tell when you were being watched. He’d had the nasty surprise of walking into the boy on more than one occasion already, one of them being the night before when he’d walked stark naked out of the shower and collided with what appeared to be empty air, and turned out to be Cheren.

Needless to say, since then Harry had managed to seek out Felix and demand to know how he got around it, and after a lot of sarcasm and evasions, the younger twin had eventually presented him with a small bag of flour and told him to chuck it around if he ever thought Cheren was creeping up on him, and then he’d be able to see the outline of him, at least. He had to admit that it was a good idea.

Unfurling the newspaper, he boredly scanned the headlines, expecting them to be something stupid – Felix liked to play with people, after all; he wouldn’t have been at all surprised if this was all some big joke at his expense. In fact, that was what he had been expecting.

He hadn’t been expecting to see FLYING HUMAN TORCH BAFFLES LONDONERS screaming out at him from the top of the paper, and a picture of London’s sky with the clear shape of a blazing human body outlined against the sky dancing in his face. His jaw dropped in absolute horror and he had to stare at it for a few more minutes just to make sure that he wasn’t imagining it all.

By the time he’d figured out that it wasn’t some kind of horrifying mind trick, that the article and newspaper were both very much real, and that for some absolutely mind-blowing reason the boys had thought it was a good idea to set Niall on fire and send him floating above the biggest city in England like a Chinese lantern, Harry wasn’t sure whether to laugh or curl up into a little ball and start crying. After all that he’d been determined to do to make sure that they were all okay, and here they were, royally screwing up his plans almost as if it was deliberate. Were they stupid? Had they done it by accident? (How on earth do you set someone on fire and levitate them above London by accident? Not an accident, then.) Had they all gone totally mad? Surely they knew that the twins and Deino would be after them again after this! It was almost as if –

As if they wanted them to chase them.

No, Harry told himself sternly, shaking his head, don’t be stupid. Of course they don’t want that. You’d have to be an idiot to do that. They must know that they’ll get caught, why on earth would they do this? It must be a mistake…but God, how does anyone make a mistake this big? He wanted to slap Niall and Zayn – and Louis, Liam and Eithne for not stopping them.

That was another point: why hadn’t they stopped them? Liam, at least, would have seen this coming if no one else had, quite literally. He would never have let them do something as stupid as this, even if he hadn’t been able to know that they were planning it…even if it had been a completely spontaneous decision, like when Niall had run away, he couldn’t have failed to notice altogether what they were planning. The fact that he hadn’t acted to stop them worried Harry; it meant that Liam was in on it too. Which, in turn, meant that there must be some kind of benefits to it, because Liam would never get involved in something stupid unless he was almost certain that it was going to benefit them.

Completely bewildered, Harry thought to himself in utter confusion, what the hell are they playing at? They don’t want us to find them, do they? They must know that by doing this, we’ll come running – It suddenly dawned on him: that was exactly why they were doing it. They wanted the attention of the four of them, and they weren’t afraid to be ridiculously obvious to get it. For some reason, they
wanted to contact them, to reach them somehow…to do the exact opposite to what Harry had been intending when he’d left in the first place. They were completely ruining the plan that he’d almost torn himself to pieces in the making of.

Well, he supposed that was very like them. Louis especially. He seemed to have somewhat of a talent for ruining Harry’s carefully laid plans. The thought had Harry closing his eyes in defeat, shaking his head and wearily rubbing his eyes. For some reason, the idiot was letting the others get themselves into trouble and completely destroying Harry’s plan, ruining the one thing he had left to live for: keeping Louis and the others safe. That was all he had, and in some cruel twist of fate, Louis was apparently attempting to take that away from him, too. It was too unfair.

Grimly, Harry got up off the bed to go in search of the trio of people who’d recently appointed themselves the bosses of him. He despised them, yes, but he needed them too; he was going to have to do something, and if that meant co-operating with them and making them trust him so he could discourage them from going to find the boys, so be it. He wasn’t going to let Louis ruin another one of his plans, especially not when this one was actually meant to save him.

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The scene which greeted him when he ventured out of his room and into the main living room was not a pleasant one: Felix was stood poring over a copy of the same newspaper he’d given to Harry, whilst his brother was sitting on a hard plastic chair with Deino perched on his lap, stroking her long nails up and down his arm and leaving goosebumps in her wake, while he twitched and licked his lips and tried to pretend that he wasn’t about to have an orgasm just because she was touching him. It was almost pitiful, and Harry’s nose curled in disgust. He would forever be ridiculously grateful towards Louis; yes, the agonizing love he felt for the older boy would be the death of him, but at least it stopped him from panting over the obnoxious girl the way everyone else did.

Ignoring Harry’s presence, Felix frowned as he read through the article, tapping the photograph of Niall with a concerned expression on his face. Beside him, Harry patiently waited to be acknowledged, and when he realized that they were all too busy with their various activities to notice him, he huffed and then cleared his throat loudly. Raising his eyebrows and looking up so politely that Harry could have punched him, Felix innocently smiled at him while Deino and his brother pretended they hadn’t heard anything. Not to be put off, Harry started talking anyway.

He tossed his copy of the newspaper onto the table, making Felix flinch. “Tell me you’re not actually going to go after them.”

Deino looked up and stared distastefully at him like he was stupid. Given that he estimated she had around the IQ of a small tree, (which was actually somewhat of a slight against trees) he wasn’t unduly bothered by the insinuation. “Obviously,” she told him, and then diverted her attention back to nursing Cheren’s bicep with her fingers. Without looking at him, she continued, “we’ve been chasing you all for weeks, and after someone put us back to square one –” she shot him a nasty look, while Harry coolly shot one back and neglected to mention that he could have easily restored their memories if he’d had the inclination “ – this is just the kind of lead we’ve been looking for!”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed impatiently, “I’m sure it would be, if it wasn’t clearly a ruse. It’s obviously a set-up; they want you to go after them. They’re probably lying in wait for you; they probably have some kind of trap. They’ll definitely have a battle plan.”

“A useless one. We all know how this works, you know. For whatever reason, you walked out on them, we have you now, which means that we call the shots. No matter how good they think they are, we’re better. We go out, we get them, we get paid, job done.” Cheren closed his eyes and tilted his head back a little, mouth slightly open, allowing Deino to continue caressing his arm. Clearly, he
believed the conversation to be at an end.

Of course, Harry had no intention of letting him get away with letting it go like that; he was determined to make this work. Louis wasn’t going to successfully botch up his own safety: no way. “Yeah, but they know that you know that! They’re planning something.”

“And what might that be?” Felix was actually listening to him, shockingly; glad that someone was paying attention, Harry eagerly turned to him and continued to explain.

“I don’t know exactly, but there’s no way they’d expose themselves like this unless they totally believe that we can’t touch them. Liam’s cautious; he’d never let them do it unless he was one hundred percent certain that they’re safe. Besides, I know them better than you do – Niall’s powers go off accidentally when he’s panicking, but he and Lou have something worked out; Lou does this thing with his force fields to extinguish him – you’ve seen it yourself! It works every time! And it takes him seconds, he’s got it immaculately timed now.” Harry realized as he saw Felix’s expression turn thoughtful that he probably should attempt to keep some of the adoration out of his tone; he was quite clearly singing Louis’ praises from the rooftops, and that didn’t really fit in with the whole thing where he was supposed to be double-crossing them, and all that. Clearing his throat, he added, “if Niall set himself alight by mistake, Louis would put him out straight away – which means that this –” he stabbed the newspaper “ – wasn’t an accident. For some reason, they have purposely gotten themselves noticed, which means that they want to be found. And if they want to be found…well, if I were you, I’d start getting worried.”

With a snort, Cheren twisted in his chair to look at him. “Worried? About that little band of idiots? Really, I do think you’re being very melodramatic. What are they going to do, pelt us with tiny force fields the size of marbles until we pass out? Singe our eyebrows? Predict our horrible deaths or make us fly around the room? There’s such a thing as taking them too seriously, you know. I know you have a thing for Bubbles, but really.”

It took considerable effort for Harry not to blush at that; Felix had warned them that his brother knew things about people just by looking at them, but he hated having his feelings for Louis mocked, especially when they were such a raw, helpless part of him. Another of his struggles was the anxious, niggling thought that Cheren might be able to see his motives for protecting his friends, that he might know why Harry was trying so desperately to deter them – he didn’t dare touch the boy’s mind to find out on the off-chance that Cheren realized he was doing it; that would be one of the fastest ways to lose his trust, and that was something he couldn’t afford to do.

As long as he could be there, overseeing anything that happened, even if he couldn’t steer his friends and his new allies apart, there was a chance that he could still protect them. As long as Harry was a part of the little team that had been formed in order to capture and eradicate his friends, he would have opportunities to make sure that they were safe, and that was the only reason he had made the decision to join them in the first place. It was all to keep the boys safe.

“You don’t know them,” he said calmly. “You haven’t seen what they can do.”

“I’ve seen enough to know that they’re not a threat.”

“How do you know that? What if Zayn levitated a knife and slit your throat with it? What if Louis put a force field around you so strong that even air couldn’t get through it, and you suffocated? What if Liam foresaw a way to kill you? What if Niall burnt you to cinders? Their powers could be absolutely formidable if they used them in the right way; you shouldn’t overestimate them!” Even the thought of his boys carrying out such heinous acts of violence made Harry shudder, but he fought to keep his voice steady. “You can’t be too careful. Ever.”
“Cher, he’s right,” Felix said anxiously, “they could do dangerous things if they didn’t know what
they were doing. I don’t think we should get complacent; we have no idea what they’re capable of –”

“Ugh!” Shoving Deino off his lap, Cheren exploded, “how am I supposed to think with you
twitting on at me, and this one messing with me all of the time?” He scowled at Deino, who
gave him a wounded look. “You know what? Fine! Fine! If it gets you two off my back, we won’t
go. We’ll wait – for now, at least. But I’m making no promises. If we get one more little indication
that they’re out there, and that they’re easy targets, then we’re going. Understand?”

Without waiting for a reply, he stormed out, muttering under his breath and leaving Harry to stare
down at the newspaper. He got a lump in his throat when he spotted a photo of one of Niall’s shoes
near the bottom corner, captioned ‘locals nickname the phenomenal being “CINDERella” as size ten shoe is the only clue left at the crime-scene’. He recognized that shoe very well; he’d coaxed a man
in a second-hand shop into giving the pair to him for free, and Niall had been absolutely delighted –
he absolutely loved them.

But at least he could breathe a sigh of relief now; he was confident that after their first attempt failed,
the boys would have the sense not to try again. The risk of getting caught by someone they didn’t
want catching them was far too great. With a flurry of media interest this large,nobody could be
stupid enough to make a second attempt.

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“It’s been four days!” Louis complained. “Four whole days, and they haven’t come near us. What
the hell are they playing at? We made it obvious enough; are they ignoring us completely, or are
there just an abundance of flying teenagers who can set themselves on fire in London?”

Niall yawned and stretched, lounging on the sofa and helping himself to one of Zayn’s crisps,
leaning over his friend’s shoulder and snatching it out of the bag with a crackle. Making a noise of
protest, Zayn snatched the bag away while the blond boy shoved it into his mouth with a crunch.
“It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it?” he asked through a mouthful of food, “They’re ignoring us on purpose;
there’s no way they could have missed that.”

“Why would they ignore us? They know they can do whatever they want with us; they
have Harry, for God’s sake; they could do anything with us that they wanted and we wouldn’t even
know, so why on earth would they not come for us?”

Mimicking Niall, Zayn shoved a handful of crisps into his mouth. Through his mouthful, he
suggested, “Maybe they don’t know specifically where in London we are, it’s a big place –”

“It doesn’t take rocket science to find out where we are –”

“Maybe they’re lying in wait for us,” Liam said darkly. Liam, the voice of reason, the positive one,
who was sat on the floor on the other side of the room massaging his temples with his eyes closed,
was officially being maudlin.

“Well, you would know. Don’t be depressing, Li. Have a biscuit.” Zayn reached for the packet of
chocolate chip cookies by his side and tossed them at Liam, who caught it, ripped it open and
gloomily crammed a cookie into his mouth, silencing himself.

“They’re not lying in wait for us,” argued Louis bitterly; “can’t you see what’s going on?”

Niall rolled his eyes. “I get the feeling you’re about to tell us. Enlighten us, then – what exactly is this
incredible master-plan that you’ve figured out singlehandedly?”

A soft snort came from the other side of the room where Eithne was curled up in an armchair with her arm wrapped around her knees, her grey eyes gleaming in the light reflecting off the little electric heater they were using as a substitute for central heating. The dim red glow it was casting out made everything look weirdly angular, almost sinister, especially the girl’s face; she had sharp features anyway, and the new red-tinted angles made her look slightly eerie.

Ignoring her, Louis told them, “It’s Harry. I bet you anything he’s stopping them from coming for us somehow. He’s trying to keep them away. Stubborn bastard,” he said softly, fondly, “he never would do things anyone else’s way. He knows we have a plan and he’s ignoring it.”

His unflagging devotion for Harry inspired several reactions; sighs of admiration from Eithne and Niall, the natural romantics in the room, a fatherly tut from Liam, who saw Louis’ faith in the younger boy as sweet but perhaps a little strange, and an eye-roll from Zayn, who would of course never admit to finding it as adorable as the rest of them did.

“Come on, then, genius – what next? If you’ve worked all of this out, why don’t you come up with a new plan?” Zayn sniffed and started nibbling another crisp, trying to turn it into a specific shape, although nobody was quite sure what it was supposed to be.

“I already have a new plan. I call it Plan B. It’s a thing of great refinement and beauty…”

“Yeah?”

“Oh, yes. It’s a masterpiece, the plan to end all plans…a revolution in the history of planning!”

“Yeah, but what is it?”

“Pure, unabridged genius!” cried Louis modestly (but not really).

“What is it, then? Come on, tell us about this great ‘thing of refinement and beauty’.” Zayn’s tone implied that he expected it to be anything but.

“Basically,” continued Louis, “it’s exactly the same as Plan A, except substituting Niall for me, and it’ll be a lot more obvious.”

Niall asked bemusedly, “Louis, how could anything be more obvious than setting myself on fire and floating above Big Ben like a balloon?”

“I might wear fuchsia,” Louis said dryly. “But on a serious note, if Harry thinks he’s gotten around us this time, he can think again; they’re going to come for us, I don’t care what I have to make them do. They’re going to capture us, boys, I’ll make sure of it.”

“That sounds so creepy,” Niall whispered.

Ignoring him, Louis said, “It’s time to put Plan B – B for better – into operation.”
“I thought you said B was for ‘better’, not for ‘balls-up’.”

“Shut up.”

Louis wasn’t in the mood for Zayn’s wise cracks. He sat sulking on one end of the sofa, and nobody had any inclination to join him; his expression was as black as thunder, and he scowled at anyone who came anywhere near him. Wisely, they were all giving him a wide berth.

His plan had been to be levitated to the top of some kind of popular landmark (they’d chosen the Tower of London) while he threw force fields around and hoped that people saw them. In the end, though, he’d stood up there for twenty minutes attempting to make substantially-sized fields, and most of them had been pathetic failures because he didn’t much like heights, and standing on the top of an enormous and ancient building that was rumoured to be haunted and where hundreds of people had died…well, it didn’t do much for his nerves. And he’d never been good in a crisis, and it had rained throughout the whole thing. These were the excuses that he snapped at everyone when they gave him long looks after he finally admitted defeat and came down—but what added more insult to injury was that he’d slipped on the edge of the balcony where Zayn had stopped him to allow him a few minutes to catch his breath, fallen off, and instinctively stopped himself from falling on his face by conjuring a field around himself that was around the size of a large elephant, and Zayn had stopped him from falling too fast. So a force field larger than most of the cars driving around below had appeared over London, which did admittedly attract the attention that they wanted, but it was safe to say that Louis was pretty embarrassed by the whole ordeal.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Liam said comfortingly, “we made the headlines again, at least.” He gestured at the TV, which was telling them the news that the second ‘interesting phenomenon’ of the week had mysteriously appeared over a famous British landmark, and an inappropriately excited reporter with messy blonde hair was delightedly telling the cameras everything she knew about the recent supernatural occurrences, which apparently was very little. The wind had turned her hair into a bird’s nest, but she was too enamoured with her very vague story to care.

“Yeah, but first they took the mickey out of me for losing my shoe, and then they take the mickey out of my powers!” Louis raged. He jabbed an accusing finger at the screen. “As if the ‘Cinderella’ pun wasn’t bad enough—now this! ‘Attack of the Flying Hamsters — some kind of strange orb strongly resembling a hamster ball was seen floating a few hundred metres above London town last night’—what the bloody hell is that all about? They’re mocking us. Mocking us!” Indignantly, he shoved a handful of Doritos into his mouth and crunched angrily on the powdered-cheese flavoured orange triangles.

“To be fair, it did kind of look like a hamster ball,” pointed out Niall reasonably, and then quavered underneath the fierceness of the glare Louis awarded him in response to that.

“If it gets us noticed, does it really matter if the whole country is laughing at us?” Zayn demanded. “The fact is, any publicity is good publicity, as any kind of organization will tell you; we’re getting publicized, so we can’t complain. At least this way, we know that we’re being put out there, that we’re definitely being seen.”

“They’re not laughing at us! They’re laughing at me!”

“Stop being such a bloody drama queen. If it helps us find Harry, what does it matter who’s laughing at us?”
Pouting, Louis drew his knees up to his chest and rested his chin on them with a miserable sigh, closing his blue eyes so that he could block out the world for a while. He really didn’t have any kind of appropriate response for that.

He really wasn’t in any state to be verbally sparring with anyone, least of all Zayn, who was notorious among them for having a wickedly sharp tongue. Louis had dark purple circles beneath his eyes, he looked pale, which was incredibly unusual for him, and he kept yawning uncontrollably. It wasn’t exactly his fault; he’d been struggling to get a decent amount of sleep lately. His nightmares were haunted with thoughts of Harry, as he subconsciously panicked about the younger boy every second of the day, worrying about all the horrible things that could have befallen him. It left him looking ragged and tired, and concerned more than anything, like he had the troubles of the world heaped on his shoulders.

Nobody liked looking at him, because they weren’t used to seeing Louis look so defeated. Everybody hated seeing the desperate flicker of hope in his eyes every time the front door opened, and the way he slumped back down in his seat again when it wasn’t Harry. Perhaps he should have been used to the idea by now, that Harry wasn’t just going to walk in and make everything all right again, but the ghost of hope still hung about him, and he just couldn’t quite manage to let it go.

“Don’t worry, Lou,” Niall said, squeezing his shoulder comfortingly, “we’ll find them. Or rather, they’ll find us. They won’t be able to resist; they’ll play right into our hands. You’ll see.”

Louis didn’t respond; he stayed staring blankly into thin air, refusing to let any of their words touch him anymore, good or bad. In his mind’s eye, he’d drifted far, far away from them and right now he was lying safely in Harry’s arms.

~*~

Harry could have killed Louis. If he ever saw him again, he was going to be sorely tempted to punch him in the face. That alone was certain; there weren’t many things he was sure about any more, but that was one of them. The twat seemed determined to screw up every single one of his plans, and the trouble was that he was stupidly good at it.

Of course, he had help, and Harry was working alone. The only form of assistance he had were three people who were unconscious to the fact that they were helping, and he had to do an awful lot of verbal manipulating to get it. Louis, however, had three supernatural beings and an incredibly intelligent girl on his side, and all Harry had was three gifted but unhelpful and incredibly contrary morons, who apart from being stubborn, were also completely intent on catching the love of Harry’s life and his best friends, and doing god knows what to them. The stress of it all was definitely not good for Harry’s health. It wouldn’t be good for anyone’s! Every second was another second that he had to spend trying to save someone who was doing their utmost to put their life in danger; apart from being exhausting, it was completely infuriating, meaning that Harry was both shattered and aggravated at the same time. Not the most pleasant of combinations, really.

Right now, Felix was explaining his apparently excellent plan to catch Louis, and Harry knew he had to pay attention so that he knew how best to sabotage it, but it was all so boring listening to Felix blustering on about how brilliant he was without actually getting around to the logistics of the actual plan that he couldn’t help drifting. Eventually, he irritably sat up and interrupted Felix’s self-satisfied speech, as it appeared that no one else was going to.

“Is there a point to any of this, or are you going to keep rambling on about how great you are all day? Because if that’s the case, I think I’ll go to bed.”

Affronted, Felix said shrilly, “Well, how’s that for gratitude? I’d like to see you come up with the
idea of genetically engineering an animal to help find a complete stranger! Yeah! Now take\textit{that} and shove it up your –"

"Wait, what?" For the first time, Cheren appeared to actually be paying attention; looking up from the table, which he’d been carving doodles into with a broken biro, he asked, "\textit{you}? You genetically engineered an animal?"

"Well…not exactly. But I told them to do it! Which brings me to our next revelation…." After a dramatic pause, Felix vanished, apparently going to fetch whatever it was he thought was going to be so useful to their plan.

He rematerialized a few moments later with one hand buried in the thick wool of an extremely dopey looking sheep, which bleated dismally and staggered a little. Harry stared at the sheep, feeling weirdly nostalgic; all sheep were the same, but he could have sworn he’d seen that particular one before…

"I call it ‘NEEP’," Felix announced proudly: "\textit{Neurologically Effected Entity}.

"It’s a sheep." \textit{And not just any sheep:} Niall’s sheep, Harry thought to himself bewilderedly.

"Well done, genius." He relented after a few seconds. "\textit{It’s not just any} sheep. It’s like a sniffer dog – only a sheep. The guys at the lab managed to do some wacky stuff to its perception and senses and that kind of stuff; NEEP is the world’s only fully functioning tracker-sheep. You give it a scent, and it’ll trace the source for you. And it eats grass, which means it’s easy to feed.\textit{And it’s} too stupid to realize that it gets rewarded for finding things, so unlike a dog, it won’t ever fake results in order to get rewards!" Felix was inordinately pleased with himself.

Harry had lots of questions, but before he could voice any of them, Cheren brought up his one and only concern: "What does the P stand for? You said it was called NEEP, but you didn’t explain what the P was for."

Felix shrugged. "Product? Phenomenon? Personality? I don’t know, NEEP sounded better than NEE. It had a better ring to it." He patted the sheep. "This is the exact same sheep that took such a shine to Sparks when I first got the Dream Team out of that cell; what with the amount of time he spent canoodling it, it knows his scent very well. According to all the blokes in the lab, if we can remind it of…" he frowned.

"Niall?" Harry reminded him.

"Whatever. If we can remind it of Niall, the theory is that it’ll hunt him down by sense of smell and find him. Therefore, according to reasoning, if we take NEEP to London, and shove something of Niall’s up its nose, then it’ll seek him out. So all we need is something that belongs to sparks, and a mode of transportation, and we’re sorted."

"The shoe –" by the time Harry realized he’d just spoken out loud, he could have kicked himself, but Felix’s head had already whipped towards him.

"Um." \textit{Shit.} "That…that shoe, that they left behind at the crime scene. That was Niall’s shoe." \textit{Idiot, idiot, don’t tell them that!} "It’ll lead us straight to him, I guess." He knew exactly why he’d said that; the thought of being reunited with Louis, no matter how much danger in, had been too tempting to pass up on. It would be his fault if Louis got hurt…but at the moment he was going so stir-crazy that he thought he was willing to take the risk.

Felix’s smile was like the Cheshire cat’s from Alice in Wonderland, except creepier. "Excellent. It’s
“all falling into place…I’m a genius!” he announced happily.

“You’re a moron,” Deino said sourly. “Get that thing out of here; it stinks.”

“Baa,” said NEEP dolefully.

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. Some things never change, he thought wryly. Genetically engineered or not, NEEP was as endearingly thick-witted as it had always been. He wondered if it still had its puppy-like loyalty towards Niall – and then realized that he pitied it, because its loyalty would be its downfall…its loyalty would be what led it straight to the blond boy, and in the end, its loyalty would be what put Niall’s life in danger. Simply through fondness, NEEP risked severely endangering Niall’s life, and the lives of all the rest. Just like Harry, really, except that at least he knew what he was doing. NEEP was going to walk straight into the trap and double-cross Niall completely by accident, through pure stupidity. Harry was planning to double-double-cross, but as far as NEEP was concerned…it was a helpless, dumb tool in the fight against the boys, and it would never, ever know.

“We’ll set off first thing tomorrow,” Cheren decided, and all of a sudden Harry didn’t feel much like laughing anymore; the smirk slid off his face and gave way to a mask of indifference that he used to hide his inner panic.

“Okay,” he agreed diplomatically, “well, I suppose I’d better go and find a hat or something; my face has been splashed all over the news as a missing person, I’ll probably be recognized unless I wear some kind of disguise –”

Interrupting him with a rude snort, Deino snapped, “Dream on, pretty boy.”

Harry was confused. “Huh?”

Felix shook his head at him. “Honestly, I do think it’s rather sweet that you think we’d trust you enough to take you out with us. We still don’t know whether we can rely on you to do what needs to be done; there’s no way we’d risk you double-crossing us. They were your allies at one point; do you really expect us to forget about that? I don’t know why you chose to join us, nor do I care, but we’ve all agreed that we need some actual solid proof that you’re on our side, and we’re taking no risks. We’ll take NEEP and go and find them, while you hold the fort here.”

“And what do you expect me to do for the foreseeable future while you’re gone?” Harry asked bitterly, too stung by the thought of not seeing Louis – even angry, betrayed, disgusted Louis – to care about how disappointed he sounded. “Crossword puzzles? Maybe find some knitting patterns and make you all nice matching woolly hats?”

“That might be nice,” Cheren responded mildly, “tell you what, if you want you can do that after you’ve finished modifying the memories of everyone on this list.” He shoved a crumpled scrap of paper across the table at Harry.

He didn’t even bother to read the first name; he could tell by looking at the sheer amount of writing on the paper that it was an impossible task. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“Does this face look like it’s joking?” It didn’t. As usual, it looked like the face of a sulky, stroppy, sarcastic teenager. “I don’t make jokes. I’m deadly serious.”

“You can’t honestly tell me that you expect me to get through all of this. There’s over a hundred people on this list!”

“Two hundred and sixty-seven, to be exact. Don’t worry; you don’t have to do it all right away. We’ll be away for a day or two, at least. NEEP is good, but it’s no miracle worker. You’ll have
plenty of time to get it all done.”

Gritting his teeth, Harry forced himself to stay relatively calm as he said sharply, “Are you deaf? I can’t do this. I am physically incapable of doing this. I had mental links with around sixty, maybe seventy people at the most; this happened several days ago. The intensity of it all was so strong that I nearly passed out; I had to let go of them all, and quickly, too, otherwise it would have fried my brain. Every memory I wiped came back the moment my mind disconnected from theirs, which means that when it all became too much for me, I was back to square one. It’ll only happen again. I physically cannot do this for you, all right?” He sourly thrust the paper back.

Scowling, Cheren returned it, his lower lip jutting stubbornly out. “Take a couple of painkillers, sleep regularly and drink plenty of water; you’ll be fine. We told you that you’d have to obey our orders – so do your job. All right?”

“Not really.”

“Shame.” Getting up, Cheren turned his back on Harry, who wondered whether he could get away with knocking him over and punching him so hard in the mouth that he ended up swallowing all of his gleaming white teeth. “We’ve given you your orders; how and when you carry them out will be mainly left to you, but we expect substantial progress to have been made by the time we get back.”

“I’m not your slave!”

“Oh? Because you see, you have to obey our every command, and at what would appear to be no kind of benefit to you, so I beg to differ. Our slave is exactly what I think you are. Now go and work on the list, slave.” He smirked.

He really was the most obnoxious bastard Harry had ever set eyes upon. In fact, his vileness was rivalled only by that of his brother, who seemed to be enjoying this just as much as he was, and the girl who was sitting on the edge of the table swinging her slender legs, one plucked eyebrow raised and her lipstick-coated mouth curving into an unpleasant smile. Harry hated them all, hated them so much that he would happily have punched them all at the exact same time right then. Gritting his teeth, he unabashedly wished a horrible and painful death upon every single one of them.
He only went out to buy milk.

At first he wasn’t sure whether they would let him go, especially as the last time he’d popped out for milk, they’d ended up chasing him across the country and all the way into Ireland, and Liam was out for the count, sleeping on the sofa with ice piled up on his forehead to try and keep his temperature down, drugged up to the eyeballs with painkillers so that he could get some proper, undisturbed sleep for the next few hours, and unable to vouch for him. But after checking that they did indeed need milk, and making Niall swear on most of the things he loved (including his mother’s life, and Nandos) that he wasn’t going to do another runner, Zayn had rather suspiciously let him out—although not without warning him that several of his limbs would be violently and unhesitatingly detached if he dared to so much as put his little toe into a strange alleyway on the way to the supermarket.

He was wearing a snapback underneath Liam’s grey hoodie, which cast a lovely shadow across his face. He hadn’t bleached his hair in a while, so that the slowly browning roots were beginning to take over, slowly creeping up the sides so that only the top was still blonde, and the rest was chocolate brown. He looked most unlike himself; most of his friends from home wouldn’t have recognized him, drowning in loose grey fabric as he was. He’d borrowed Louis’ aviators, and they kept sliding irritatingly down his nose so that he had to keep pushing them up to prevent them from falling down his nose. Wearing loose charcoal-coloured sweatpants of Harry’s that he’d purloined when Louis had been moaning around the house looking depressed rather than lingering in Harry’s room (he’d picked up this totally weird habit of smelling Harry’s clothes for some unfathomable reason, seeing as Harry hadn’t taken them with him, but even Louis drew the line at walking around with his face buried in his best friend’s trousers; he wouldn’t notice that Niall had taken them) he basically looked like one of many hundred chavs loitering on the streets of London. It wasn’t a comparison he liked, but if it kept him out of harm’s way, he supposed he could contend with the dirty looks and misapprehension from pensioners.

Niall was just crossing the quiet, practically deserted road when he heard it.

He thought it was a cat at first, and who could blame him; the only discernible noise was a snuffling, a weird rustling sound, and then the clang of a metal dustbin lid, making his head snap up in surprise. His head jerked so sharply that the hoodie fell down, the material pooling around his shoulders, so that his bright green snapback, not the most conspicuous item of headwear, was exposed. Swallowing, he glanced around, burying his hands in his pockets and trying to stand up a little straighter so that he looked taller.

“Is anyone there?”

A strange snuffling noise, and then clinking, like something was nosing glass bottles around, came from a nearby alleyway. A more curious, less wary teenager might have gone to investigate, but not Niall. He stayed cautiously rooted to the spot, hands buried in his pockets, staring towards the source of the commotion and knowing that he probably should be comforted by the knowledge that he could easily barbeque anyone within a ten foot radius of him but also knowing that he wasn’t, really. There was a difference between knowing you could do something and actually having the inclination to do it, and when it came to it, Niall wasn’t certain he could burn a piece of toast, let alone a person.

“Kitty?” He called. Pause. “Pussy?” He chuckled softly at the dirty joke; the innuendo gave him some slight sense of reassurance. “You okay down there? If you’re not, give me a miaow. If y’are… don’t say anything.”
There was no answering sound, which was what Niall had wanted; ideally, he would have turned his back on the noise and continued on his way. But he felt bad, and he felt uneasy, and he wouldn’t much have liked to be a cat in a lonely street like this, with only tin cans and the odd wandering hobo for company. Oh, and a suspiciously piss-like aroma, if you were unlucky. Lovely. It wasn’t the most charming deserted street he’d ever found himself on.

“I’m way too soft for my own good,” he grumbled to himself as he scanned the street and then jogged across the road, heading towards the sound. If it was a cat, he could always stroke it or something, for moral support.

If not…well, screaming and running were both high on Niall’s ideas list, and he reckoned he could have a fair pop at both of them.

He poked his head around the corner, checking for an ambush, but when none was forthcoming, and no angry chavs with Dubstep blaring from their headphones leapt out at him brandishing knives and spitting threats with dropped syllables so that half of their words became a jumbled, meaningless mess (‘oiright, mate, we dun’ wan’ no trouble, just give us your wallet or somefink and we’ll say n’more bout it, innit?’ for example) he dared to venture a little further towards the bins from which the noise was being emitted, forgetting to heed Zayn’s warning about not straying one inch from the street he’d set out on. It was suspiciously quiet now, and he wasn’t sure whether he liked it; the silence made him feel almost as uneasy as the ominous rustling had.

Bringing his hands out of his pockets, Niall satisfied himself that there was no one about (no one friendly, at least) and raised his right hand to shoulder height, clicking his fingers and then summoning a tiny fireball into his hand. He could have done it without the theatrics, but it was cooler that way. Cupping the flames protectively in his palm, he edged forwards, jaw tight, eyes flickering from wall to wall as he did so. If anyone jumped out at him, they’d be getting a face full of flames; the moment he instinctively went to hit out at an assailant, he’d burn them, intentionally or not. It didn’t do any harm to have a little light, either. Not that he was scared of the dark, but if you didn’t have to be in pitch blackness, some illumination was nice.

Soft footfalls padded on the ground, making him jump; they were his own. Gentle breaths sounded stupidly loud, bouncing off the walls, but they were his, too. Niall wasn’t really at home in enclosed spaces; his breathing quickened and he whirled around at the sound of breaking glass only to found that he’d trodden on a fragment of a broken bottle in the ugly black shoes he’d borrowed off Zayn, and cracked it even more.

“Baa.”

“Holy sh –” Niall yelped and spun around, his left hand waving uselessly in the air while he stupidly brandished his right towards the source of the sound, mouth hanging open as he struggled to think of a suitable threat to make, or something clever to say (all that came to mind was ‘burn, baby burn!’ which wasn’t particularly inspired, even for him) – but he found himself dropping that hand in shock, careful not to let the flames hit his leg and singe his trousers; he dampened them down enough to still give him some light, but not to leap high enough to burn his clothes. He’d reduced enough outfits to cinders lately.

Niall crouched down on his knees, careful to kick the glass shards out of his way first so that he wouldn’t end up spouting blood like a fountain full of red food colouring from his legs. Squatting down in front of the source of the noise, he squinted at it in utter disbelief, raising his hand like a torch so that he could see better. Sure enough, his eyes weren’t deceiving him.

“Holy sheep…Michael?!”
It was his sheep; unmistakeably his sheep; it had the same dopiness, the same dazed expression, the same eyes…and there was just something about the way it wobbled as it stood staring adorably at him, like it had missed him. His sheep!

Niall had no idea how an incredibly stupid and rather slow sheep had managed to make its way all the way from the Scottish Highlands to South London, but he wasn’t complaining, and he knew it was his because as it ambled closer, bleating expectantly, he could see that a tiny bit of its tail had been singed off. That had been his doing; whilst hugging it, he’d gotten a little overexcited and a couple of sparks had lit up its tail, and although he’d hastily extinguished them, none of the boys had noticed and the sheep hadn’t seemed unduly bothered (come to think of it, he wasn’t sure whether it had noticed, either). He would have recognized it anywhere.

Secretly, he’d christened it ‘Michael’, after his childhood imaginary friend, and he’d kind of missed it. No one tended to rely on Niall; he was the baby, the cute one, he wasn’t often in charge, wasn’t used to having someone look up to him. Michael was stupid, and it was always up for a cuddle, which suited Niall, because he was a cuddly kind of guy.

Extinguishing the flames in his palm and plunging them into darkness, he threw his arms around its neck, burying his face in its side, and hugged it very hard. Yes, he was an eighteen year old Irish guy hugging a sheep in a backstreet in London – weird, but normality had never mattered much to Niall, and a friendly face was a friendly face, even if it did belong to a sheep.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his hands raking down its back as he stroked it, glad to have someone around who wasn’t going to get all suspicious of him every time he went to get milk, or get annoyed when he sat eating rather than contributing to discussions, or all of the things which seemed to get on the boys’ nerves. He was enthusiastically smacking its side like dog lovers often did to their dogs when his fingers encountered a weird bump, there was a strange zing as something shocked his fingers, and it flinched away from him, bleating pitifully and dancing off to the left as if he’d hurt it.

Niall was perplexed. “What the…?” A frowned creased his forehead. “Come here, boy. Let me see. Let me see, come on.” He made coaxing noises, holding out his hand, and Michael hesitantly stumbled forwards, nosing his fingers. Careful not to hurt him again, Niall searched through his wool for the weird shape, and when he found it, rather than brushing it with his fingers again, he parted the wool around it so that he could see what it was.

A strange kind of circuit-board had been fused to the skin underneath the wool, in a pink patch of skin that had been shaved bare, and Niall couldn’t see any visible join or gap that he could use to prise it away – he would have been afraid to try anyway, in case he hurt Michael. Whispering to the sheep to calm it, he leaned in a little closer, holding back the fur with one hand while he illuminated the alleyway with the other, squinting so that he could see. The wires and little bits of plastic meant nothing to him – but there were letters etched in manufactured, computer-generated block lettering at the top of the board.

“N-E-E-P,” Niall read aloud, and then scratched his head in confusion. “What on earth is –”

“Surprise, kiddiewinks!”

Niall yelped and fell over backwards, the flames going out again in his shock, and raucous laughter erupted around him as Cheren appeared apparently from thin air (though really he had been there all the time, Niall realized, but invisible, lurking and listening for god knows how long), bent double, clutching his knees and roaring with laughter. Straightening up, he wiped one of his grey eyes – and then all of a sudden he was fiercely disciplined again, his expression cold, without the trace of a smirk lingering on his thin lips. He walked over to Niall with his hands in his pockets, and looked boredly down at him like he was an extremely uninteresting museum exhibit.
“Well, what have we here? I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with N. N for naughty, running away...N for nuisance, proving rather hard to find again...N for notorious, N for naive, N for Niall. Did you really think we couldn’t find you, hmm? Did you really think you could escape?” Cheren started prowling around with his hands behind his back, keeping a careful eye on Niall as he did so. “Well, this is a turn up for the books. Where are the others, hmm? Where’s Bubbles?”

“What have you done with Harry?” demanded Niall; it took him only a few seconds to make his fist set on fire, flames licking his hand all the way down to his wrist, and he held it threateningly in front of himself, like a flaming boxing glove. “I’ll burn you! Tell me where he is, or I’ll burn you!” He was proud of how strong his voice was; he didn’t hear the slightest shake.

“All in good time, all in good time...I think we have other matters to discuss first...such as; it’s time to fetch your little friends...Felix is out searching right now; it’s only a matter of time before he finds them anyway. Why not make it easy? I’m sure if you feel like cooperating, we can make sure that things are a little less hard on you...” His tone was compelling, almost seductive, and Niall wasn’t buying it.

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass, thanks. We stick together; I’m not going to betray them.”

“Oh, you do, do you? Funny, that – some of the other members of your little dream team didn’t seem to get the memo...you’ve been double-crossed, my friends. We didn’t abduct Harry; Harry came to us. And now we have him, you’re at a major disadvantage. You don’t even know if this is happening, do you? It could all be inside your head...” He continued silkily, whispering right in Niall’s ear, “this street, this scenario, it could all be happening in your imagination...or Harry’s imagination, depending on how you look at it...”

“You get away from me, or I’m warning you, I will burn you! I may not be in the perfect position to burn all of your hair off, not evenly at least, but I can certainly make a good effort to singe your eyebrows off, and then you’ll look pretty fucking stupid, let me tell you! So get back, or I’ll do it!” He was borderline hysterical, but he channelled it as aggression, not wanting Cheren to see quite how unnerved he was to have been so surprised by an invisible boy materializing apparently from nothing right in front of him – the flames leapt higher, and burned bright, and with the light from them reflecting in his eyes, Niall felt almost brave.

Cheren snapped, “I’m the one making the bargains!” But he did look a little less certain, and Niall derived a small bit of satisfaction from that. “Now tell me where they are!”

“Make me!” They both knew he wasn’t going to give up without a fight, but their problem was this; Niall wanted to tell him, so that they could all be taken, and he’d forgotten his role for a moment. He was supposed to be the baby, to beg and grovel and spill all of their secrets like a bucket of water that had been kicked over, to give Cheren whatever he wanted in exchange for promises which were lied through his gleaming white teeth. But he’d shown his true colours, as a fighter, and a loyal friend, and now he had to figure out how he could lead the boy back to their hideout and get them captured, whilst giving the boys some warning, and making it look convincing so that Cheren wouldn’t know they’d planned to be caught in the first place.

He had to improvise, and fast; he had to feign some kind of emotion, and he chose cowardice. Leaping to his feet, he scrambled backwards, looked frantically around, and then rushed back into the street, threw himself around the corner and sprinted desperately back the way he had come, the flames on his fist dancing wildly in the breeze that he left in his wake, all the while screeching “LADS! THEY’RE COMING FOR US – FUCK’S SAKE, LIAM, WAKE UP, WAKE UP AND SEE, THEY’RE COMING – LOUIS, LOUIS, ZAYN! ZAYN, ZAYN! EITHNE! THEY’RE COMING!”
It wasn’t an Oscar-winning performance, let’s put it that way – but he was running and screaming down the street, so he didn’t really have to bother much about controlling his expression. He focused on putting all of his energy into running faster instead, his feet practically flying as he ran with energy spiking rapidly through his body, spurring him onwards as he fled from the other boy. Distantly, he heard Cheren curse and snap “Felix!” as if he could conjure his little brother from thin air and use him as a personal taxi. Just in case Felix was within earshot, Niall sped up, then deliberately took a wrong turning and doubled back, looping around a random street to make it look like he was trying to lose them, and then hared back off in the correct direction.

Speed, he could do, and surprisingly, as he hurtled down the road he didn’t find many things to trip over. Fate was on his side for once, and he dodged every obstacle he found, making sure not to stumble and fall. He wanted to be caught on his own terms, the ones that he and the others had agreed on, not the ones chosen by Cheren and Felix and Deino.

Luckily, he hadn’t even been halfway to his destination, and his hands slammed into the front door and it burst open only eight minutes or so after he’d set off; puffing and panting, he staggered over the threshold and tripped straight into Zayn’s arms. Zayn caught him and set him upright before he could fall flat on his face, then spotted that Niall was struggling for breath, his cheeks flaming pink with exhaustion, and his jaw dropped.

“Niall?” he asked in utter bewilderment.

“They’re…they’re following me,” Niall choked, “right behind me, a couple of streets back at the most – places, everyone! Places! They’re coming!”

Louis paled visibly; Niall could see his face over Zayn’s shoulder and watched the colour leeched from it in an instant. “Shit,” he said, and then he sprinted into the living room in a panic, darting over to the sofa where Liam lay sleeping and shaking him harshly to wake him up.

“They can’t be coming!” Eithne shrieked from a couple of rooms away, through the sound of pouring water, “I’m in the shower!”

“Well get the hell out of the shower, then!” Niall cried impatiently, “we don’t have time! Cheren’s hot on my heels and I don’t know how long we have before he comes bursting in here!”

In a flurry of extremely unladylike swearwords, Eithne burst out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her like a robe, her hair dripping wet, and staggered into the room which, as the only girl, she had been allocated to. The door slammed behind her and Niall turned away hastily, trying to think of anything other than the fact that an extremely attractive girl was haphazardly throwing clothes on in the other room with only a rather flimsy door between them.

“How did they find us?” demanded Liam blearily, staggering into the room supported by Louis, who was carefully preventing him from crumpling to the ground. “What did you do?”

“They did something to the sheep – you remember that sheep? They’ve stuck some freaky gizmo to it and I reckon that’s how they tracked me down; I think the sheep managed to trace me somehow, I don’t know!” His hands flew to his hair and raked anxiously through it. “We’re not ready, we had no warning, this isn’t good –”

Eithne emerged from her room with a steely look in her eye, grimly determined. She’d scraped her sopping wet hair back from her face in a tight ponytail, and had thrown on the bottom half of an old murky grey tracksuit, pulling a scarlet hoodie of Zayn’s over her head. She had no make-up on. She looked terrifying – she was a woman on a mission, and none of them had much experience in dealing with women’s missions. Understandably, they all became rather nervous rather quickly.
She ordered, “Don’t panic. Running around like headless chickens won’t help anybody. Keep a clear head. Liam, you carry on doing that weak and disoriented thing, even after you properly come around; it’s very misleading; will put them off their guard.” she instructed. “Niall, huff and puff some more – look exhausted, come on! Make them think you’re an easy target! Louis, you’re Liam’s walking stick and your priority is him, so you’re not focused properly, right? And Zayn… you’re… well, I can’t think of everything! Act like easy pickings!”

Normally, she would have been resented for taking charge so swiftly, but miraculously, nobody argued; they were desperate for someone to take control, and grateful to her for shouldering the burden. They all scrambled to follow her instructions.

The door creaked, and five heads snapped up in alarm – even Liam’s, although he let it loll wearily against his chest a few seconds later in a facade of exhaustion. They all looked anxiously around, knowing full well that Cheren could be standing behind any one of them at any moment, waiting to pounce. None of them particularly liked the idea.

“If we’re going to get cornered, let’s do it somewhere else. I don’t want them to catch us here, just in case we need to get away and still need a place to go. Come on.” Commandingly, Zayn grabbed hold of Eithne’s hand and yanked her so hard that she squeaked in shock, and then he had whisked her out of the door and was sprinting down the street, still dragging her by the hand and not even allowing her a moment to pause for breath.

Admittedly, nobody was comfortable with the idea of being cornered on common ground; the house was kind of like a haven to them. Niall shrugged and started rushing after them, and still pretending to support Liam, Louis followed, hastily slamming the door behind him, and the five of them set a steady pace as they thudded around the corner, Zayn leading the way with Eithne stumbling along behind him.

It took Niall a minute or so to catch up to Zayn, who took long loping strides on his long legs, but he managed to match the pace he had set and before long he was mere inches behind the Bradford boy, determined that he wouldn’t be the one to plead for Zayn to slow up. “Zayn – Zayn! Where are we going? Do you have any idea where we’re going?” he panted.

“Leading them away,” Zayn said shortly, “as far away from home as possible, and as quickly as possible, so we can at least make some kind of attempt to get this back on our own terms. We were supposed to be in control of the situation and now we’ve kind of lost it – just as well, I suppose; you’re a terrible actor, did you know?”

“I had heard the rumour,” Niall said dryly. Well, as dryly as one can whilst running for one’s life. “But did you have anywhere specific in mind, Zayn? Because that’s kind of vague, y’know – not very helpful.”

For a minute or two, Zayn considered that, frantically scanning the skyline with his brown eyes and looking for a suitable building for them to vanish into, one which would be abandoned yet not completely derelict, and a respectable distance from the home they were struggling to lead Felix away from. Beside him, Niall panted heavily, and Eithne choked for breath in as dignified a manner as possible, and the sounds of footfalls and huffing for breath was the only sound. They could practically see smoke coming out of Zayn’s ears, he was thinking so hard; his mind spinning through a thousand possibilities even as his eyes quickly roved over the buildings as they flashed past.

“That one,” he said all of a sudden, pointing at what appeared to be an old warehouse building that towered over them. The windows were boarded up, the door swung off its hinges. It was hardly the trickiest building to infiltrate, and not the most subtle of choices, but subtlety wasn’t really on their list of priorities.
The five of them veered quickly towards the building, Zayn leading and dragging Eithne beside him while Niall hurried only a few inches behind them and Louis and Liam brought up the rear, Liam still convincingly limping while Louis made an excellent job of pretending to support him. Zayn kicked open the already ajar front door with a bang, making as much noise as possible, and they all scurried inside like a troupe of terrified mice, darting through the doorway and into the shadows.

“They’re tracking us,” Niall said breathlessly, “so they might find the house anyway, but if Cheren saw which way I went, and they follow the scent that’s freshest, then there’s a chance they might miss it.”

“Let’s hope they do,” answered Zayn, “we’ve gone to enough trouble to make it obvious that we’re here. Is everybody all right?”

“Yep,” came Liam’s slightly hoarse answer.

“Fine here,” chirped Louis.

Bending over double with his hands on his knees in an attempt to catch his breath, Niall chimed in breathlessly, “Yeah, yeah, I’m all right too,” waving a hand dismissively, like he didn’t matter.

Zayn didn’t need to clarify whether or not Eithne was all right; he had her so tightly clamped against his side that he could feel every time she breathed. Nodding, he looked warily towards the door, where the only light in the room was filtering in through the open doorway. There were more shadows than light, darkening their faces so that they looked like eerie shadow people, puppets, almost, and even Liam’s tired but welcoming face looked a little ethereal and weird – but there was just enough light to see by, so that they could see the profiles of each other, vaguely make out who was who and where everybody was. It was better than pitch blackness. Taking a deep breath, Zayn hugged Eithne, clapped Liam on the shoulder in a brotherly manner, and then nodded at Niall and Louis, who were both looking around rather nervously at the darkness and the gloom that surrounded them suffocatingly like a thick sheet that numbed their senses and shrouded everything in fuzzy confusion. It was like the dampener on their sight had lessened their other senses as well, leaving them disorientated and uncertain.

“Okay. So here we are. It probably won’t take them long to find us if they really were as close behind us as Niall said they were, in fact, from the sounds of it, they were right behind us, so we should probably just stay here until –”

The door slammed, cutting him off, and Zayn abruptly fell silent as the room was plunged into darkness. Someone grabbed Niall’s wrist and wouldn’t let go, and he couldn’t tell whose hand it was (although it felt like quite a petite hand, so it might have been Eithne) and squeezed him in a vicelike death grip that made him flinch. It was like a scene from a bad horror movie; suddenly they were plunged into darkness. The door creaked and swung open ever so slightly, broken as it was so that it wouldn’t properly close, so that the tiniest crack of light spilled out into the room, leaking a sliver of light onto Zayn’s face. He swallowed.

“Boys,” Niall whispered, “I get the feeling that we’re not completely alone.”

With his free hand, he conjured flames in the palm of his hand, holding them out in front of him like a torch. They grew in size, leaping higher and higher, illuminating the room so that he could see that the person who was gripping his arm hard enough to cut off the circulation to his fingers was in fact Louis.

Embarrassed, Louis sheepishly let him go, and Niall sucked in a breath and rubbed his hand to try and massage some feeling back into his fingers. “Sorry,” whispered Louis.
“S’okay,” Niall whispered back, and then he raised his voice and said a little fiercely, “we don’t like being messed around, so stop playing these mind games and show yourself, you cowardly twats! Stop hiding in the dark and the shadows – come out, come out, wherever you are.” He was astonished at himself; his own daring, the taunts coming out of his own mouth. “Unless you’re too scared, that is…”

“Scared,” Felix grumbled, “now you just wait til we get our hands on you, then we’ll see who’s scared…”

“Felix! Shut up!” Cheren hissed, and there was the sound of a grunt and skin colliding with skin as Cheren presumably elbowed his little brother in the gut.

“Right, so we’re not alone,” Louis said. “That’s all we needed to know; thank you!” Then he tugged on Niall’s sleeve and bolted, and the rest of them chased after him, their feet thudding on the dirty wooden floorboards as they sprinted off into the darkness, knowing that for the chase to be convincing, they would have to make at least some kind of effort to get away.

“Where are we going?” Liam hissed urgently.

“You should know!”

“Yeah, well, clearly I have about as much idea as you do, and that’s the problem! You don’t have a plan, Louis!” They thudded across the room, and Liam’s shin collided with some stairs; he swore, then yanked the nearest person and gave them a shove; aided slightly in vision by infrequent bursts of flame from Niall, who was struggling with the dilemma of whether it was more important to help them see or prevent them from being easily spotted in the darkness. “Until you have a plan, I can’t see a thing; I’m as clueless as the rest of you, which means we’re screwed!” Clearly agitated by being, by his definition, blind, Liam was impatient for once.

“Plans are for people with no imagination. Improvisation never did Napoleon any harm.”

“Napoleon didn’t improvise! Learn your history – but first move your arse; they’re catching up!”

Louis let out a short whine of disapproval at being shouted at, but rather than waste time arguing, he obediently put on a burst of speed, and along with the rest of them, vanished into the darkness with the twins clumsily blundering around on the lower floor that they had left behind.

“Oh, God, sorry –” in his haste to stop standing on Eithne’s small, canvas-clad foot, Louis stumbled backwards and ended up stomping on Niall’s instead, tripping over his ankle, and would have fallen onto Liam as well had Liam not known that he was going to do it and had the foresight to both step smartly backwards and reach out to catch him before he could go sprawling to the floor with a thud and giving their whereabouts away.

“Watch yourself, Louis,” he whispered into Louis’ ear, and then releasing him and sidling back into the darkness again, allowing the shadows to fall like a curtain across his face while he closed his eyes, pressed his fingers against his temples and returning to his world of scanning and examining and sifting through possible futures, discarding useless events and trying to make sense out of the important ones. Liam’s power would never be easy to handle, but there was no way he was going to give up on it. Whether he’d ever gain complete mastery over his abilities remained to be seen; perhaps he was destined to live in a perpetual struggle between balancing the future and the present for the rest of his life. But he wasn’t going to get complacent, or lazy, and if he never managed to completely master it, he’d spend his whole life trying.

“Should we show ourselves yet?” Niall hissed. “Li? What’re you getting? Li. Liam.” He tugged a little impatiently on his friend’s sleeve.

“Working on it,” Liam promised patiently, sounding worn rather than irritable, which he had every right to be – if their roles had been reversed, the headaches, indistinct visions and constant badgering for more details from the others would have driven Louis mad in the space of days – Liam just dealt with it. With remarkably good grace, actually.

They all shuffled uncomfortably in the darkness, awaiting Liam’s verdict for what their next movement should be. Nobody spoke, allowing him to concentrate, but the tension in the room was a physical thing; they could all feel it in the tightness of their chest, the short sharpness of their breaths, the way their eyes flickered tensely from wall to wall, making sure that nobody was sneaking up on them. They wanted to be found, true, but nobody felt comfortable with the idea of being crept up on, somehow. It wouldn’t feel as much like their own plan if they didn’t see it coming, was the unanimous verdict. Understandable, really. They hadn’t thought any of it through anywhere near as well as they’d thought they had.

“I can definitely see something,” Liam said slowly, “but it’s indistinct…uncertain…I can’t get a clear fix on it; could you just move a little to the right, please, Eithne?”

Confused, she blinked her grey eyes at him, but obediently stepped sideways, and Zayn came with her, his hand resting protectively on her arm as he sidled to the right by her side, not moving an inch away from her. He was stunningly protective of the girl.

“That’s better…now to the left? About eight steps should be fine.” There was an almost dreamy tone to his voice, like he wasn’t completely there, and his eyes were vague.

A frown creased Eithne’s forehead, but she followed his instructions, her lips moving and silently framing numbers as she counted the exact number of steps that Liam had dictated. Her expression was wary. Coming to a stop, she looked anxiously at the space which she had just vacated, keeping a close eye on it.
“Thank you,” Liam said, and then he snatched up a long, flat piece of wood off the ground and swung it violently in a neat, vicious arch right through the space which Eithne had previously occupied – except before it could swish through the apparently empty space, there came the sound of a harsh thunk, the sound of wood smacking against skin, and a yell, and there was a loud thud as an invisible body hit the floor, knocked right over by Liam’s perfectly calculated swipe. Dust billowed around Cheren in enormous golden clouds, framing the shape of his body as it settled on him where he lay stunned on the ground, flat on his back and shell-shocked by the impact and the suddenness with which he had slammed into the floor.

Groaning, he wavered into view, looking dizzy, and sprawled motionlessly for a few minutes on the ground with a dazed expression. Horrified, they all leapt backwards in disgust, and Liam raised the board and swiftly brought it back down again; had he not regained some sense and abruptly rolled over and out of the way, it would have cracked down hard on his head. As it was, Cheren was left struggling to scramble to his feet, still a little unsteady and confused.

Without saying another word, Louis planted his hands on Niall’s back and hurriedly started shoving him along, seeming to realize that the blond was too surprised by what had just happened to start moving on his own. The rest of them followed him, silent in their mutual appreciation for what Liam had just done. Later, they would all be thumping him on the back to congratulate him, but at that moment, their main concern was running – they all seemed to have forgotten that they were supposed to be getting caught.

Zayn remembered first – he stopped dead, holding up a finger to stop them, and Niall crashed right into him, steered by a steely Louis, who was going to let nothing stand in his way. “Wait!” he ordered. “Stop running.”

“How are you mental? Keep moving,” Louis snapped in Niall’s ear, giving him another shove, “don’t listen to him, keep moving!” Niall obstinately let his knees lock, refusing to move another inch, and Louis’ frantic pushes were in vain. “What the hell are you doing? Niall, move!”

“No more running,” Zayn said firmly. “We can’t outrun an invisible guy, or a teleporter. Who can walk through walls. You’d have to be crazy to think we could get away from them. We stand a far better chance by trying to fight.” Sidling closer to Louis, he whispered into his ear, words flying from his mouth so quickly that they blurred together and Louis barely caught them, “the plan was that we let them catch us, remember? I know your instinct is to run, but if the choice is fight or flight, and we need to get caught, fight is our best option. Remember what they would have done to Niall? And what they might be doing to Harry right this instant? Come on, Lou. Are you with us? Strike a blow, for Harry’s sake?”

Louis nodded sharply and stepped back to get himself a little room to manoeuvre, his expression hardening. “I don’t know how the hell we’re supposed to fight, though. My power’s purely defensive; I’ve no idea how you expect me to work with that. And Liam, what’s Liam going to do? Predict them to death?”

“It’s my job to worry about that. You leave that to me.” Liam clapped him on the shoulder, looking strained. “I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve; don’t you worry.”

She looked more determined than scared, but as Eithne’s fingertips brushed Zayn’s elbow, she looked a little unsure of herself. “What about me? I haven’t any powers. What do you want me to do?”

He licked his lips contemplatively, then dropped to his knees, felt around on the floor and with a scrape of metal on wood, retrieved what looked like a bit of old piping. Wordlessly, he offered it to her, and she took it without complaint, although her nose wrinkled as her fingers tightened around
“Whack them,” he advised, “and don’t be shy about it. I’ve seen you get aggressive – unleash that inner anger. Think about that time you told me to load the dishwasher and I accidentally dropped six plates and smashed them on the floor. Are you thinking about that?”

Eithne’s livid expression spoke for itself; she settled into a kind of crouching position with the bar raised aggressively over her head, like a cricket bat, preparing to take a swing at the next person to come too close. “Oh, I’m ready.”

For a moment, Zayn allowed a tiny smile to dance across his face as he watched her, and then he nodded to himself. “Excellent.”

“I can’t start hurling fireballs around or setting myself alight in here. There’s too much wood around. The whole place would go up.”

“I agree,” said Louis, “but I’ve figured something out. I think if we can lock some fireballs into my force fields, then they’ll be hot enough to burn people, but the flames will be locked inside, so they can’t set things on fire. You’re pretty much impervious to heat, right? If I can make the fields fast enough, could you throw them?”

Niall answered by cupping his hands into a fist, then hurling a fireball upwards. Louis immediately flicked a force field after it in response – one that flickered into existence around the ball of flames, and then dropped straight downwards, landing easily in Niall’s waiting hands. He took a few moments to test the weight of it, roll the fist-sized ball of heat around in his hands, familiarize himself with it, and then he nodded at Louis and stepped back, tossing the ball from hand to hand as he prepared to throw it.

They had no more time to prepare as Felix leapt straight through the wall beside Niall, landing like a cat on the balls of his feet, shockingly close. Niall being Niall, he hesitated for just a split second before he raised the ball high above his head, and brought it crashing down with the weight of a bowling ball and the heat of an oven, right down on Felix’s head.

After that, they all reacted pretty instinctively, like they were a whole unit rather than four shocked adolescents struggling to cope with the fact that they had been thrust into a fight that they didn’t intend to win. Louis knocked the winded Felix to the ground with another force field, momentarily pinning him to the floor, and then Zayn snatched him up and sent him flying towards the ceiling, then back down again, with such an almighty crash that they were surprised that the boy’s skinny body didn’t burst right through the floorboards and fall right down to the bottom floor. They all stared at his groaning, barely stirring fall in utter shock, astonished at themselves. They’d fought, and for the moment at least, it seemed like they’d won. The whole thing had lasted a matter of seconds.

Stunned, Niall let the fireball contained inside Louis’ force field flicker and die, dampened and extinguished by his lack of concentration. They were plunged into darkness.

A high-pitched, piercing scream made them all jump, and they all floundered helplessly, whirling around as they struggled to locate the source of the noise. By the time another little ball of flames had blossomed hastily in Niall’s right hand, the cry had cut off with a low, gurgling whimper, and the only sounds were Felix moaning weakly on the floor as he struggled to raise his head, the flames in Niall’s hand crackling, and the typical creaks and groans of an old building as the fragile infrastructure realized that it was once again being relied upon to offer support to something other than simply itself, and didn’t seem to like it much.

All heads in the room turned expectantly to Louis, like they thought he might have made the noise –
all except for Liam’s; Liam had buried his face in his hands once again, and stood in silence, trying to see.

“What?” Louis asked defensively, wrapping his arms around himself. He pretended not to notice his voice cracking slightly. “I know I’m a little bit camp, but I’m not that bad.”

“Who was it, then? Who screamed?” There was an edge to Niall’s voice that he didn’t much like; fear did strange things to his accent, warping it so that it sounded harsh and snappy.

Zayn spoke up, then, although not to admit to making the ridiculously girlish sound. His brown eyes were wide, and he kept looking frantically around himself, hands grasping fruitlessly at empty air as he struggled to catch hold of someone who no longer stood beside him. “Eithne?” he said faintly, and then panic started bleeding through onto his expression. He paled and his mouth fell open, letting a low gasp escape as he spun around, still searching, eyes flickering from wall to wall and not finding the familiar gleam of white-blond hair that he was searching for. “Eithne? Where’s Eithne?”

“Where’s Felix?” Louis demanded, having turned back to the place where they had left the dark-haired boy writhing on the floor and found that he wasn’t there anymore.

“Peek-a-boo!” And then a giggle. Like Cheren thought this was some kind of crappy, clichéd movie. But he didn’t show himself.

“Eithne!” They’d never heard Zayn panic before, or seen him get scared, but he’d officially lost it. Twisting around and around like a dog trying to chase its own tail, his head whipping back and forth as he searched for the blonde girl, he had none of his restraint left. He just looked terrified.

“Zayn,” Louis said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Zayn,” repeated Liam.

“Not now,” he growled, “Eithne! Eithne, where are you? Eithne!”

“Zayn!”

Only her voice was enough to break through his desperation; Zayn’s head snapped up and he started sprinting towards the source of the noise. Swearing, Liam sprinted after him, trying to grab hold of his arm; in the darkness, Louis, Niall and Liam were linked together, clinging to each other’s sleeves, belt loops, anything they could hold onto really to make sure that they didn’t lose each other in the darkness.

They chased Zayn though gaping open doorways, along corridors, twisting and turning towards Eithne’s voice. He could probably have found a far quicker way if he’d thought logically, but for the first time since any of them had met him, Zayn was panicking. So he simply followed the sound of Eithne’s semi-hysterical cries. Sprinting on his long legs, he was near impossible to catch; not even running for his life, but for hers. His eyes were wide, the brown turning cold and hard with panic, like frozen mud, and his caramel skin had turned pale. Every time he faltered, uncertain, his head would whip back and forth until another piercing scream rippled through the corridors, as if she knew every time he lost his way and was giving him a new opportunity to find her…guiding him, almost.

When they found her, she was not alone. Cheren had his arm around her neck in a gesture which should have been an embrace, but clearly was intended to be menacing; he was grinning a little, and running his long fingers down the slender column of her throat, stroking up and down and provoking little whimpering cries to burst from between her teeth. Now that they’d arrived, and she’d stopped
hysterically shrieking for Zayn (something which Louis suspected that Cheren had induced, forcing her to scream; judging by the tight line that her lips were now pressed into, holding back most of her sobs, she was fiercely proud and would not have screamed for help willingly) Cheren seemed to be enjoying the opportunity to wickedly caress her, threatening her somehow. Every so often, she’d choke on a sob which she was desperately trying to withhold, and her eyes kept fluttering closed as she shuddered in disgust. Zayn’s jaw clenched, echoing the sentiment; he didn’t like Cheren’s long white hands being on her any more than she did.

“I’d watch where you’re placing your hands, if I were you.”

Cheren raised his eyebrows and lowered his gaze to her throat, his fingers slowly drifting downwards, dipping just underneath the neckline of her borrowed hoodie and making her shudder in distaste. “Why?” he asked tauntingly. “Is she yours?”

“No,” said Zayn. “She isn’t anyone’s. She’s nobody’s property but her own, and correct me if I’m wrong, but she doesn’t particularly want your filthy hands on her. So I’d advise you to re-evaluate exactly what you’re doing, and then let Her Go.”

“Tell you what; why don’t we let the lady decide? Tell us, then, darling – would you like me to let you go, or would you rather stay right here with me, hmm?”

Eithne opened her mouth, and then slammed it shut again with a snap, closing her eyes and leaning back against Cheren, resting her head on his neck in what could be interpreted as ecstasy, but her expression proved to be terror. Zayn’s own eyes narrowed in outrage as he spotted a flash of metal hovering around her ribs.

“Oh, so you’re going to hold her at knifepoint – that’s not what I’d call letting her decide.”

“People have strange definitions of free will these days. Besides, I’m just polishing my knife on her hoodie, that’s all.” He leered at her. “Maybe she likes living a little…dangerously. Right, hon?”

Eithne stayed stonily silent; he pressed the blade against her ribs, and they all heard her sharp intake of breath as first one tear, then a second spilled down her colourless cheeks. “Right, hon?”

“Y-yeah,” she choked, all but paralysed with fright.

“See!” he crowed, raising his eyebrows at Zayn. “What did I tell you? Feisty young girls are easily bored…they crave excitement. That’s something I can most definitely give,” Cheren purred against Eithne’s neck.

“Let her go. LET HER GO, YOU LITTLE SHIT!” It took the combined efforts of both Liam and Louis to restrain Zayn, who was just about ready to knock the smirking dark haired boy to the floor and slash him to bits with the very knife he was threatening Zayn’s girlfriend with. None of them were completely sure when she had started meaning so much to him, but seeing the way he’d lost his cool, the rage in his eyes and the way his face had paled while his ears glowed scarlet with anger, the way he lunged and struggled violently against the restraining hands of his friends…it was enough to show Liam that his prediction had been completely correct; somehow, amongst the whispered conversations and covert floating kisses and the many extra hours of watch duty that Zayn had stolen from the other boys, ‘keeping guard’ over the girl until they had almost all forgotten that they’d ever guarded her in the first place. Somehow, in her relationship with Zayn, care for Niall when he’d gone astray, and all of her calmness and gentle guidance in their next actions, they’d all grown to trust her – Zayn, most implicitly of all. And Liam had known that Eithne would one day mean more to Zayn than anyone else did, but he hadn’t expected it to happen so suddenly, or for Zayn to be so unashamedly desperate about it.
Cheren tutted patronizingly. “Language! Ooh, you foul mouth. Girls don’t like swearing, you know. Along with spitting, and leaving the toilet seat up, swearing is right up there on the list of their pet hates. They absolutely despise it!”

Zayn snarled – and then his whole body went limp, shocking Liam and Louis into loosening their grips. Only that had been his plan all along, and he threw his weight back against them, breaking free. With a hiss of triumph, he launched himself at Cheren and Eithne, and rather than grabbing the girl as they all expected, he grabbed Cheren, twisting him into a vicious headlock and almost turning him upside down. Gurgling, his face turning red, Cheren released Eithne but had the presence of mind to hang on to the knife, which he tried to turn on Zayn.

In the end, he managed to lightly graze Zayn’s stomach with the sharp blade, and when Zayn yelped in pain, Cheren took advantage of his distraction and threw him off, knocking him back on top of Eithne. Zayn’s hand closed around one of her slender wrists, and he hurriedly rolled off her, so that he wouldn’t hurt her. She was shaking, sobbing quietly, curled up into a ball with her head tucked in, cheek pressed against the floor as she cried. Zayn draped an arm over her waist, feeling her tremble, trailing a hand down her spine, and for a moment he seemed to forget that Cheren was standing over him, panting and bent double as he struggled to catch his breath. His face was purple, but Zayn was focused on Eithne’s, which was white. One of his thumbs lightly grazed her cheekbone, swiping a salty bead of moisture from a few centimetres beneath her bluish grey iris. There were more of them clinging to her eyelashes.

“Hey,” he whispered against her hair, feeling it slide against his lips. “Don’t cry, sweet. I’m here.”

She only sobbed harder, fingers twisting in the fabric of his shirt, nails digging into the back of his hand, shaking all over. Zayn hated to see her that way; he lay flat down on the floor, his back to the threat, leaving himself completely vulnerable and with pain from the cut on his stomach spiking through his torso like someone had strapped a cactus to his abdomen. Not that he cared about that – his world now consisted of four colours: the crimson of his hoodie that she wore, the pale, murky blue of her frightened eyes, the pale blonde of her flowing hair where it was spread around her head on the floor like an enormous white-blond halo (either she’d shaken the bobble out of her hair, or someone had pulled it out, because a light golden waterfall had cascaded down her shoulders, released from the restraints of the band) and her usually creamy skin, turned papery white with shock.

“Did he hurt you, love? Just show me where.” His hands fluttered helplessly over the lines of her quivering body, lingering hesitantly over the lines and curves of her as she shook weakly, too shaken even to answer him. “Tell me now, and I’ll tear him apart. You can watch, or you can close your eyes, I don’t care. I’ll rip him into pieces and then flush the pieces down the toilet and throw that toilet off a cliff…”

Despite herself, Eithne giggled, her laughter contorted with sobs. She managed a brave little smile, her eyes glistening with tears as she squeezed his hand, removing it from the soft curve of her waist so she could squeeze it, hard. “You’re ridiculous.”

His answering smile was small, but instant, and encouraging.

Before he could answer, Cheren had dived down on top of him and was wrestling with him from behind while Niall and Liam fought to drag him off and Louis swore as he frantically hurled force fields into their midst, where they bounced off people’s heads, blossomed between them and made the whole job an awful lot harder, and all the while Cheren was flailing around with a flick-knife in his hand, in serious danger of ripping enormous holes in people. Louis’ main concern right then was getting their most vulnerable element, Eithne, out of harm’s way.
Eventually, at a loss, he yelled, “Eithne! Roll!”

With her hands protectively over her head, Eithne rolled over, across the floor and away from the skirmish with a whimper that went unheard in the scuffle – and the moment she was far enough away from the fight, a field bubbled around her and then she was safe, hands pressed up against the bubble as she stared, panic-stricken, at the four boys grappling on the floor.

Zayn landed an angry but calculated punch into Cheren’s gut just as Liam snatched Niall out of the way in anticipation of the knife that narrowly missed puncturing his stomach. Realizing that he was being overwhelmed, Cheren decided to say a fond farewell to dignity by responding as he often did; calling for assistance on his little brother.

“FELIX!”

Felix came leaping through the wall rather like a ballet dancer, a fan of theatrics as always, with an enormous grin on his face, arms extended as if he was about to pirouette. Clearly he was enjoying the idea of completely humiliating his brother and being his last hope at the same time. Yet his stupidity backfired; he jumped straight through the chipped concrete wall, and fell over one of Niall’s legs that was sticking out as he rolled around on the floor hanging onto Cheren’s knees, growling as he struggled to let him go.

“Yes, brother dear? You c – holy shit!” With a yell, Felix fell over and hit the floor with a smack, hands flying out to catch himself. Disconcertingly, he went right through the floorboards up to the elbows before he managed to right himself, grabbing something inside the floor and using it to halt his fall. He pushed himself back up through the floor, sat up, and then stared in utter shock at the fighting boys. “Cheren, what –”

Without giving him a chance to finish his question, Cheren yelled “PLAN B, LIX. PLAN B!”

Felix’s face hardened; apparently the phrase meant far more to him than it did to anybody else. Hooking his foot around Niall’s leg, which he’d tripped over in the first place, he reached out and pressed the flat of his hand against the bubble which Eithne was caught in, the bubble that Louis had a protective hand on, meaning that as Niall hung on to Cheren, who was having his hair pulled by Liam and punches rained down on his chest by Zayn, they were all interconnected, all touching each other. And Zayn lifted his head and realized with a sinking feeling what was about to happen, that the twins had lain far more careful plans than theirs, and that he couldn’t even shout out a warning to the others because he would barely have time to open his mouths. Their bodies were tangled, linked, and a link was all Felix needed.

A wicked grin lit up Felix’s face as he made eye contact with Zayn.

The world convulsed sickeningly and then twisted inwards on itself and ripped apart, combusting around them in an explosion that painted flames onto the insides of his eyelids, and all Zayn could hear was his own voice relentlessly chanting swearwords like some kind of horrible prayer, keeping him sane because at least there was something real in the world…and he could hear Niall echoing, spitting even more profanities that spilt from his lips even faster than they fell from Zayn’s. And he could hear Eithne crying. She sounded like a tortured kitten.

That sound curled around him like a horrible, icy cold blanket as Felix whisked them all away, and he closed his eyes so that he didn’t have to see the colours pulsing and trickling before his eyes like someone had jumped on a cartful of citrus fruits, and not only were the painfully bright colours (acid green, livid orange, bright yellow) trickling together in a hideous mash of ugly neon shades, but the juices were filling his eyes as well, oozing through his body, searing every inch of him with the pain you get when you smear lemon juice in a cut. But Eithne’s sobs were still louder than his own
agonized screams.
“Where the hell did they go?”

Zayn was on his feet almost as soon as he knew there was something for him to stand on, and his
head whipped back and forth as he frantically searched for any sign of the twins, who didn’t seem to
be anywhere. Nowhere that he could see, anyway. Grimacing, he dropped to his knees, held out his
hand and helped Eithne to her feet, because it felt like the sort of thing one should do in these
situations. Chivalry wasn’t entirely dead, after all – it would only die if you let it. And Zayn favoured
the old fashioned ways; opening doors for girls, lending his jacket to them when it was cold, kissing
them in the rain, ladies first, all of that stuff.

She squeezed his fingers so hard he thought they might break, and her hands were freezing cold
and clammy. Her whole face was completely drained of colour, and she was still shaking. Hastily, Zayn
put his arm around her to hold her up, but he didn’t like the look of the nasty cut that she’d somehow
acquired on one cheek, didn’t much like any form of injury, especially ones that involved blood, so
he averted his gaze. She looked awful, but he wasn’t about to tell her so.

Apparently, either Niall could no more put etiquette into use than Liam could spell it, or he’d just
forsaken it as a waste of time, because he sat bolt upright, his mouth hanging open in surprise, and
tactlessly blurted out, “Wow, you look like shit.”

“Cheers for that, Niall. Just what I wanted to hear; thank you so much.” She looked like a flimsy
puppet being held up by nothing but a couple of weak strings and Zayn’s supportive arm, but he
decided that her retention of her ability to use sarcasm was a good sign.

Louis picked himself up off the floor, dusting his knees down and glancing around him, looking for
Cheren and Felix with his forehead creased into a frown. “Where’s Tweedledum and
Tweedledumber?”

“God knows. Not here, which I’m going to say is a good thing.”

“Yeah, but neither is Harry, and we only came here for him – there’s no sign of him anywhere,
which I’m going to say is not a good thing.” He was quite literally twitching in his desperation to
find Harry, to touch him, hold him, maybe even just look at him, and it was a little unnerving to see
his almost spasmodic little twitches, especially when witnessed out of the corner of your eye.

“Well, they were hardly going to have him propped up in the hallway like the bad guys’ equivalent
of an umbrella stand, were they? He’ll be around here somewhere, just out of sight. Use your head,
Louis.”

“How can I? How can I use my head, Zayn, when he’s all that’s in it? You tell me that!” His voice
cracked, but he pretended not to notice or care. “I wake up, and he’s in my mind. I’m drifting off to
sleep, and he’s still there. He’s even in my dreams – just his voice, sometimes; his laugh, him
murmuring in my ear, or I feel him touching me…I’m going insane, he’s all I can think about, and I
haven’t a clue where he is or how he is or whether or not he hates me, which by all rights he should.
So I hope you’ll forgive me if I seem a little fractious!” Louis yelled.

“Keep your voice down!”

“Why bother? They know where we are.”

Stop arguing with me. I don’t want to pick a fight with you, Louis; not here, not now. We need to
find out what they’re up to, and yelling at each other like three year olds won’t help. Liam, are you getting anything?” Zayn turned on him, only to find Liam curled up on the floor twitching even more than Louis, his eyes shut, fingers pressed against his temples, struggling with some kind of internal dilemma. His lips were pressed so tightly together in a sharp white line that for a moment Zayn thought someone might have superglued his mouth shut.

“Divide and conquer,” he muttered nonsensically, and before anyone could interrupt, he held up a hand to indicate that they should shut up. “They’ll work to split us up, one by one, so they can deal with us easier. Deino’s lurking in some of the outer corridors, waiting to ambush us…Felix is somewhere near the middle, but he keeps walking through walls, it’s wrecking my head! God knows where he’ll be in ten minutes; he’s flitting from room to room like a butterfly. Cheren is a couple of corridors away, waiting for us to catch up…” Liam groaned. “My head –”

Unfortunately, Louis wasn’t in a particularly sympathetic mood; leaping forwards, he grabbed Liam by the shoulders and shook him a little, but Liam was a lot more fragile than he looked – so many sleepless nights and horrific visions had taken their toll. He was clumsy and a little bit weak, and therefore Louis underestimated his own strength and shook Liam like a rag doll; he could have sworn he heard something rattling around inside his friend’s head. Too stressed to be regretful, he demanded, “And Harry? Where’s Harry?”

Liam whimpered and slapped at him, and Niall hurriedly rushed forwards and bravely attempted to prise Louis off, peeling his hands away from Liam’s biceps a lot like you pick off a plaster; slowly, carefully, and with immense difficulty. “I don’t…I don’t…yeah, there’s something…a room, and a paper…tears falling, it’s all a mess, I can’t read the words…he’s got a glass of water next to him but his hands are shaking too much to pick it up…can’t pick it up…he’s crying, he can’t see, so many tears, can’t wipe them away…shit!” Liam gasped, and he staggered so that Louis stopped trying to shake him and hurriedly focused on holding him upright instead. “It’s all too much, and it hurts, and he’s crying because he can’t do anything else, and breathing hurts –”

Louis was wide-eyed with panic, feeling himself tremble at the very thought of it all. He could picture it all so clearly; Harry crying out, shuddering in agony, his whole body convulsing, believing that nobody was coming for him…his long-fingered hands shaking over the paper that he could barely see through his tear-blurred vision…his blood running cold and slow while the rest of his body burned, searing with pain through every inch of him…

“Where, Liam?” he demanded impatiently. “Where?”

Liam stirred slightly beneath Louis’ harshly gripping hands, fingers like claws digging into his skin, while Liam’s expression stayed infuriatingly blank, eyes unfocused. His lips moved as he murmured under his breath to himself, partaking in conversations he could see unfolding right in front of him. His mind was too entangled in the threads of the future to be of any help to them in the present. If Louis hadn’t known exactly what was wrong with him, he could have been forgiven for thinking that Liam had been drugged.

He didn’t have time to indulge Liam’s dreamy trances now. Raising his hand, he slapped Liam hard across the face, so that the whole room echoed with the dull smack of skin on skin, and the younger boy’s head jerked satisfyingly as he hissed in pain, jolting back to awareness with his brown eyes filling with irritation and comprehension.

“Ow!” he said indignantly.

“Where?” Louis growled.

“A room…somewhere near the centre of the building…the door is locked, but it’s not a very good
door; it wouldn’t be too hard to break it down...He’s almost lying on the desk now, he needs to sleep, but it hurts too much, he’ll never rest with this pounding in his head –”

“Which room? I don’t care about the furniture, for crying out loud, and it’s no use telling me how hurt he is if I can’t find him to make it stop – I need details Liam!”

Losing his temper, Liam snapped, “I don’t know. What do you want from me, a map? I’m not a sat-nav, Louis; I’m Liam, and I’m trying to help you out here, but the more orders you bark at me, the harder it is to see, and I don’t get to pick and choose the details, so quit asking me questions! I’m telling you all I know! Everything I see is coming out of my mouth right now, so it’d probably be in your best interests to shut up.” Eyes fluttering closed, Liam stood still, chest heaving like he’d run a marathon, and Louis fell reluctantly silent, awaiting more agonizing information about the excruciating agony Harry was in that hit him like a kick in the balls with every syllable that Liam forced out of his mouth.

The next person to make a noise was not Louis, but Eithne, and the sound she made was not a demand, but a sob.

She crumpled underneath Zayn’s touch like a paper doll, white and frail and easily torn, and the sound she made ripped from her throat like tearing paper, too, as she closed her eyes and staggered against him. Instinctively, he caught her, but he wasn’t fully there; as far as he was concerned, it was all some kind of horrible dream.

At least, that was how he felt until the enormous scarlet hoodie rode up and exposed the pale grey polo shirt she wore underneath it, and the horrible deep red stain that was splodged like scarlet ink over her stomach. He laid her carefully down on the floor like a child’s toy, dropped to his knees and his hands fluttered uselessly over her, but he was caught in a horrible, deathly kind of calm; this wasn’t happening to him, how stupid, his girlfriend hadn’t just been stabbed, that never happened to people really, well, it did, but he wasn’t people, he was him, just Zayn Malik from Bradford and this was all completely ridiculous, who on earth went round stabbing people these days, it wasn’t real, it wasn’t real –

He could have believed that she’d tipped a glass of red wine all over herself if he hadn’t known that there was no way she could have gotten any, if he hadn’t seen her shocked expression and the little ‘o’ of surprise that her mouth had stiffened into as her hand fluttered towards her side and the wound that she’d been valiantly pretending wasn’t there for the past five or ten minutes.

Forgetting her modesty, forgetting their horrified audience, forgetting everything, Zayn yanked the shirt upwards and peeled it away from her sticky skin, and found himself struggling not to lose the contents of his stomach to the floor at the sight of the horrific hole in the skin just above her hip, puncturing the slight curve of her stomach. An actual gaping hole, and the skin around it was sticky, painted with red like an angry child had splattered poster paints all over her belly –

But it wasn’t paint, and the truth of the matter was that Eithne had a fucking great hole in her, and Zayn didn’t have a clue what the hell he was supposed to do about that.

He settled for ripping out the lining of the left hand pocket of his jeans (he couldn’t have ripped any other part of his clothes anyway, this wasn’t a shitty movie and clothing fibres were stronger than they looked) and wishing it was cleaner, and then bunching it up and hurriedly pressing it against the awful hole to try and staunch some of the bleeding. It felt kind of like he was cramming the blood back inside her, which made his head spin a little less, anyway, and he remembered a teacher or a first aider or someone on a TV show once saying that you were supposed to apply pressure to a wound for some reason, so he did that, and he pushed.
She whimpered in response, and he swore, because he was hurting her and he didn’t mean to and
God, he’d messed this up, he messed everything up, this was just another rather consequential thing
to add to his list of things he’d messed up, and he was a shit boyfriend and just an all-around shit
guy, really, and what was he supposed to do, he didn’t have a clue about people getting stabbed and
this was all nuts and if she died he was going to – God, no, don’t say that, she isn’t going to die, see,
I’m so fucking stupid –

And he’d thought that he’d kept all of that horrible paranoia locked up safely in his head to torture
him and him alone, and keep well away from everyone else so that they weren’t poisoned by his
panic, but apparently he’d said it out loud and spilled out the whirling contents of his head in front of
them, because she shakily reached up and laid a finger over his mouth to shut him up, and his cheeks
burned, because he’d let his mouth run away with him as always. And he was wasting time being
embarrassed for himself when she was bleeding to death on the floor…

Make her laugh, he told himself. Girls like a funny guy. And if she laughed then maybe it would
make even more blood gush out, make her die faster, her life ebb away quicker, but he couldn’t just
let her lie there gasping raggedly and struggling to keep him calm when that was supposed to be his
job, so he forced himself to say something, anything, as long as it was funny. Laughter is the best
medicine.

“Babe,” he said helplessly, stroking her hair, “babe…you’re bleeding all over the floor, babe, you’re
gonna have to stop that, because you’re making a right mess and someone’s gonna have to clear that
up –”

She choked, eyes fluttering closed, and for a horrible moment he thought he’d killed her, until they
opened again, pain clouding the usually clear blue, and he realized that the horrible gurgling noises
she was making were laughter. “Yeah, sorry about that. Looks like you’re going to have to get some
rubber gloves and a mop and wipe it all up later…”

“Nah, not me. Do these look like hands that scrub floors?” He held up one of his shaking hands for
her to see, and imagined that she was admiring the smooth, unbitten crescents of his nails, the lack of
scars or marks, the smooth skin that stretched over his knuckles. “Louis can do it. It’s about time the
princess got down on his knees and put his backside into something other than Harry’s lap, am I right
or am I right?”

“Charming,” Louis snorted, and suddenly he was beside them, crouching on his knees on the
opposite side of Eithne, his hand rubbing up and down one of her arms to try and warm her up a bit;
there were goosebumps littered all over her skin as the warmth ebbed out of her at the same
frightening speed as her blood. “I haven’t put my arse anywhere near Harry yet, more’s the pity. Ah
well, there’s still time…” He provoked another short wheeze of laughter from Eithne, gave her a
comforting smile, and then anxiously glanced at Zayn. “She’s freezing,” he whispered, “and she’s
losing blood fast. We need to get her to a hospital or something.”

“I’ve been putting pressure on it –”

“Yeah, and that’s great, but she’s still losing a serious amount of blood, Zayn; she won’t last more
than twenty minutes at the most, not at this rate. Besides, look at her – she’s drifting in and out of
consciousness like a yo-yo; she can’t hold out for much longer. She might be a fighter, but that’s a
serious wound she’s got there.” He protectively brushed Eithne’s hair off her forehead and then
checked her pulse, and Zayn was panicking so hard that he forgot to be irrationally jealous of the gay
man whose mother had worked in a hospital and knew what he was talking about, who usually
wouldn’t have so much as brushed past Eithne in the hallway without having his arm ripped off by a
jealous Zayn. “Eithne, honey, stay with us. Come on, don’t fall asleep now – you can’t leave me on
my own with this twat, that’s not fair.”

A hoarse giggle greeted his words, and she sounded like a dying old woman, each breath rattling like a coin inside a tin can; they all winced at the noise. “Not…leaving you alone…with him…Liam and Niall are here…you’re a big boy, I’m sure you can…deal…”

“Nice to see you leaping to my defence, babe. That’s lovely, that is. I’d have thought you’d want to stick around and make sure no funny business goes on – I’m pretty hot, you know. Lou reckons he’s only got eyes for Harry, but I don’t think he’d say no to a chance to cop a feel, you know what I mean? I’m in demand!” Satisfied that he’d coaxed another weak smile out of her, Zayn muttered, “how did the bastard get her? I didn’t see him stab her –”

“Christ knows, but he got her good. We need to get her out of here –” Louis’ gaze flickered upwards and he hissed in triumph. “Skylight! Zayn, there’s a skylight! If I can get a field on that and break the glass, do you reckon you could fly her out of here on your own? I can give you another field for the first couple of minutes, but I don’t know what the range is; I couldn’t guarantee you more than seven or eight minutes before I’d lose concentration and the field would dissipate, and then you’d be on your own –”

“What do you mean? I can’t carry her out of here on my own, are you insane?” Zayn hissed. “I know she’s only little, but where the hell would I go?”

Liam and Niall were beside them too now; Liam determinedly helping Zayn to keep the bloody pocket lining firmly compressed against Eithne’s seeping stomach, along with Niall’s jacket that he’d hurriedly whipped off (“I don’t need it anyway, I don’t get cold anymore” he’d insisted nobly) while Niall let Eithne crush his hand and stared fearfully down at her, biting his lower lip so hard that they were all surprised his teeth didn’t go straight through it.

“Find the first phone box you come to, and call an ambulance,” ordered Louis, looking right into his eyes. “I’ll give you all the help I can, and the guys can come with you if they want, but I’m staying here. I need to find Harry. I’m sorry, but we came here for Harry, and I am not leaving without him, especially not after what Liam’s said. So make your decisions now, guys, but just bear in mind that it’ll be far easier for Zayn to levitate two people than four, and decide quickly, because not to be insensitive, but Harry needs me, and I’m not staying. You’ve got literally two minutes, and then I go.” He got to his feet, brushing his knees down, and his eyes burned as he looked regretfully down at Eithne, clearly feeling awful about abandoning her, but his allegiance to Harry defeated all of the ties he had to the girl, or to anyone, hands down.

Niall patted Eithne clumsily on the shoulder, then rose and went to stand beside Louis, looking pale but steely; clearly he had no intention of being part of the hospital party. He wasn’t about to let Louis go charging off to find Harry on his own!

“I’m with you,” he said. “Harry needs us. Let’s burn the bastards!”

Louis licked his lips and gave him a one-armed hug. “Thanks, Niall. But I’m not asking anyone to take sides, here – it’s not us and them, or anything like that,” he hastily clarified, “the only them is Felix, Deino and Cheren. But I’m staying to find Harry, and you guys need to get Eithne to hospital, so I’m sorry, Liam, but I have to ask – are you with us, or are you with Zayn?”

The decision was apparently harder for Liam than any of them; he stayed kneeling on the floor with indecision flashing across his face for more than a minute, while visions flashed across the insides of his eyelids, painting the future into his mind as he struggled to see which party he would be more helpful to. Eventually, he exhaled heavily, kissed Eithne on the cheek, leaned over her to hug Zayn, and then he joined Louis and Niall too, looking determined.
“I’d only slow you down,” he explained, “stopping every few seconds to scream about what’s going to happen in ten minutes – I’m the ultimate spoiler. People would hate me if I ever went to the cinema again. And I can’t control myself, so I’m going to be more use to Louis. At least I can tell these guys something useful, Zayn.”

“Right.” Zayn scooped Eithne up in his arms, bridal style, and held her for a couple of seconds, meeting all of their gazes with a reserved one of his own. “Well. This is it, then, I suppose.”

“No such luck. We’ll see you later, you tool.”

He snorted a laugh, and then his grip on Eithne tightened slightly and he looked up at the skylight which Louis was flexing his fingers at in preparation to break. “All right, then. See you in hell,” he said, and then a force field hit the glass window like a cannonball. There was a sound like screeching, like squeaky chalk on a blackboard as the glass shattered and dropped with a tinkle to the floor, sparkling like thousands of tiny knives, ready to cleave enormous holes in them if it fell in the right place, if it hit them at the worst possible angle. Niall, Liam and Louis leapt hastily backwards to avoid the falling glass, and encapsulated in a force field, Zayn and Eithne shot towards the ceiling, sailing straight through the gaping hole of the skylight and soaring out of sight.

“Shit,” Niall said shakily, and he breathed out a wobbly laugh, wiping his hands on his sweatpants. “And then there were three.”

“And then there were three,” Louis agreed, and he squeezed the blond boy’s wrist and hoped to God that they hadn’t just set eyes on Zayn Malik for the last time, and they were going to be able to find him again hopefully before too much time had passed.
Chapter 36

His back hit the floor with a horrible crack and a wave of pain slamming straight through his shoulder-blades and filling the rest of him with pain, shocking him so much that his flames were extinguished instantly, and he choked and struggled for breath as he scrabbled for a handhold to pull himself into a sitting position with. The only thing he could be glad of was that at least having the breath knocked out of him had halted his own awful screaming.

He hadn’t meant to scream – in fact, he’d started off by making it a loud and hopefully menacing war-cry as he ran around the room being licked by flames, throwing clumsy fireballs at the right people and struggling to dodge an invisible boy, and a guy who could teleport in the blink of an eye and walk into walls – although both were trying to avoid him, which was something, at least. It made his job a little bit easier. But it was all kind of scary, really, which was why he’d ended up screaming his head off, and he was rather glad to have been stopped.

Still, that didn’t really answer the question of what on earth had collided with him hard enough to knock him several feet across the room, and if it was indeed Cheren, running at a ridiculous speed, why was he not screaming in agony having been set on fire through contact with Niall?

Niall got his answer when he spotted a pale-faced Liam looming over him, who reached out, looped his arm around Niall’s skinny shoulders and helped him to his feet so that they could both watch Louis, who was hurling force fields haphazardly around, making them bounce off the walls as he struggled to get lucky and catch one of the brothers in a conveniently placed field. As he was relying purely on the chance of a fluke, it wasn’t likely that he would succeed, but he looked furiously determined anyway, the fields flying from his fingers at an intensity that made Niall feel dizzy. When he spared his friends a quick glance, Louis saw the blond looking dazed and grimaced apologetically.

“Sorry!” he yelled over the sound of force fields bouncing off the walls, and the constant breeze that Cheren caused every time he whipped past, always gone long before making a grab for him could even occur to anyone.

Niall shrugged at him and then settled into a kind of fighting stance beside Liam like he was about to start doing martial arts, his fingers bursting into flames as he prepared to try and blindly start fighting again. This was one of the least brilliant ideas any of them had ever had, but he wasn’t going to give up. He just needed some way of working out where Felix and Cheren were –

“Liam?” he began urgently into Liam’s ear. “Liam, you told Eithne to move earlier and then you smacked Cheren over the head – how did you know he was there?”

At that moment, Louis chose to colourfully express his feelings with a variety of adjectives beginning with F, B and T to describe Cheren as he blew past in an invisible blur, so Liam had to raise his voice as he replied, “I saw myself doing it, so I knew where he was. If I hadn’t planned to do it, I wouldn’t have seen myself doing it, so it’s a pretty big paradox…why?”

Well, Niall would have been lying if he’d said that didn’t make his head spin, but he didn’t need to know the logistics as long as he knew the basics. “Well, I’m planning to set Cheren’s stupid tufty hair on fire, so if you could see where he was, that would be greatly appreciated!”

There was a short pause, and then Liam’s eyes fluttered closed and he said calmly, so softly Niall barely heard him, “Take a step backwards and then four to your right.”
Niall instantly hopped backwards, staggered in the direction indicated, and then he said a little prayer, whirled around and punched the air with one of his flaming hands in the hope that his clenched fist would collide with something.

He didn’t land a successful punch, nor had he honestly wanted to (the thought of setting someone on fire and watching them burn to death in agonizing agony made him feel incredibly sick) but he did manage to catch the back of Cheren’s jacket with one knuckle, feeling the fabric graze his hand, and then sparks danced between them and flames licked up the back of the garment, meaning that although they couldn’t see Cheren himself, they could see where he was judging by his jacket. And judging by his vicious swearing, Cheren could definitely feel that his jacket had been set on fire.

“There, Louis!” called Niall, pointing at the flickering flames, and Louis instantly whirled towards them and tossed a force field in their direction, which missed Cheren by inches.

Swearing, Louis struggled to create another one, but Cheren danced nimbly out of the way of that one, too, and then he was shrugging out of his jacket and casting it onto the floor with a curse as he stamped on the flames to try and extinguish them. Sensing an advantage in Cheren’s distraction, Louis threw one more blind, panic-stricken field right at him in utter desperation.

By a sheer stroke of luck, the field hit him hard, and they all heard a loud, embarrassing grunt (‘Urgh!’) of surprise fly out of the boy’s mouth as he went down, hitting the floor face first, where he flickered into view and lay there groaning, apparently giving up on everything and forsaking escape for just lying there, drowning in a pool of his own embarrassment and soaking up humiliation like a sponge.

Like a madman, Niall yelled “GET HIM!” as he leapt up and down, pumping his fist and huffing and puffing like a forty year old man at a football match, and Louis was all too happy to oblige. In seconds, Cheren found himself trapped in the centre of a force field around the size of a mini cooper, and apparently noticing the transfer, he sat up, realized what had just happened and his mouth twisted as he rent the air with a selection of choice swearwords, shaking his fist and pummelling the walls of the field with his free hand and his feet. Understandably, Louis took great vindictive pleasure in seeing him trapped like that, and even more pleasure in sending several more force fields towards the one he had trapped Cheren in so that they knocked together, bouncing wildly around and shaking him around like a cat inside a washing machine. He yelled and threatened them at the top of his voice, but Louis laughed all of it off; they all knew full well that he had the black-haired teen right where he wanted him, and his sense of humour was rapidly waning. The smile slid off his face, his eyes tightened, and he stepped forwards to knock on the surface of the force field in the way people are not supposed tap on the glass of the enclosures to wake the animals, but do anyway – only with that rare talent Louis had of being viciously sarcastic and incredibly sassy, he managed to make it ten times more aggravating and even a little insulting.

“Look, boys,” he said coolly, “we’ve got ourselves a bargaining chip.”

Having apparently realized that he was gaining nothing with his aggression and Louis was in full control of the situation, Cheren visibly slumped and then irritably sat down in the bottom of the force field, folding his arms so that his baggy sleeves fell loosely around his hands. “I don’t know what your game is, but it won’t work. Bargaining chip – ha! They won’t swap me for anything, you ought to know that by now.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t be so smug about it; the fact that your own brother doesn’t care enough to consider bargaining with your captors and that you’ll freely admit it isn’t really very funny, is it? It must be lonely, only getting close to people because they’re useful.” Liam said.

Cheren’s expression curled into a scowl. “I have priorities.” He looked a little bit woozy, and Niall
decided to draw attention to it, just to make him uncomfortable.

“Are you all right in there, man? You look a bit green,” he said loudly.

“Shut up,” Cheren muttered, clutching his stomach, “I get claustrophobia.”

That was enough to make Niall feel sorry for him, suffering from the condition himself, but Louis had no such experience, and remained unrelentingly merciless. “Tell you what, let’s play a little game. You give us a bit of information, and we’ll see about making your enclosure a little bigger. If you start bullshitting us, then the size will considerably decrease. Wanna play? Come on,” he said icily, “don’t be a spoil sport.” And the edges of the field flared menacingly as if to emphasize his point.

Cheren warily eyed the edges of the field, cautiously probing a small section of the inside with his fingers, before he wrinkled his nose and seemed to withdraw slightly, shrinking away from the walls of the bubble. “I don’t suppose I have much choice, do I?”

“Nope,” Louis agreed cheerfully, “none whatsoever.” Niall was beginning to feel a little bit bad about this whole coercion thing, and even Liam looked a bit uncomfortable, his mouth twisting with something rather like regret, but Louis was enjoying himself; this was his little bit of payback, for Eithne and Zayn, for himself, and for Harry most of all. From what Liam had said, Harry was in horrific agony, or would be all too long, and that was Cheren’s fault – his, and his obnoxious little brother’s, and not forgetting Deino’s, of course. Louis was going to make him pay for that. “Now, we’ll start with an easy one.” His voice hardened as he demanded, “where’s Harry?”

Surly as usual, Cheren raised an eyebrow defiantly, and then snorted, right in Louis’ face. “Well, there’s a deal-breaker for you right there. You must be even stupider than you look if you think I’m telling you that.”

“Yeah, like you have any choice in the matter,” snapped Louis, his tone like an elastic band pinging viciously against someone’s fingers – Cheren flinched at the sound like Louis had taken the metaphorical elastic band and snapped it right against his face. “Your residence is about to be rather significantly downsized if you don’t start talking pretty quick.” The force field began slowly but visibly receding as Louis’ fingers constricted, millimetres at a time, twisting in on themselves so that the bubble folded inwards, crumpling like a ball of paper and shrinking to the smaller size that Louis indicated.

It could only have gotten three or four inches smaller before Cheren lost his cool and started shrieking “All right! All right! I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you, just stop doing that, for Christ’s sake, I’ll suffocate if you make it any smaller!”

Drama Queen, Louis thought condescendingly, but he halted the shrinking process as promised. “Start talking, or it’s going to get an awful lot more cramped in there than it is right now, you get my drift?”

Cheren whined – yes, whined! – and shifted miserably about, but he obediently rattled off, “We’ve got him in a small room near the back of the building, working on a list of minds to modify; some of our operations have been, shall we say…not clumsy, but handled a little less smoothly than we would like, and we have some people’s mouths that keep running off and need sorting out. We set him to work on that some time yesterday evening; to my knowledge he’s still there.”

“Liar.”

With a flutter, the field withdrew in on itself a good two inches more, and Cheren squealed like a
little girl, hands instinctively flying out and landing on the walls of the bubble as if he could push
them out again, recoiling at the horrible buzzing sensation they gave on the palms of his hands in
response. Clearly the insides of force fields do not appreciate being excessively touched, if Cheren’s
frantic shoving could even be called that. It sounded far too calm a term bearing in mind his blind
panic, the way he was desperately lashing out.

“No, no, it’s the truth! It’s the truth, I swear, I’m not lying, you have to believe me, please, I’m telling
the truth, please, oh god don’t, please, you have to believe me it’s the truth I swear,” Cheren all but
sobbed.

“I know, I was just checking to see if the story stayed consistent or whether you blurted out the
actual truth in response to a little duress,” Louis explained mildly, the field blossoming under his
command, and Cheren shuddered heavily in relief with every inch that it grew.

“You’re an absolute fucker, do you know that?” he said furiously.

Louis seemed to take it as a compliment; his whole face lit up with delight. “I had heard the rumour,”
he said conversationally, “although one could argue the same for you. Now, are there any more of
you? Because I don’t like nasty surprises, and if you and your knob-job of a brother turn out to be
triplets and there’s another one of you nasty pieces of work floating around, I want to know about it
now. Likewise; allies of any kind, give me a list.”

“Harry,” Cheren sneered, looking ridiculously pleased with himself, like he thought that was going
to strike a significant blow to Louis’ esteem. “He’s with us, now – obeys every word we say without
question. He’ll turn your minds into mush with one word from me!”

“Dream on,” Louis told him shortly, “the only word Harry ever obeys is his own. Or possibly his
mum’s. He’s been sabotaging you from the moment he joined you, and he might not have done as
thorough a job as any of us would have liked, but it was most definitely a start, so if that’s the best
thing you’ve got to throw at us, consider me sorely disappointed. I was expecting something far more
impressive than a double-agent who just so happens to be double crossing the opposite side to the
one you thought he was.”

There was a rather nasty silence as Cheren contemplated that.

While they were all watching his thoughts churning away underneath the surface, a frown plastered
across his face, they were all too busy keeping their eye on the boy safely contained in the force field
to think about the one who wasn’t.

Of course, it was Liam who realized what was going to happen first, but as he turned with his mouth
falling open to warn Niall, a hand reached straight through the back of his head, which was quite
possibly the most disgusting sensation he’d ever experienced. It didn’t hurt exactly, but he could feel
Felix’s long fingers twitching around inside him as the younger boy poked his hand right through
Liam’s face and covered his mouth, his wrist and part of his arm still sticking through Liam’s head.
In disgust, Liam bit down hard on his fingers, and Felix stamped on his foot in outrage as a response,
but with a pale hand shoved into his mouth, Liam wasn’t really in a position to be yelling out
warnings.

Niall turned to glance at Liam, looked away, did a double take and then stared at him in utter
revulsion. Being the sadistic moron that he was, Felix obviously thought it would be funny to take
his hand out of Liam’s mouth and give Niall an obnoxious, sarcastic little wave; a flutter of his
fingers that made the blood vanish from Liam’s face as his stomach did back-flips of nausea at the
sight of several waving fingers sticking out of his own face in front of him.
Well, Niall had never been one to downplay his own emotions, especially not horror, so the notion of staying calm and not panicking was not one that he had ever been adept at. Which was why with a yelp of horror, he burst into flames right in front of them; a crackling, leaping inferno almost twice his own height flared up around him in his shock, his own instant defence mechanism that could do more harm than good but that he couldn’t control particularly well anyway, let alone when he was this freaked out.

It had all been planned; perhaps the execution was not as smooth as had been intended, but nonetheless, it had been planned. Because as Niall shook himself desperately in an attempt to extinguish the flames that nobody but Liam (who knew from future experience) never really realized were his greatest weakness as much as they were his greatest asset.

Noiseless in her bright pink ballet flats, far more suitable for this particular operation than the six-inch heels she usually wore, Deino had crept up unnoticed on Niall. When Louis turned towards the commotion and his mouth fell open in surprise, it was far too late for him to stop Deino from giving a wicked, scarlet-coated grin and emptying a bucket of water right over Niall’s head.

The agonized screech that the Irish boy made clawed at all of their ears as the flames extinguished with a hiss, leaving him standing in a patch of blackened floor looking shell-shocked and pale, with his eyes dazed and expression twisted with pain. Apart from the somewhat gentler method of Louis’ fields, nobody had ever extinguished Niall by force before, and apparently it hurt. He whimpered, stared beseechingly at Liam and then dropped to his knees, hands raking on the ground as a low cry was tugged from his lips.

For a moment or so, they all watched him scrabbling helplessly on the floor as if he’d lost something, looking like he’d been smashed over the head with a sledgehammer and making little weak mewling noises like an injured animal. It was when he gave up on patting the ground, slid to the floor and lay down with his eyes closed, his breathing laboured and shallow as if she’d done him some kind of awful harm with the water (which quite possibly she had) that Liam lost his temper.

Violence wasn’t Liam’s way, and the only force he needed was for grabbing her by one bony white wrist and yanking her towards him with a livid expression plastered across his usually friendly face. She squeaked in surprise as he reeled her in like a fish, pressed his lips to her ear and whispered so quietly that nobody else had a chance of hearing.

Her dark eyes widened as he whispered on, and by the time he pulled away and warily wiped his mouth as if even having it near her earlobe could give him some foul disease, Deino was shaking all over. Now, her eyes narrowed suspiciously as she glared at him, her hands clenched into tight fists. She was torn between panic and desperate, angry denial.

“And how do I know you’re telling the truth?” she demanded.

Liam’s faced stayed impressively blank as he told her, “Melanie blames you for it, you know. Your disappearance. She says that was what started the depression. And when you go to the funeral and queue up at the doors with everybody else, she grabs a handful of your hair and pulls it and starts screeching about what a dirty slutty failure you are, and starts a scene right there over the coffin. Just like you know would have been the opposite of what she wanted.” There was a horrified pause as Deino’s hand flew to her mouth, and then he said a little less harshly, “They won’t let you into the church, you know. Not after you make a scene like that. ‘It’s better for everyone’, they’ll say, ‘if you stay away’. You won’t get to pay your last respects.”

Deino gave a low, aching sob with her hands over her face just as Louis snatched the bucket out of her hand and brought it smashing down on her head, so that she crumpled to the floor. She didn’t even cry out. For once, she was reasonably dignified as she dropped to the ground and landed on her
stomach, face turned to the left. Liam grimly grabbed Niall by the arm and helped him to his feet while Louis threateningly whirled the bucket over his head, one hand still outstretched with his fingers splayed outwards, keeping the field in place.

“Nobody move, or I’ll finish her off.”

The twins’ faces were even paler than usual; ashen, almost. “You wouldn’t,” Felix said uncertainly, although he made no move to try and take the bucket from Louis. “You’re one of the good guys. You’d never kill anyone. You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I? I told the love of my life that he was the most disgusting creature I’d ever set eyes on, rejected everything he’d done for me and made him so desperate that he felt he had to leave, and even after I’d done that, he came and offered himself to you tossers because he was so desperate to protect me. I’m going to repay that favour and get him back if it’s the last thing I do, and I have no intention of letting anything or anyone stand in my way, so if I were you, I’d reconsider that statement very carefully.” He threateningly raised the bucket over Deino’s motionless body. “I’m going to ask you again: wouldn’t I?”

Liam turned white at the sound echoing inside his head of Deino’s skull cracking horribly between the floor and Louis’ bucket and he gripped the shaking Niall by the arm so hard that he flinched as he realized that although it hadn’t happened yet, Louis most definitely would.

Cheren realized it, too; he had gone a nasty shade of green. “He means it, Lix,” he said hoarsely. “He would. And he wouldn’t regret it for a moment.”

For a moment, Felix struggled to figure out his next course of action. With his brother restrained and the girl unconscious on the floor, he was going to have to do this on his own, and he didn’t much like the odds – or the responsibility of having Deino’s life in his hands.

His tongue flickered out to wet his lips, startlingly pink compared to the rest of him; he had gone extremely white at the new turn of events. “What do you want?”

“We’re going to do a little deal,” Louis told him calmly. His fingers flexed meaningfully on the handle of the bucket. “Tell us where Harry is. Make no attempt to stop us from finding him. And in return, I won’t bash her brains out and I’ll give you back your brother. If not, there’s going to be a brain milkshake on the floor and I’ll cut off the air flow into the force field and suffocate him. Death by asphyxiation – nice, right?” He scrutinized Felix’s appalled expression. “Your choice.”
“Was he telling the truth?” Louis panted.

“As far as I could tell,” answered Liam, his breathing ragged, “I can see us finding Harry, but the details are still a bit vague…the directions he gave us were sound, though.”

Since Niall was still pretty much incapacitated and struggling to walk in a straight line or keep his eyes open, Louis had ended up making a field around him so that they could essentially push him around like he was in a kind of makeshift wheelchair. Despite his distaste for enclosed spaces, Niall was drained and dizzy enough not to have complained; he was lying dazedly on the bottom of the bubble while it rolled over and over, and Louis was still extremely confused by the physics of the field, because it was turning and moving and basically replicating a hamster ball, but as always, the occupant was lying flat on the bottom of it rather than being turned upside down and thrown violently around. He’d never understood that, not that he was complaining.

In a brief moment of clarity, Niall had dramatically told them to “leave me, I’ll only slow you down…I’ll be alright!” but as Louis sourly pointed out, this was real life, and not to be clichéd or anything, but nobody was getting left behind. And although skinny and small, Niall was not light, and Liam’s attempt at a fireman’s lift left him exhausted and sweaty because of the intensity of the body heat that constantly oozed off Niall’s body (although the water had admittedly cooled him off a lot, he was still uncomfortably warm to have skin contact with for a prolonged amount of time) which was about the time when Louis had come up with the idea of rolling him along the corridor in a force field. It was slowing them down a lot, but he was fairly confident that they had plenty of time to get to Harry. They’d left Felix on the floor murmuring to Deino as he pushed her hair away from her neck, checked her pulse, tried to awaken her, and Cheren had still been in a field at that time. It would take a while before Louis got out of range and released him, and Felix was enough of a gabbling wreck to be incapable of coming up with a coherent plan. He’d craved leadership, but when it had been unceremoniously thrust upon him, the stress had almost made him snap under the strain.

Liam closed his eyes again and tried to focus on his memories of finding Harry, whilst Louis and Niall stayed silent, awaiting a verdict from the other boy, who was apparently struggling very hard to control the images in his head; his forehead was creased in a pained scowl.

“There should be a corridor to our left.”

Louis spotted it at the exact moment the words left Liam’s mouth; with a determined, “Right,” he began steering the force field towards it.

“We don’t want to go down that one.”

“Right, okay.” Neatly twisting to his right, Louis righted the field and continued pushing it straight along the corridor they were walking along.

“And there’s a door coming up on the right…”

“Yeah, yeah, I see it!”

“We don’t want that one either.”

Louis gritted his teeth and avoided the intense urge to either punch Liam in the face or ask which door or corridor they did want, because that information might be a little more useful.
“Right, I’ve got it now,” Liam enthused, eyes flying open. “Eighteen steps forward, down the next corridor on the left, then first door on the right!”

“You’re completely sure?” Louis asked, not bothering to keep the biting sarcasm out of his voice. “You’re not about to tell us that actually it’s eighteen doors to the left on the next right corridor, or on the moon or something, right?”

“Ha,” Liam said evenly, without a trace of humour. “You should be a comedian. Do you want to find Harry, or not? I’m one hundred percent sure this time.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. I just don’t want any more false alarms. I need to see him.”

They followed Liam’s instructions in silence from that moment on, rolling the force field down the indicated corridor. Niall had sat up, his hands pressed against the inside of the bubble, his nose practically pressed against it too, like a child at an aquarium desperately flattening his nose against the glass in an attempt to get a better look. For once, Louis felt no temptation whatsoever to mimic him.

They’d only taken their first few steps down the corridor when Louis heard an absolutely awful noise wrench the air, grab a handful of his intestines and rip them out through his nostrils – or at least, that was what it felt like to hear that first, drunken sob stabbing him in the abdomen with as much force as a physical blow, perhaps more.

Louis recognized the sound of Harry’s sobs almost unnaturally quickly bearing in mind that he’d never actually heard them before.

He’d seen Harry cry before, of course – he’d seen the younger boy stand before him with tears trickling down his cheeks until his whole face was drenched in saltwater and Louis was almost afraid that something inside of him had ruptured and all of the moisture in Harry’s body was leaking out through his swollen tear ducts. He’d watched, speechless with rage, as grief and guilt had infiltrated Harry’s expression, turning him into a tearstained little boy who had broken something and feared some kind of awful reprisal. Then Louis had spat angry words into Harry’s face and watched it crumple like paper clenched tightly inside a fist; he’d watched ten thousand shades of pain splash across Harry’s face like Louis was furiously swiping expressions onto the younger boy with a paintbrush and he’d felt swirls of vindictive relief spiralling through his guts as he’d wrenched Harry apart with his words, piece by piece, reducing him to a torn and broken little boy who quivered before Louis’ vicious, unrestrained anger.

Yet through all of that, Harry had uttered not a word – not until Louis was done with him, anyway; not until Louis had finished turning his tongue into a knife and hacking Harry into little bits with it. It was as if silence was all Harry had left; like his dignity was all he had left to cling to as he was ripped to pieces by the sharp slash of Louis’ harsh words.

He had no such reservations now. His low, persuasive, velvet voice had become an aching mess – contorted into trembling gasps, low moans and ugly sobs. It was terrible; it was like the pure embodiment of pain in vocal form, the kind of noise that clawed your ears to shreds. Hopelessness, exhaustion, agony, the choking sound of someone who had nothing left to call their own except their own life, and was in so much pain that they were beginning to wish they didn’t even have that.

It was what Louis imagined hell might sound like.

He was afraid to open the door and see the face that accompanied that noise – if there was even any face left. It honestly wouldn’t have surprised him if Harry’s face had been scraped away bit by bit with a horrible kind of blunt instrument; at least that would explain the noises. The
awful, *awful* noises that made poor Harry sound like he had a cheese grater stuck in his throat and was choking on it. The noises that Louis were so desperate to stop.

Louis made his mind up right there and then. Already, he’d forgiven Harry – secretly, he’d given up on being angry the moment he realized that his fury really had driven Harry away – and he couldn’t bear to hear *anyone* make sounds like that, no matter what they had done to him. His fingers were on the door handle, trying the door; it was stiff – no – locked! He hurled himself at it in utter outrage (*how dare it stand between him and Harry?*) slamming into it with his shoulder, banging it with his fists – kicking, when none of that worked. And in the end, relying on his final defence, he stepped back, gave himself a generous run-up and splayed his fingers and hurled a force field at the door as well as himself, and the combination of the two was enough to not just *open* the door, as had been his intention; not just *break* the door, as had been his desire. He *smashed* the wood, splintering it completely, and as could only be expected, he clumsily fell straight through the space where it had been and landed with a smack on the ground, his sudden loss of concentration making all of his force fields dissipate and the hands he threw out to catch himself not even succeeding in stopping him from slamming into the ground and knocking all of the breath out of himself.

He lay on the floor for a moment or so, cheek pressed against the cool ground, struggling to take in a breath, and then with monumental effort he raised his head and groaned, “Harry?”

The curly haired boy was slumped over a small wooden table that was heaped with papers; the chair he sat in was positioned towards a computer screen the size of a flat-screen TV, and there was a woman with honey-coloured curly hair and enormous glasses staring blankly out at them from the screen. It appeared that Harry was halfway through a Skype call. The woman’s gaze was glassy and unfocused, and Harry’s shoulders were shaking as he let out a low, subdued sob.

It took every ounce of willpower Louis had for him to peel his aching body off the cold floor and crawl over to the chair Harry was sitting in, and by the time he’d gotten there, he could see that Harry was shivering, his head turned to the left, cheek pressing against the desk. He was whimpering quietly, and as Louis reached out to touch him, he discovered that the younger boy was sweaty and his skin was around the same temperature Niall’s was usually at, which was extremely worrying. Carefully, Louis brushed some stray, sweaty curls off Harry’s forehead and knelt down beside him to try and listen to some of the all but inaudible mutters that fell feverishly out of his mouth.

“I’m here,” he whispered. “Harry, it’s me, Louis. I am *so* sorry. Can you hear me? I’m so, so sorry, I never meant it to come to this. Come on, you’re all right, please Harry, just nod, just say something, *please*. Squeeze my hand?” He scrabbled desperately for Harry’s limp right hand, which lay twitching on the table, and crushed it within his own fingers. “Please, babe, squeeze my hand if you can hear me?” He wasn’t sure how the *babe* had slipped out, but it felt *right* somehow, so he chose not to question it.

There was complete silence, apart from the odd mumbling that came from Harry’s lips, pressed together into a tight line. Louis leaned over him and pressed his lips right against his ear.

“Harry,” he said loudly.

Harry’s long fingers suddenly twitched and then curled tightly around Louis’, almost crushing his hand so that he flinched, but he didn’t utter a word of complaint. Instead, he wrapped his arm around Harry’s shoulders in an encouraging but clumsy approximation of a hug.

“Louis,” Harry moaned.

“Yeah, I’m here. God, I’m so sorry, Harry, I’m so sorry, please forgive me – God, are you okay? I can’t believe what a twat I’ve been, I am *so* sorry –” His lips pressed against the top of Harry’s head,
and he inhaled the incredible scent of his curls even as he gently squeezed Harry’s hand back, afraid to hurt him. “I’m here. Can you lift your head for me? Can you look at me, Harry?”

“Can’t…hurts…it hurts, I can’t…I can’t…I can’t…” It appeared to be the only thing he was capable of saying; trembling even more, he gripped Louis’ fingers with a painful intensity. “Can’t…” He keened softly, and in response, the woman on the screen let out a faint whine.

That was when it dawned on Louis that their mind were still connected, that somehow Harry had established more than just a video link between himself and this stranger. Apparently, Niall had come to the same conclusion; standing beside Harry, he carefully pulled out a sheet of paper from underneath his head, and silently held it out to Louis. A list of names, numbered one to two hundred and fourteen, and one hundred and six of those names had been ticked off in red pen. The ticks grew larger and clumsier as the list went on; the last five names or so had been shakily scrawled in a child’s handwriting, as if the writer’s hand had been shaking so badly that they could barely pick up the pen. It wasn’t hard to imagine, with Harry shuddering so violently in Louis’ arms.

“Please listen to me, Harry. Baby, are you listening? You have to let her go.”

The woman on the screen tilted her head a little, like she was listening, but Harry himself didn’t seem to hear him.

“Louis…”

“Come on, Harry, I know you can hear me. Let her go. Let all of them go.”

Harry grabbed two handfuls of his own curls, dropping Louis’ hand, and tugged violently on them, as if ripping his own hair out would distract him from the agony that was ripping his mind to shreds. Frightened that he was going to hurt himself, Louis tugged gently on his wrists, trying to disentangle those long, pale fingers from his hair.

“Let her go, Harry.”

His only response was to cry out again.

“Oh then,” Louis said grimly, “looks like this is going to be difficult. We need to make him more comfortable if I’m going to get through to him; can you grab his feet, Niall?”

Liam grabbed the chair and started pulling it out from underneath him; Niall seized Harry by the ankles, and Louis got a steady grip on his torso. It would have helped if Harry wasn’t so long, his limbs sprawling gracelessly out as the two of them struggled to lift him out of the chair, hastily aided by Liam, who helped to lower him to the ground and then struggled to make him comfortable on the floor with his head resting on Louis’ lap. Louis carefully pushed his untidy mess of curls out of his eyes, which stayed firmly closed. He had gone a very sickly shade of white, and Louis didn’t like it at all.

“Louis? Louis, it hurts,” said Harry pathetically.

Louis gave him a squeeze in an attempt to reassure him, and smoothed down an unruly curl. “Yeah, and it’s going to keep hurting until you let those people go. There’s nothing I can do, I’m sorry. You’re going to have to do it on your own.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Harry forced his eyes open and stared miserably up at Louis, stroking the back of his hand with one shaking thumb. “I’ve been clinging to them for so long I don’t know if I can even remember how to let them go anymore. I’m scared I might lose myself if I try to let them go…like they’re going to take half of me with them.”
“You’re going to have to trust me, Harry. That won’t happen, okay? You think I’d let them take even a tiny bit of you as a souvenir? I’m an annoying twat and I’m incredibly possessive, and now I’ve got you back I have no intention of letting anyone else so much as look at you ever again without having one of their arms ripped off in recompense, so please. You know you can’t do this. Just let go. I promise it’ll be okay.”

Harry choked a tiny little laugh, and his fingertips dug into Louis’ arms; there would be bruises there the next day. “You know I trust you.”

“I don’t know why,” Louis said softly. “Not after all those awful things I said.”

“You didn’t mean them. And I’d have understood even if you did. What I did was wrong…I know that now. I hate this power, and all the awful things I’ve done with it…the people I’ve corrupted, the things I’ve done…you must hate it, too. You must hate me.”

“I don’t hate it,” he was told, “it’s part of what makes you who you are. I couldn’t hate that if I tried. And I most certainly do not hate you. You’re all I have right now, Harry. All I want. And I…” he hesitated before figuring he might as well just say it; it had to be said one day, and now was as good a time as any. “I love you.”

Harry’s grip tightened harshly on his fingers, which were rapidly turning numb. “I love you too.”

What happened next was all a blur. Louis leant down to carefully touch his lips against Harry’s, but before he was even halfway there, Harry all of a sudden wasn’t there anymore. Without so much as a yelp, he’d completely vanished, like a pair of invisible hands had yanked him forcefully out of Louis’ arms. Louis almost fell forwards right on his face in shock as he scrambled to keep his balance and urgently looked around the room at the same time, eyes flickering wildly from corner to corner as he looked, and Harry was nowhere to be seen.

By the time he’d sat up and gotten over his momentary disorientation, Harry was gone, and Liam was staggering over to the door with his eyes closed even as Niall hurriedly opened it so that he wouldn’t walk right into it.

Liam’s brown eyes flew open, dazed as they were, and Louis suspected that it wasn’t doing him much good to look at his surroundings because he wasn’t really seeing them anyway through the haze of the vision that had been thrown upon him. “The stairs!” he cried, and took off at a sprint, and the other boys hared off after him, Niall trying his best to stay level with him so that he could open any doors they encountered before Liam ran right into them.

Not even bothering to keep track of where they were going, Louis followed Liam without question, down a couple of corridors and threw doors that Niall hastily flung open and didn’t bother to slam closed in their wake, and Louis was officially panicking now, because he’d had Harry in his arms and been holding him and about to kiss him and now he was gone –

There were far too many corridors in that building for Louis’ liking, but Liam was like their own personal map, barely faltering for a second as he threw himself through doorway after doorway and skidded around seemingly endless corners, and he knew exactly where he was going, for which Louis was ridiculously thankful. Their feet thumped on the floor, Niall’s bare feet making a slapping sound since he’d burned his shoes into slivers of charred rubber (the smell still hung disgustingly about him) and his clothes had been reduced to burnt rags that hung off his frame in shreds. Liam’s shoes squeaked. Louis didn’t even register the sound his own feet were making on the polished floor as Liam stopped dead, wrenched another door open and the three of them bolted through it, staggering to a stop as they spotted Harry and Felix stood at the top of an enormous flight of stairs, struggling with each other and teetering right on the edge.
Harry looked weary but determined, his teeth gritted, forehead furrowed in a frown, and Felix appeared to be almost enjoying himself as they wrestled on the very edge of the staircase. Of course, it wouldn’t matter to him if they fell; he could probably pass straight through the floor if he had the presence of mind to phase through it. They were grappling on the edge with arms wrapped around each other in an awful parody of a hug.

Of course, Harry had an advantage in both height and weight, being far taller and therefore a lot heavier than the skinny Felix, who looked about as substantial as paper as they each fought for mastery. But Harry was still sweating and shaking with the effort of holding onto the hundred-plus minds that he hadn’t managed to let go of yet, and Felix, apart from being a bit shaken up, was in perfect health.

It was far too evenly matched for Louis’ liking. Every time Felix staggered and shifted closer to the edge, he would haul Harry with him, so that they each hovered right on the brink of an enormous drop and one wrong move, one sufficient stumble and they would both go down. Louis’ heart was in his mouth as he watched them, arms dangling uselessly at his sides, too shocked to even think about creating a force field that could save them both.

The whole world had slowed down. They were underwater, and every move they made was almost comically slowed down in Louis’ eyes. Felix kicked Harry’s shin. Harry ripped an enormous chunk of his hair out. Felix attempted to head-butt Harry and followed it up with a vicious skinny elbow that jabbed sharply against Harry’s ribs, and Harry yelped, which in turn caused Louis to cry out. Distracted by the sound, Harry’s head snapped up again as he gazed concernedly at him.

It was the only distraction Felix needed as he threw his weight against Harry and gave him a shove. Harry staggered backwards and placed his foot on a step that wasn’t there, and then his eyes widened, hands grabbed out for Felix and passed straight through him, didn’t manage to catch the banister in time and he fell, tripping backwards and throwing himself head first down the enormous staircase.

In typical movie fashion, Harry’s fall should have been slowed ten times more in order for maximum effect, but if that had been the case, Louis would have had time to do more than just cry out and stagger forwards one step with his hand outstretched as if he could catch him from that distance. He might have had time to make a field, to do something that would save him. As it was, he was completely helpless, and Harry vanished with a cry down the staircase in a blur of chocolate brown curls, a borrowed red sweater that made him look unhealthily pale and washed out, and off-white Chinos that were too tight for him. And Louis didn’t have time to react, but he had time to take in all these horrible details as the sound of Harry’s head crunched against the staircase and he rolled awkwardly, hit the wall and then bounced off it, around the corner and continued to fall down the stairs and out of sight.

Felix looked up and his grey eyes met Louis’, and then he did what Louis thought was perhaps even more despicable than pushing Harry in the first place: pale eyes wide with astonishment, he breathed out in surprise, and then completely stunned, he laughed.

The scream that ripped its way out of the back of Louis’ throat and shredded his vocal chords didn’t even sound human. His reaction was instantaneous and completely uncontrollable; his hands shot out, fingers unfurling out of the clenched fists they had become, and with another horrible scream, he hurled a force field the size of a small elephant at Felix with the same strength and ferocity of a wrecking ball.

It hit the skinny sixteen year old in the chest, large enough that it slammed into his long nose with a crunch, and then it was Felix’s turn to yelp and make a desperate grab for a handhold as he staggered
backwards, tripping over his untied shoelaces. He fell in a blur of black and white as his hair, hoodie and pale skin seemed to merge into one as Louis’ tears had distorted everything into a fuzzy mess.

His vision had blurred and his eyes pricked with wet heat; he couldn’t even see past his tears because he knew all too well that it would take a miracle for Harry not to be smashed into bloody pieces at the bottom of that staircase. But that didn’t stop him from staggering forwards and rushing down the staircase two steps at a time, almost slipping on a horrible bright red patch on the floor, seeing another on the wall where somebody’s head had collided with the skirting board and left an awful spodge like a smashed strawberry there. As he rushed down the stairs, he sobbed to himself a relentless “please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please-please” as if simply by praying he could reverse all of it, as if he could lurch forward and snag Harry by the wrist before he could fall –

He reached the bottom, and Felix was nowhere to be seen, but it was unmistakably Harry who lay on the floor in a crumpled, broken mess, the floor around him smeared with scarlet, left cheek pressed against the floor. His eyes were closed, his right arm stuck out at an awful angle, and as Louis dropped to his hands and knees beside him, he was crying too hard to see whether or not his chest was still rising and falling.

“Harry –”

He couldn’t breathe, how the hell was he supposed to speak? And he didn’t dare check for a pulse in case he hurt him, barely dared to look at his fragile body where it lay contorted into that awful flattened position on the floor like a broken china doll, and a tangle of swearwords fell from his lips, along with prayers and sobs and other, terrible noises he hadn’t known he was capable of making, and all of it was intertwined with Harry’s name. He couldn’t stop himself from saying it, he was almost hysterical as he cried out, all of him frozen but his lips.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck Harry – oh god – Harry no, no, no, don’t – don’t be dead, shit, Harry please, please, no, don’t do this, wake up, Harry, wake up, you can’t do this to me, you can’t do this! Harry, wake up! Wake up! Harry! HARRY!”

Regaining some kind of control over his limbs, he shook Harry very gently, and the boy’s left hand, which had been lying on his chest, was dislodged and fell to the floor. Louis cringed in horror, terrified that he’d hurt him, and he seized Harry’s hand, almost dropped it again, and then started desperately kissing it with a gentleness that frightened him, sobbing as he layered kiss after frantic kiss onto the boy’s fingertips.

“Harry. No, you’re okay, you’re fine, you’re going to be okay. Shhhhh, baby, it’s okay. I’m here, come on, you’re all right. Just lie there, just stay still, we’ll get help, it’ll all be okay, you’re going to be fine –”

Liam had dropped to the floor beside him, as had Niall, but when the brown-eyed boy tentatively reached out to carefully press his fingers against Harry’s neck and feel for a pulse, Louis cried out as if Liam had been about to stab Harry and he smacked the well-intentioned but trembling hand away with a choking sound.

“No! Don’t you touch him!”

“Louis –”

“Leave him alone! Keep your hands off him!” Crying horribly, Louis struggled to shield Harry’s lifeless, bloody body with his own, his eyes streaming. He was still carefully holding the boy’s pale hand as if he was Harry’s life support machine, as if Harry was his, like they’d both die if either one of them let go, although poor Harry wasn’t holding on so much as being held. In a way, Liam could
see that it was true. Louis and Harry were a single solid unit, it was clear from the way Louis had held him so carefully; he could no longer imagine one without the other.

“Please, Louis, we need to make sure there’s a pulse and then if there isn’t we’ll know we have to start compressions,” Niall sobbed, his own blue eyes swimming with moisture.

Ignoring the Irish boy, Louis stared at Liam like he was seeing him for the first time, then grabbed him by the shoulder with his free hand. “You! You can see the future! You look, you look right now and you tell me he’ll be all right! Tell me, Liam. Tell me he’s going to be all right, he’ll be fine, Liam, you can see it, he’s going to be okay, Liam tell me!”

“I don’t know!” screamed Liam, “I don’t know all right, I can’t see, I can’t see anything, I don’t know!”

“Don’t be stupid, of course you know! You see everything! You see what you’re having for breakfast next weekend, for fuck’s sake, how can you possibly not know whether your best friend is going to die or not? Liam, tell me he’s going to be okay!”

Liam’s mouth fell open, but before he could speak another word, they all hesitated. There appeared to be some kind of fog curling around them; a thick, horrible mist that tasted foul when they inhaled it and clung to their tonsils, a thick, cloying white cloud that was what Louis imagined pure numbness would be like. It sucked at their limbs, wrapped around them like a blanket, and Louis wavered dizzily as it seeped thickly in through his open mouth.

“What the hell is this stuff?” Niall asked tearfully, swiping at the fog.

Liam’s eyes widened in horror. “Gas!” he choked. “It’s gas, cover your mouths –”

Niall clapped his hands over his nose and mouth and Liam stifled the misty substance by hiding his face behind his sleeve, but Louis lay miserably on top of Harry, carefully stroking his now icy face with one hand while he dripped tears onto the scarlet sweater the motionless curly-haired boy was wearing. He still refused to let go of his hand.

“I love you, Harry.”

“Louis, cover your nose and mouth up, for God’s sake!”

“Harry, I’m so sorry, I love you so much, I never meant this to happen…I’m going to stay here with you, okay? It won’t be long now…I’ll join you soon enough…” His face crumpled and he closed his eyes, grabbing a handful of Harry’s jumper in his free hand as he buried his face into Harry’s chest.

“Louis, please!”

Niall grabbed Louis by the shoulder, his blue eyes blazing. Despite being muffled behind his fingers, his words were clear enough as he demanded furiously, “For fuck’s sake, Louis, do you want to die?”

“YES!” Louis screamed, right in his face, “YES I DO, I DON’T HAVE ANYTHING LEFT TO LIVE FOR ANYMORE! Don’t you understand? He’s dead, I’ve never loved anyone else more in my entire life and I never told him how much he meant to me, and now he’s dead, and I’m never letting him go! And they can gas me all they like, because if he’s not alive then I don’t want to be alive either! It’s him and me, and I CAN’T –”

Whatever he had been about to say next was lost as he coughed horribly, spluttered and then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell back against Harry’s chest, landing on top of the younger boy as
he lost consciousness.

Niall’s free hand grabbed frantically at Liam’s wrist and tightened desperately, and Liam could practically feel the bruises forming, but he determinedly wrapped his own free arm around Niall’s shaking body. There were no time for condolences, last words, nothing dramatic or sweet or memorable at all. Just a choking cough rather like Louis’, and then Liam went down as well, collapsing against the floor as his vision started to turn black.

The last thought that crossed Liam’s mind was, *But I don’t want to die.*

He was on his own, then, with three of his best friends lying on the floor around him, and there wasn’t enough oxygen left in his lungs for Niall to convert into flames as he panicked. He flailed helplessly for a few seconds, whimpered pathetically, and then his own eyes closed as he finally gave up and crashed to the floor with a moan, hitting his head so hard that the gas didn’t actually manage to knock him out; it was the blow to the head that prematurely claimed Niall Horan’s last moments of consciousness from him, and he could only be glad that at least he hadn’t fallen victim to that horrible wet, hacking cough like the other boys did, and it was pretty much the only thing he had left to comfort him as the blackness dropped over him, plunging him into complete darkness like someone had pulled a sheet over his head.

Like he was in the morgue already.
Chapter 38

It hurt to open his eyes, because the harsh fluorescent lighting gave him a headache at the best of times, let alone when he’d just resurfaced from a forced sleep that had kept him under for god knows how long. But Louis was nothing if not determined, and so he forced himself into a sitting position and scanned the room with his heart in his mouth; he could feel it fluttering at the back of his throat, and it made him want to be sick. He desperately took in the scene.

Liam was sitting in the plastic chair beside Harry’s bed with his face buried in his hands. Niall looked hollow-eyed and hungry, and Zayn and Eithne were both sat on the floor in the corner, Eithne sat on Zayn’s knee while he played with her hair, his mouth drawn into a pout. Harry was propped up in bed staring up at the ceiling, his green eyes clouded with thought, like he was seeing something completely different from the rest of them.

The moment it dawned on him that he had been the last to wake up, Louis was swinging his legs over the side of his own bed almost angrily, furious that no one had shaken him to try and bring him back to consciousness. He staggered when his bare feet hit the floor; he got the feeling that he hadn’t stood up for a while.

Everyone’s heads snapped up to stare at him, but Louis barely noticed. He grabbed hold of his own bed, then Harry’s, and the moment he was close enough, hurriedly sat down on the bed. It creaked in protest, but Louis barely even noticed; he was too busy anxiously poring over Harry’s face. Once he managed to ascertain that Harry was indeed alive, if a little unresponsive, he had to decide whether he should close his eyes and hide his tears of relief, or whether he was too desperate to keep looking at Harry to care. Deciding upon the second option, he squeezed Harry’s hand, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and waited for a response.

None came; Harry didn’t so much as twitch. His eyes roved over the ceiling, unseeing, and passed over Louis’ face without a flicker of recognition. Louis bit down so hard on his lower lip that he was surprised it didn’t start bleeding.

“You won’t get anything out of him; don’t take him personally,” Liam said wearily. His voice sounded rough and scratchy. “He’s pretty much catatonic. I don’t know what they gave him, or how it’s different to what they gave the rest of us, but it’s ridiculously strong. I don’t think he even knows we’re here.”

Louis was horrified, but the empty look in Liam’s eyes was almost more frightening to him than Harry’s sudden loss of lucidity. “What’s wrong, Liam? Why…why do you look like that? Where are we? What did they do?”

Liam rubbed his eyes exhaustedly. “They’ve taken our powers away,” he explained dully.

There was a horrible silence where Louis tried to disprove that statement by flexing his fingers, and discovered that no force field bubbled there. He shook his head in utter disbelief, tried again, and then, stricken, looked up at Liam. There were times when he’d cursed his powers and wished he could give them back, but the idea that what once had been his wish had been granted…

“They can’t have.”

“Well I defy you to make a field.”

“I –”
“You can’t, I know. Just like I can’t see the future, Zayn can’t levitate, Niall can’t set himself on fire. No matter how hard you try, it won’t work. We’ve been doing everything we can ever since we woke up, but nothing works, Louis. I don’t know how the hell they did it, but they took our powers.” Liam looked weary, defeated, like the loss of his future vision had sapped him of all of his energy.

Several calming breaths, a good couple of minutes and some seriously aching fingers later, Louis had to admit that Liam was right.

“What about Harry?”

“Well, as you can see, he’s awake, but he isn’t reacting to any kind of stimulus, verbal or whatever. He’s here, but not here. By all intents and purposes, he should be awake, but…” Liam shrugged. “I don’t know whether it’s a defence mechanism his body has done to itself or whether it’s been induced, but we can’t reach him. We’ve been trying for long enough.”

Louis leaned in and pressed his forehead against Harry’s; kissed him on the tip of his nose, stroked his curls. Harry blinked at him, but his expression stayed the same, and it made Louis feel uneasy.

“Can you hear me, Harry?”

When he received no response, he started trailing kisses down Harry’s cheekbones, onto his jaw, along his neck. By the time he’d pushed back the ugly material of the hospital gown Harry was swaddled in, Louis was beginning to lose hope – until he felt the tiniest, lightest of squeezes on his hand; Harry’s fingers had fluttered infinitesimally and he had managed a faint squeeze to communicate to Louis that he was actually sentient, he could indeed hear him.

“Oh, God.” The noise that ripped its way out of Louis’ throat could barely be recognized as words, but by the time he’d buried his face into the blue and green patterned gown, he was beyond caring that he sounded like an incoherent idiot. Still hanging on to Harry’s hand, he allowed a couple of embarrassing tears to plop onto the gown and hide his face in the younger boy’s chest. Despite the fact that Harry was motionless, silent, and to all intents and purposes, helpless, Louis still felt ten times safer when he could feel Harry’s reassuring warmth radiating through him, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. “Oh, God.”

Underneath him, Harry shuddered very lightly, and his fingers twitched again in a slightly firmer squeeze that made the other boys gape; nobody else had managed to trigger so much as an uneven breath from him, and yet he was quite clearly struggling to hold Louis’ hand. Something in his vague expression seemed to shift; perhaps his eyes shone a little brighter, or his forehead creased minutely into a frown. Whatever it was, the blank expression seemed to thaw slightly.

“I am so sorry, Harry. I’m so, so sorry. Does it – you’re not in pain, are you? Oh, God, Harry, I’m so glad you’re okay, I thought you were…” He moaned quietly at the very thought. “It’s okay, you don’t have to – as long as you’re okay. Don’t speak. Just…sort of squeeze my hand if you can hear me? If you can find it in you to forgive me…”

Of course, no response was forthcoming.

“I am an utter twat,” Louis told him, “and I don’t deserve anything from you except a punch. I have done terrible things…said things that no person should ever say…I can’t apologize enough for my actions, and I can’t justify them. It was completely unwarranted. You’d never force me to do anything! The only thing you made me do was realize that I am completely in love with you… the only fault I can find is that you didn’t make me discover that sooner, although that’s my doing, not yours. My own stupidity. Please, Harry, if you – oh, I just need to know you’re okay!” Louis swore
softly in frustration. “You have no idea how much you mean to me.”

“We’re lying in a mysterious hospital having had god knows what unearthly crap pumped into us to suppress the powers that were thrust upon us in a similar way, and yet he still finds time for drama.”

The low, slightly cracked murmur that stole through the room made them all jump, although not so much as the quiet chuckle that followed it. Everyone held their breath, scarcely daring to believe that they had heard Harry’s voice, and Louis carefully raised his head off Harry’s chest, not bothering to dry his eyes.

“Harry?”

His lips barely moved as he spoke, words blurring together like he was drunk, as if he couldn’t summon enough energy to enunciate properly. “Don’t move away from me, you twat. I’ve had you out of my arms for long enough.”

Louis responded by hurling his arms around Harry’s neck and whispering into his ear so that nobody else could hear him, “I’m sorry.” Out of all his pleas, cries and desperate apologies, it was this small, shaky one that he meant the most.

“You’ve apologized enough,” whispered Harry faintly, “but I’m kind of a bit sore, so…if you could, um…maybe be a bit more careful with me for the time being –”

Horrified, Louis leapt back, remembered Harry’s request for him to stay close, and hesitated for a moment or so before he carefully crept up the bed and nestled underneath Harry’s arm, resting his head lightly on the other boy’s shoulder while he held one of his hands and stroked his knuckles with one thumb. “God, sor – um. I’m terrible at this. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“It wasn’t that bad. Just a bit tender, is all.” Pause. “Wait, what am I saying? I’m in absolute agony, practically screaming in pain; I need you to kiss me better. All over my body. It all hurts, you’re going to be kept rather busy.”

Louis choked a laugh and resisted the urge to punch him. “Idiot.”

“Yeah, but it’s a valid point…and once I actually do stop hurting, I’m expecting some kind of compensation for all of this. I like it rough.” Harry licked his lips suggestively and Louis watched with his mouth hanging open, mesmerized. “I want you to throw me up against a wall and –”

“Okay,” Zayn quickly interrupted, “this is cute and all, but please…the food here is crap, but I’d like to keep it down, and you guys are kind of making me want to vomit.”

“Please don’t vomit,” came an unfamiliar voice; “I can change dressings and stitch wounds with the best of them, but vomit is not in my job description.”

The woman in the doorway was wearing a nurse’s uniform and had her dark hair pinned into a no-nonsense bun, although her eyes were twinkling in a way that suggested she was in no way averse to mischief. Beside her was a man in a suit who could have been any age between late thirties and early fifties, but had a remarkable amount of hair for an older man, a thick moustache and was carrying both a stick and a briefcase. They all stared, and Louis forgot Harry’s warning and gripped him a lot harder than was necessary.

The two of them came bustling through the doorway, and whilst the nurse started checking dressings and tapping on Harry’s IV feed to make sure he was getting enough chemicals into his system, the man with the briefcase pulled up another plastic chair from the side of the room and stared intently at them all.
It started to get uncomfortable after a few minutes; Niall began fidgeting nervously underneath his scrutiny, and nobody else felt much better. When his stare lingered on Eithne for what Zayn seemed to think was too long, sparks seemed to fly between them with the fierceness of the glower Zayn was shooting in his direction. But the man didn’t seem to notice, or if he did, he didn’t particularly care.

“My apologies,” he said eventually. Having watched the nurse vacate the room, of course.

They all stared at him in utter confusion. Nobody really knew what they were expecting, but certainly an apology hadn’t been at the top of anybody’s list.

Examining the floor, he intoned, “I’m afraid that when I sent some of my associates after you, they were a little less delicate than perhaps was appropriate…”

“A little less delicate?” Louis spat. “They threw Harry down the stairs! They had us chasing around filthy alleyways trying to escape them; they would have killed Niall if Liam hadn’t had the foresight to stop them!”

“Yes, well. Reckless enthusiasm has always been somewhat of a family trait…my sons were always very eager to get their hands dirty, so as to speak…” An aghast silence met this revelation. “Perhaps I ought to start from the beginning. I represent a company experimenting in genetic modification, and we recently developed a chemical which we hoped to use to enhance people’s latent abilities and make them more exaggerated. Felix and Cheren were both very eager to trial the drug – a decision which they later regretted; administration was somewhat hit and miss at first, and there were a lot of problems – but once we’d refined the drug, we wished to see how it would affect certain test subjects. Deino was the first non-family member we recruited, but funds had been too substantially depleted for us to offer similar…um…recompense to any others. Thus the reason that we chose five healthy males of a similar age to test the substance on. The fact that the five of you are here right now is a testament to the project’s success.”

Louis’ lip curled. “You call that success? Disregarding the terror, the being chained to a wall, the emotional distress, the fact that Eithne got stabbed when she should have nothing to do with this and the fact that your son threw Harry down the stairs –”

The man pulled a face, as if he were thinking “so you’re still hung up over that, you really need to let it go” which did nothing to improve Louis’ temper.

“ – There’s also the small matter of the way Liam’s been left practically catatonic some nights because of the visions he’s been having, the way that Niall’s flammability means it’s dangerous to go near him half the time which could completely ruin his chances of relationships in the future and all the people Zayn threw around the room when he got drunk! Oh, and the way that Harry suffers from horrible mental breakdowns if his power gets used over capacity, so as to speak. Which, might I remind you, was another form of abuse your sons chose to subject him to!”

Having worked himself into a furious frenzy, Louis was quite literally shaking as he fought to keep his temper under control. He was gripping Harry’s arm so hard that it made Harry wince, but he simply squeezed Louis’ hand in return, sensing that Louis needed someone to hold before he lost it completely. Force fields or not, he was quite capable of violence of some kind; if he had to snatch the plastic chair Liam was sitting on from underneath him and bludgeon the irritatingly calm man over the head with it, he would, and quite willingly.

“Some of their methods were perhaps a little…unorthodox. But it was all part of the testing process! We needed to see what effects different circumstances, such as stress, would have on you. Bearing in mind that the others knew it was all simulated, it wouldn’t have worked as effectively on them.”
“It didn’t seem very simulated to me,” Liam said stiffly, massaging his temples.

“Well, clearly the situation escalated. Especially once you started being noticed. That little stunt with the fire above London? We’re still trying to contain the fallout from that one. News spreads like wildfire, especially amongst conspiracy theorists. Which was where you came in, Harry.” He nodded at the curly haired boy. “Damage control.”

Louis turned purple with suppressed rage. Harry, however, stayed calm. “Damage control,” he repeated.

The suited man nodded encouragingly. “We couldn’t have eyewitness accounts being sold to the papers, certain photos or videos leaked, specific bits of information bandied about…the most effective solution was to have you erase these things or their locations from people’s minds. We gave you a list to work from and orders on what to wipe; I’d have thought you’d have worked it out by yourself by now.” He raised an eyebrow, giving the impression that Harry had disappointed him. The hostility in the room grew more tangible; if it grew any stronger, it would be growing hands and viciously strangling the life out of the man in the way that they all so strongly desired to.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry said coolly, “I guess I was kind of busy slipping in and out of a coma.”

The ensuing silence was one of the most awkward Louis had ever encountered, and yet the man in the suit still had the audacity not to look even slightly abashed. It was safe to say that everyone in the room was thinking murderous thoughts at that precise moment in time.

“Well, yes, quite. The fact of the matter is that some of the more unpleasant side effects have been rather…unfortunate. Our research and observations all indicate the same thing: Harry, if you overuse your power, there will be nasty consequences. It pains me to say this, but they could be classed as…life threatening.”

Louis went white and froze beside Harry, absolutely horrified. Ashen but determined to remain calm, Harry patted his hand, nuzzled his cheek with the wild curls sticking messily out around his head like a halo, and then regarded the stranger before them. Despite the fact that his life was the one in danger, he was far calmer than Louis was.

“But you’ve taken our powers away,” Zayn observed, speaking for the first time so that they all jumped a little in surprise.

“And thus comes my next point. A proposition, if you will.” He rose out of his seat. Beginning to pace up and down with a contemplative expression, he continued, “Not long after the chemical was developed, we also managed to create a formula to reverse the effects – this is the formula we administered to you whilst you were unconscious. Apologies for the sleeping gas, by the way; I sensed that you would be uncooperative, and it was just easier for everyone. But I digress: currently, you’ve been given a dose which will render you incapable of using your powers for a short period of time…I’m estimating a few hours, at the most, before you can use them freely again. However, we are able to permanently disable them, should you wish. All it will take is a small inoculation, and then you’ll be…well, pardon the phrasing, but you’ll be normal again.”

Suspiciously, Louis narrowed his eyes and asked, “What’s the catch?”

“As I’m sure you’ll understand, this is a highly secret operation, and…to put it bluntly, it’s not exactly legal,” the man admitted. “We’ll be expecting anyone who receives the treatment to sign a contract agreeing to disclose nothing of your experiences over the past few months. You’ll be closely monitored to ensure that you uphold your part of the bargain.”
“No thanks,” Niall said abruptly. “It’s a pain, setting myself on fire every time I get freaked out, but I
don’t want to be spied on. I’ll keep the powers, if it’s all the same to you. Maybe you gave them to
me, but they’re mine now…I wouldn’t feel right without them. So thanks, but no thanks.”

The room rumbled with sounds of approval as the other boys nodded in agreement. Only Harry
stayed silent, nibbling his lower lip – something which didn’t escape Louis’ notice.

Before he could question it, he was interrupted. “Now, don’t be so quick to refuse! I’m afraid that for
one of you, it won’t be so simple. Now, should you choose to keep your powers, we have a facility
in Sweden where we’ve been keeping other…patients” – guinea pigs, Louis thought disgustedly –
“and we’d willingly transfer you there so that you can live undisturbed, away from members of the
public to whom you could cause harm, and of course it would be far more private, because we
wouldn’t feel the need to observe you. But the fact of the matter is that Harry doesn’t have a choice.
We’ll be administering a full dose of the drug to you in due course,” he explained almost kindly.

Horrified, Harry stared at him. “What? Why do I not get a say in this? I have a choice too!”

“You’ve been proven incapable of distancing yourself from those who you have established a mental
link with. Once your current dosage wears off, the link will come back, and regardless of whether
you could let them go, any future usage of your powers would eventually trigger another episode.
We’ve checked your brain activity during the mind links and it would be life threatening for you to
continue, as well as being dangerous to your mental health. If you continue to use your powers, the
only question will be that of which will give way under the strain first; your body, or your mind?
Either the electrical impulses in your brain would overwhelm you and you’d become brain dead, or
you’d be reduced to a gibbering wreck. I’m sorry,” he said, compassion colouring his tone for the
first time as he rested a hand on Harry’s arm, “but you haven’t a choice. You will be given the drug,
will sign the contract, will go home and say nothing of what happened here. Because if you
don’t…you will die. It’s only a question of which part of you will die first.”

Harry sank back against the pillows, his face bone white and expressionless, but Louis could feel
him trembling all over. The knowledge did him no good; he had no idea what to say, what to do. He
felt as helpless as Harry did. Stupid, confused, like a foggy fist had seized his brain and wouldn’t let
him think.

Their fingers were still interlocked, they were still pressed tightly together, and Louis knew full well
that he wasn’t going to let go. No matter who tried to persuade him, or what they said, he had every
intention of holding Harry’s hand until the day they died – and he didn’t plan for that to be any time
soon, no matter what this man in the navy suit said!

“What if I refuse?”

“You’ll die.”

“I might not.”

“We’ve done the calculations. None of them are in your favour. You will die.”

“What if I don’t use my powers?”

“You know it doesn’t work like that. You can’t just switch them off! You will use them, intentionally
or not, and the stress will build up, and it will become too much and you will endanger your life. I’m
not saying this to be cruel. I’m telling it like it is. The others can all choose whether or not they lose
or keep their powers, but you’re going to have to give them up.” He glanced over at where Eithne
was huddled quietly in Zayn’s lap. “You’ll sign a contract, too,” he ordered, “and whatever research
you’ve conducted from studying these boys will be destroyed. Is that understood?”

Her porcelain cheeks flushed pink and her eyes flashed dangerously; Eithne wasn’t one to be ordered
about. But when one of Zayn’s hands comfortably brushed her spine, she breathed out sharply,
bowed her head, and nodded, hiding a furious expression behind her hair. “Yes.”

“Good,” came the brisk response. “Now, a choice must be made. Who will have the drug?”

Louis was shivering almost as much as Harry now. He still couldn’t quite get his head around what
was happening. “Can we not have some time to think about it?” He asked hollowly. “To discuss…
things? We have things that need to be sorted out, Harry and I. Without the boys? Without anyone?”
He shot them all a pleading glance. “We need to talk. Privately. You know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t
important.”

He was answered with a swift nod. “You have an hour, and then you’re going to have to make your
decision… I’m sorry to push you like this, but the arrangements have been made; things must be
done. And please believe me when I say that I’m sorry it’s come to this.”

When he left the room, he was swiftly followed by Niall, who had an arm wrapped around his
stomach (probably hungry), Liam, who had his arms wrapped around himself (he appeared to be
giving himself a hug) and Eithne and Zayn, who had their arms wrapped around each other (pretty
self-explanatory; they seemed to be pretty much inseparable now). They left Harry and Louis alone
with their thoughts, but most importantly, each other.

First things first, thought Louis, and then he twisted around on the bed and pressed his lips against
Harry’s, cautiously but firmly.

It wasn’t their first kiss, nor the first that Louis had initiated, but it was the first of which he could be
completely certain was of his own volition, and he was determined to enjoy it. His fingers slipped
into Harry’s curls, sifting through them, grabbing greedy handfuls, and he coaxed carefully coaxed
his way deeper into Harry’s mouth, the tip of his nose pressing against Harry’s cheek, his fingers lost
in a tangled mess of curls, his eyes tightly closed.

Something in that kiss made his stomach ache. Something in it tied his intestines in knots and caused
his throat to ache horribly, something in it felt like it was impatiently scratching away at his insides.
And even as his heart pounded against the inside of his chest, he was painfully aware that all good
things must come to an end, kisses included, and once this one did so they were going to have to
talk, and make awful decisions, and he was completely sure that he didn’t want to.

Harry pulled away first, gently reaching up and disentangling Louis’ fingers from his curls. Sitting
back a little, with just-tumbled-out-of-bed hair, a swollen mouth, pricking eyes and a churning
stomach, Louis felt more than a little self-conscious – that is, until one of Harry’s long-fingered hands
cupped around his jaw, caressing his cheek, stroking down his face, and the I love you shining in his
eyes might as well have been a scream into a megaphone, because it was the loudest thing Louis had
ever heard.

He wanted to lose himself in Harry’s eyes, his thick hair, the warmth of his mouth, the feel of his
hands. Almost desperately, he moved forwards again, touching their eager mouths together, and
something sparked between their lips as they began another kiss, this one heated. The first had been a
reminder, a greeting, almost – their own way of finally reconciling. It had been something soft,
something special, something tender. This kiss was still incredible, but it had underlying tones of lust,
of the frustration Louis had been having for weeks that he needed to take the edge off, and if he
couldn’t start punching anyone, he might as well do it this way instead. Harry was holding his face
and his lips felt silky and yet hard against Louis’ own, and their foreheads were pressing together and
noses aligned and oh, Harry smelt a little like disinfectant and a lot like Harry, and Louis wanted it. Wanted *him*. Wanted all of him.

“Louis, we need to talk,” Harry murmured against the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t want to talk. Talking means decisions, and that’s not something I’m good at. Let’s just do this.” Louis tugged gently at Harry’s bottom lip, which he’d caught between his teeth, to illustrate his point.

“As if I wouldn’t gladly do just that! You think I don’t want you to? You think just the fact that you’re here makes me want to say ‘fuck all of them’ and just spend the rest of our lives here in this room? And never let anyone else in? Because I can’t think of anything I’d like more, but we only have an hour to decide what the whole rest of our lives will be like, and whether we’ll still have each other in them. Sixty minutes, Louis! That’s all we get. Probably less, now.” Breathing out with a shudder, Harry wriggled backwards and pressed his back against the headboard, whilst Louis fiddled with the scratchy hospital duvet and didn’t quite meet his eye, because he didn’t know if he would be able to contain himself if he caught so much as a flicker of that grass and emerald green. He reached out and took Louis’ hands again; they were far smaller, almost seeming to be lost in Harry’s own. “Let’s talk.”

“Okay,” Louis agreed quietly, and he forced himself to look Harry right in those devastating liquid green eyes, taking in every inch of the boy he was determined that no matter what, he was going to spend the rest of his life with. His thumb skittered down the back of Harry’s hand, shaking too hard to be the smooth, soothing stroke he had intended for it to be. “Let’s talk.”
“What are you going to do?” Harry asked softly. “Have you any idea?” His hands on Louis’ were warm, reassuring, a steady grip that made him feel safe, which was nice.

“I’d made up my mind from the moment the words left his mouth.”

Harry nodded, his lips pressed together in a firm line. “Well, I want you to know that I won’t hold it against you…I wouldn’t ask you do something that huge for me.”

“I know you wouldn’t. Neither would I. That wouldn’t be fair to ask something so huge of you…it’s a very difficult decision to make, I suppose it’s just as well that I already know exactly how I feel about the matter.”

“You know I wouldn’t dream of trying to talk you out of it…I doubt I ever could anyway. I respect your decisions, Lou…your judgement will ever be better than mine. So I guess…maybe we don’t have to talk after all.” He managed a very wobbly smile. “Maybe we’ll start saying our goodbyes in private, yeah? Before the others come back?”

“Goodbyes?” asked Louis stupidly, his hands stroking absently down Harry’s long arms as he gazed concernedly into his eyes, confused by the direction the conversation was taking. He didn’t at all like this talk of goodbyes; it made him nervous.

Bravely, Harry pulled him into a hug, much like the ones they’d always shared in the past; tight, bone-crushing embraces so they could feel their hearts hammering against each other and so that Louis felt like he’d never have to be let go…and maybe he could just stay here, with Harry, safe. “I’m not very good at this, but…I do love you. I respect your decision. And we’ll probably never get a chance to do this again, so…” He pressed a tender, timid kiss to the corner of Louis’ mouth.

Louis stared at him like he was simultaneously an idiot and the most divine and wonderful creature ever to grace the earth with its presence. “What are you on about?”

Blink. “You said you’d made your decision!”

“Of course I have. Oh, Harry, really? You didn’t honestly think I’d agree to go swanning off to some camp somewhere that this guy has organized? I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him – remember way back in the beginning, when I heard those guys talking about selling us off as slaves so people could use our powers to their advantage? That could have been a ruse, those men could have been acting under their own alternatives, but then again…I’m inclined to believe not. He’s Felix’s dad, for god’s sake; the guy must have ‘corrupt’ written right through him. His motives are about as clean as Niall’s language. I want out; I don’t want anything more to do with him, and dissociation seems far easier this way. Besides that…I couldn’t lose you. Not now, not after I’ve only just gotten this part of you…” He held Harry’s face in his hands like something delicate and breakable, tracing a careful line down Harry’s jawline so that the younger boy’s eyes closed and he shuddered in enjoyment at the fluttering sensation in his belly.

No. Concentrate, Harry. He’s saying something here; pay attention! Harry scolded himself. Forcing his eyes open, he asked anxiously, “What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to sign his stupid contract.”

“What?”
“It’s hardly a difficult choice. Get shipped off somewhere and never see you or my family ever again, or give up these stupid force fields and get to stay with you. It doesn’t take a genius to work it out, Harry.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Why not?” There was a moment’s pause, and then Louis shot him a hurt look. “Don’t you…want me?” He sounded like he’d struggled to force the words out, and his eyes seemed to dull miserably at the very thought.

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course I do!” Harry snapped. “You think I wanted any of this to happen? You think all of those things I did for you were for nothing? Of course I want you, Lou. Forever. But I can’t be selfish; I can’t force you to give your powers up for me.”

“Force me? Now who’s being ridiculous? Honestly, Harry, you seriously believe I’d rather have a couple of stupid lilac bubbles at my disposal than spend the rest of my life with you? You’ve got problems up there if you honestly think that.” He tapped Harry on the forehead. “I love you. I don’t think there’s anything I wouldn’t give up for you, so please…stop.”

Harry said angrily, “No, you stop. Have you properly thought about this? Once they take your powers away, you can’t get them back. You rely on them now – if you’re going to fall over, that’s how you catch yourself; if you drop something, that’s how you make sure it doesn’t break. It’ll be like chopping off a limb, Louis. You’ll be at a total loss without this, like you’ve lost a sense.”

“I’ll acclimatize. Don’t you understand? I came after you because I love you, I’m here because I love you. There’s no way I’d give you up for anything, especially not what is essentially a safety blanket and some pretty purple lights! You can’t make me leave, Harry, you can’t make me keep my powers, you can’t make me do anything!”

“Louis…” Burying his face in his hands, Harry turned away, dropping his hands and shaking his head. “You can’t do this. Your powers are a part of you!”

“Yours are a part of you, too.”

“I don’t have a choice!” Harry cried, his eyes decidedly wet and his voice shaky. Even his lips trembled as he seized Louis by the shoulders and shook him a little, trying to communicate this important point. “If I don’t lose mine, I’ll die! Or I’ll go mad. I don’t have a choice.”

“Neither do I, Harry. This is what you don’t seem to understand! They’re a part of me, sure. But you are everything to me, and I’d rather lose one small part than the whole.”

Harry’s response to that was first to stare at him open-mouthed for a few seconds, then to lean forwards and bury one of his hands in Louis’ hair. He carded almost roughly through the fluffy caramel strands with his long fingers, looking completely stunned, and then before Louis could do anything other than make a hoarse, slightly strangled sound as Harry’s mouth slammed down on his, silencing any further dramatic speeches he could have made.

The kiss was rough and it was messy and it was warm, and it was clumsy because they were both holding each other’s faces and Harry was sifting feverishly through Louis’ hair while Louis slid his hands down Harry’s shoulders, and they both sort of lost themselves in it for a while. Secretly, Harry was wondering whether, if he had to chance to make Louis keep his powers and leave, would he do it? If he could meddle with his head one last time, would he do that?

No. He didn’t think he could. Not any more, not after everything that had happened…especially not
with the warmth of Louis’ body pressed so closely against his own. He didn’t think he’d have the willpower any more. They both wore ugly billowing hospital gowns, and Harry stroked the worn fabric of Louis’ gown, soft and bobbly as clothing gets with frequent washing, then grabbed two handfuls of it so that the material bunched around his shoulders and slid down his neck, exposing the tanned skin stretching over his collarbones. Harry buried his face in the crook of Louis’ shoulder and deeply inhaled the scent of his neck, feeling kind of creepy but deciding he was past caring.

Louis tilted his head and struggled to manoeuvre around the awkward positioning so he could kiss Harry again. He ended up with curls up his nose, in his mouth, tickling his face, and his smile only widened because of it. His fingers raked down Harry’s spine, dug into him through the raspy fabric, and although they both shuddered at the sound of their gowns rubbing together with a skin-crawling chafing noise, neither of them had any intention of letting go.

They only realized quite how desperate their wandering hands were becoming when Harry found that his hand had crept up underneath Louis’ gown and was caressing his stomach, enjoying the smooth, firm curve of his belly as his hand wandered over it. By the look on his face, Louis was enjoying it too, although he barely dared to believe it was actually happening.

Lips against his jugular, and Harry murmured, “Melodramatic bastard” in possibly the most loving tone of voice Louis had ever heard, and Louis leaned against his moving lips and eagerly revelled in the sensation. “Forget a speech; that was a whole monologue. Completely unnecessary.”

“It won you over though, didn’t it?”

“God knows why. You’re an absolute idiot, you know.”

Against the delicate shell of his ear, with Harry’s curls lightly tickling his mouth, Louis whispered, “I had heard the rumour.” Then he nibbled on Harry’s earlobe for emphasis.

The sound that Harry made in response as he twitched underneath the pressure of Louis’ teeth pressing delicately against his ear was neither a whimper, a moan or any other kind of noise Louis had ever heard. It was just a helpless kind of cross between a gasp and a groan, and Louis liked it awful lot.

“Don’t…believe everything…you hear,” he forced out, and Louis chuckled.

“Feeling a bit hot and bothered, are we?”

But before Harry could answer, the door flew open, and everyone who had left the room came marching back in again. It truly was a testament to how comfortable Louis was with his sexuality and his public portrayal of affections that he didn’t push Harry away, didn’t flinch, didn’t cringe, didn’t look the slightest bit ashamed. In fact, the only expression on his face as he looked up and scowled at the newcomers was annoyance. Beside him, Harry blushed a little, but he didn’t take his hand off Louis’ stomach or bother to hide the fact that he had a hand up his gown.

“That was never an hour!” Louis protested hotly. “That wasn’t even fifteen minutes!”

“No, sorry,” replied the man in the suit, sounding anything but. He brushed imaginary fluff off one crisp black sleeve. “We’ve been warned that the drug will need to be administered sooner than expected to those who want it…I’m so sorry, you’re going to have to make your decisions now.”

The room fell solemnly silent and everyone glanced around waiting for someone else to speak up and make their choice known. Apparently nobody quite liked to be the first to show where their allegiances lay.
Eventually, it was Niall who spoke up first. “I, uh…I’m gonna go. To this place in Sweden. I need to get to grips with things still, and maybe there’ll be people there who I can’t hurt as easily…I don’t want to give my powers up.”

“Yeah, me too.” Liam’s hand landed on his shoulder, and Niall’s face instantly flooded with a bright smile. “I have to go…there’s someone waiting for me there.” He’d been struggling for weeks to predict when and how he was going to meet the love of his life, and now he finally had a time, date, and place. Just over a month from now, and Danielle, once a part-time dance teacher and IT saleswoman, would walk into his life. Water manipulation powers – he wasn’t sure how Niall was going to take to her yet, with their powers being pretty much polar opposite and all but one could only try. He was still hoping Niall might be his best man one day.

“Harry and I will do it,” announced Louis. This was met with far less surprise than he’d expected; Liam didn’t look surprised at all (when did he ever?) Niall looked a bit taken aback, but then his gaze flitted to their interlocked hands, close proximity and swollen lips, and he nodded wisely, figuring out the situation reasonably easily. In the corner, Zayn and Eithne were huddled up with their arms around each other, his around her shoulders and hers around his waist, and while Eithne seemed moved by the announcement, Zayn looked like he got it completely. He caught Louis’ eye and gave him a knowing smile which Louis returned as he continued, “we’ll give up our powers. We’ll sign the contract.”

“Excellent, I’ll have someone fetch the equipment and prep you right now, then. What about you, Zayn? What’s your decision?”

He raised his head. His mouth was set in a stubborn line, his eyebrows sloping fiercely downwards, which was when they all realized that he had no intention of coming quietly. “Neither,” he said. “I’m sorry?”

“Neither. Because Eithne can’t come with me to that place, not with all those people who could do her harm, and I know full well that you won’t let us have any further contact if you let us go; we’ll be separated. Which I have no intention of allowing to happen.” His arms tightened around her. “She stays with me – and seeing as none of your offers allow that, I’m going to have to decline.”

He was answered with a forced, sickly smile. “Now, Zayn, you know you can’t just refuse like that. What do you expect me to do, hmm? Just let you go? I know it’s hard, but make your choice. It’s not like you have any other choice in the matter than the ones I’ve given you.”

“That’s where you’re mistaken.” Zayn looked up, and everyone else in the room looked up, too, to where the skylight was propped open to allow fresh air to filter into the room (it had no other windows; presumably it had been assumed that they could break out that way). He grinned wickedly at Louis, who felt a strange sense of déjà vu – except this time, Zayn didn’t need his help.

The man frowned, clearly not getting it, and everyone else enjoyed his confusion while Zayn ambled to the middle of the room, Eithne by his side. Positioning himself almost directly below the skylight, he glanced around the room.

“It’s been fun…in parts. Guess I’ll miss you losers. Especially you –” he pointed at Liam “ – with your bloody spoilers, although I guess it means I had the borrowed foresight to come prepared.” He mischievously patted his pocket. “When you find that hot girl, remember, confidence and great hair is key. Niall, everyone will be looking for your services as their own personal marshmallow toaster – make sure you ask something in return; it’s a premium service. Harry, watch yourself, you dick, and don’t fall down any more stairs. Louis?” Their eyes met, and an enormous grin flickered across Zayn’s face. “Make sure he knows you’re there.” He made a small thrusting motion, and Louis
snorted with laughter. “As for the rest of you…” Then Zayn made a violent and incredibly rude gesture that left little to the imagination, and made eye contact with the suited man as he did so. Once he’d done that, he tightened his grip on Eithne and then shot towards the ceiling in a way that made Louis feel incredibly dizzy, because of course he had seen this happen before. The only difference was that this time one of Eithne’s red patent ballet flats fell off and almost hit the suited man on the head, since he was leaping up and down yelling after them. (Louis noticed that all the other boys were wearing their own clothes again, and he felt incredibly jealous of this fact.)

Zayn and Eithne sailed through the skylight and Louis waved as he watched the two of them vanish through the gap, struggling not to laugh at the sight of the suited man yelling into the iphone he’d pulled out of his pocket and barking orders to apprehend them at whoever he was talking to, even though they all knew it was too late.

The moment they’d disappeared from sight, Louis turned to stifle his laughter in Harry’s hair, whilst Niall, who had no reservations about hiding his amusement, snorted with laughter, and Liam grinned at them all. Trust Zayn to make a dramatic exit.

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“We’re gonna keep in touch, though, right?”

“‘Course,” Louis assured him, hugging him with the arm that wasn’t aching, having had an enormous needle plunged into it. Beside him, Harry was rubbing his own arm and grimacing; the shot they’d been given had been large and clumsily given, and they were both less than impressed by the dull heaviness of their arms. “Dunno how we’ll figure it out yet, but we’ll sort something, Niall, don’t you worry. You’ll be okay, though, right? You’ve got Liam.”

“Yeah…” All of a sudden, Niall brightened. “Oh, yeah! You’ll never guess who they’ve said we have to take with us!”

“Who?” Harry sounded a little worn out, but he was making a determined effort to perk up, for the other boys’ sakes. He still wore a smile, they all did, even though they were struggling to cope with their farewells. After spending so much time together, they were still all stinging a little from the loss of Zayn – that had been like ripping a plaster off; fast and therefore the pain was mostly gotten over with quickly, with just a slight lingering ache that could be ignored. This was going to be worse, far worse.

“Michael!” At the confusion which greeted this statement, Niall continued excitedly, “you know, the sheep! After all the modification they did to it, it’s unfit for being released into the world with all the other animals and so on – like us! So I’ve got to take it with me!”

Since he was clearly delighted by this, everyone murmured appreciatively. But before anyone could continue the conversation further, Niall hurled himself at the closest person (who happened to be Harry) and buried his face in his shirt, hiding from the world. Harry was stunned, but pleasantly surprised, and he squeezed Niall tightly.

“I’m going to miss you,” Niall said thickly.

“You too, Nialler. We’ll figure something out though, yeah?” Harry lied, because despite all of his and Louis’ assurances he wasn’t sure it was going to be quite so easy keeping in touch as all that. After a moment’s consideration, he picked up a pen from the table by his bed and quickly scribbled his home telephone number on Niall’s arm. “There. If you can get hold of a phone of some kind, call me. I’ll be there.”
Niall blotted his damp eyes on his sleeve. “Thanks, Harry. You’re a great guy, you know that? You and Louis deserve each other, you deserve a bit of happiness to come out of this whole mess. I hope everything works out for the two of you.”

“So do I. But I’m confident it will.” Crushing Niall against his chest in one of the roughest hugs he’d ever given, he instructed, “if you see Zayn, let him know, will you? Pass the number along? It’ll be a lot easier for him to find a payphone or something.”

“Will do. It’s going to be weird without you guys, you know…”

“Oh, come on, don’t get me all soggy,” Harry joked, although he was struggling to hold back his own tears. “Don’t drown me before I get a chance to hug Liam, will you?”

That, of course, was Liam’s cue to hug him as well, and as always, Liam was far calmer about the situation, although he was visibly struggling with his goodbyes too. Louis hung onto Niall while Harry and Liam bravely said their goodbyes, and then they swapped around, and then it all started getting a bit muddled because Liam found himself hugging Niall while the Irish boy sobbed “I’m going to miss you so much!” and Harry whispered “Louis, is that you?” because he’d found himself being hugged by Louis instead. Then they had to explain to Niall, like he’d forgotten, “Liam’s going with you, you plank!” and by the time it had all been sorted out there was a snobbish looking man standing around looking impatient, and they all gathered that they had to go.

The final goodbyes were all far more rushed, but that made it less painful, really, so they’d be glad of it later on. Rather than dramatic farewell speeches, their official farewells went something like this:

Cough. “Well. I guess I’ll see you guys around.”

“Yeah…it wasn’t exactly fun, but…we had some good times. I’ll miss you.”

“I’ll miss you too…but I won’t miss your smelly feet.”

Laughter rippled through the room.

“My feet don’t smell!” Pause. “Well, all right, they do, but whenever you eat a particularly pungent piece of cheese…you’ll think of me.”

They all snorted with laughter again.

“Bye, Louis.”

“Bye, Niall.”

“Bye, Lou.”

“Yeah. See you around, Liam.”

“Catch you later, Harry.”

“You too…Niall.”

“Mm, later, Harry.”

“Bye, Liam.”

The room emptied somewhat rapidly after that, and Harry and Louis were alone. Swallowing, Harry fell into Louis’ arms and into one of the hugs he didn’t think he’d ever get enough of; an embrace
that was firm but gentle, and he inhaled the warm smell of Louis that drowned out the hospital disinfectant, and had bent his head so much that when he stood on his toes a little, Louis was able to press a careful kiss onto the top of his head, amongst the midst of several thick, fluffy chocolate curls.

“It’s going to be weird without them.”

“I know…” Louis sighed heavily. “But we have a new problem, you know.”

Harry’s head jerked in alarm. “What’s that?”

“We have to go home now…but I don’t think I can stand to let you go. Meaning we’ll have to go together. So whose house are we going to first? Bearing in mind that the other’s parents will probably be absolutely fuming that we didn’t contact them first…”

“Well…I have some things I need to tell my parents. Because I didn’t know I…liked guys too, before I met you. So I never told them. That I’m…gay, or bisexual, or pansexual, or whatever it is I am. I need to explain…”

“Easier with two,” Louis said softly. “Trust me. I know. They can’t flip out as spectacularly if there’s another gay person in the room…I’ll come with you, if you want. Help you to explain…”

Relief had Harry sinking even further into his embrace. “Would you? Really?”

“Of course I would! We’re in this together, you know. This, and everything else. Five became two, and I’ve got no intention of letting two become one ever again…I’ll always be here to hold your hand.” The statement was slightly ruined by the fact that Louis’ whole arm was numb and he couldn’t seem to properly wrap his fingers around Harry’s, meaning that their tingling knuckles brushed limply together and they both giggled a bit. Louis tutted impatiently and let his twitching hand go limp. “Well. You know what I mean.”

Harry grinned. “Yeah.” Raising eyebrow, with his own good hand, he reached out and took Louis’, which made the older boy blush a little bit with embarrassment at not having thought of that himself. Harry raised Louis’ hand and kissed it, which was very old fashioned but nonetheless romantic, and as his lips left Louis’ skin, an odd shiver trickled down Louis’ spine. Their eyes met, and Harry’s green irises burned into his blue ones. “I do…I love you.”

“I love you.”

Silence fell, and they were both completely comfortable with it, which, for two such talkative people, was quite strange.

Silence is made to be filled, but was there anything else to be said? They could think of nothing.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

(I'm sorry, this is a repost on request from my other blog and I wrote it about a year ago, and I haven't even been able to reread it without cringing. I've always sucked at endings, but they were even worse last year. So this is awful. Sorry.)

She screamed when she first saw him.

It was a reasonably justified reaction, bearing in mind that the last time Harry had set eyes on his mother he’d kissed her goodbye and then cheerfully headed off for college one perfectly average morning. A good couple of months later (at least three, he was estimating, if not four) he and Louis knocked on the front door, and when she answered it with puffy eyes and a kind of desolate dignity which suggested she’d been expecting someone else entirely, her shriek of response all but shattered Harry’s eardrums.

Her arms ended up around his neck, and she began sobbing almost incoherently against him, although he thought he managed to make out “you’re alive, thank God!” “been worried sick” “thought you’d died” and “where have you been, anything could have happened” before she started punching him.

“Ow!” Harry complained, “ow, ow! Mum, stop it!”

“Where – the – hell – have – you – been?” she panted furiously, beating his chest with her clenched fists. “I’ve had the police out looking! The whole country on alert! Nobody’s found you, nobody knew where you were, and so many other people have gone missing lately I didn’t know what to think – ” As if she had some kind of intuition exclusive to mums, her head snapped up, eyes trained on Louis and then narrowed as she said sharply, “who’s that?”

“Perhaps we should go inside,” Harry suggested gently, resting his hand on her arm.

“Has he been getting you into any funny business? Drugs, or something? I’ve heard all sorts of rumours, people have been saying –” Anne abruptly cut herself off, eyes widening in shock. Her dark hair was untidy, pushed back from her face, but she still looked nowhere near her actual age (at which Louis couldn’t begin to hazard a guess, but he was sure she didn’t look it). “Oh, goodness, it’s you,” she breathed. “You were on the news as well, you were one of the missing boys! Laurence something. Lance. Leo…Lewis!” She snapped her fingers, perplexed, frowning over the fact that she was unable to recall his name.

Harry corrected her, “Louis.” He didn’t have to say anything else: the whole word was bathed in adoration from the first syllable to the last, and as he said it he turned to place his other hand on Louis’ arm the way he had on his mother’s, except far more intimately. He almost seemed to glow, radiating love from his bright eyes, and Anne sucked in a breath and nodded slowly as things began falling into place.

“Let’s…not discuss this on the doorstep,” she said softly. “Come in, both of you…come in.”

Well, Louis could hardly fail to notice the appraising glance she gave him as he slid past her and over
the threshold, surreptitiously holding onto Harry’s wrist. Her eyebrows were raised, her expression unfathomable, but he was most definitely being given the once-over. It would have made him feel uncomfortable, had he not experienced similar things many times before. But as Harry tugged him through into the living room and they both sat down on the sofa (Harry seemed eager to snuggle as closely up against him as possible, but Louis had experience with this kind of situation and wisely scooted a reasonable distance down the sofa, still holding Harry’s hand to show support but sitting far enough from him to keep Anne from pursing her lips) Louis could only focus on how the tips of Harry’s fingers kept lightly brushing the back of his hand, and how nice the sensation was.

Silence fell, and Louis enjoyed the opportunity to take in a couple of little pieces of Harry’s childhood. Pictures of a bluish-green eyed baby, and an adorable one at that, adorned the mantle piece, progressing through years’ worth of school photos showing Harry’s slow progression from cute baby to clumsy child to lanky, slightly gangly teen – the most recent picture was of Harry looking far neater than Louis had ever known him, with freshly trimmed hair, wearing a blazer and several necklaces and laughing uproariously right into the camera, which had Louis tingling all over with fondness. He found it especially sweet watching how Harry’s curls had thickened over the years, dimples deepening, and how he’d gone from boy to man even more so since Louis had met him. The Harry then and the Harry now were two different creatures.

Now-Harry was slender and angular with pointed, emphasized bones and shaggy, loose curls. Now-Harry had solemn eyes that could become wicked and teasing in an instant, and his clothes hung off him since he’d lost weight in recent weeks. Now-Harry was firmer than he had been, and he met his mother’s gaze unflinchingly as he absently caressed one of Louis’ wrists. He’d grown, and that made Louis feel sad – how must it feel for the woman who’d watched her little boy grow so much more than this?

Louis was so proud of him, though. So, so proud. Like he was bursting at the seams. Harry’s mother must have been all but overflowing with pride every time she looked at him. Louis gave Harry’s knee a reassuring squeeze.

Anne went straight to the point: her no-nonsense approach was refreshing, if a little overwhelming; it left Harry struggling for an answer. “Why did you leave, Harry?”

He stuttered instantly, thrown off by the suddenness of her approach. “I – I never…never, I –”

“Was it because of him?” She glanced over at Louis. “Did you think I’d be angry? Because Harry, you’re my son, and whoever makes you happy…is your business, not mine. Did you leave here so that you could be with him?”

“No!” said Harry, stunned.

“I would have understood, you know. Would it be so hard to pick up the phone? Drop a text? Write a postcard, even? Just so I’d have known you were alive! It’s been so frustrating, looking for you and never finding a thing. Do you remember those documentaries we used to watch on Wednesday nights, on channel ten?”

Dumbfounded, Harry nodded. How could he forget? It was a tradition of theirs. Ready meals on trays in their laps, going cold as they sat staring at the TV, slack-jawed with awe, or chattered their way through several hours’ worth of television. Their bonding time, if you will.

“All those shows we used to watch, where children had been abducted, and I always used to say, ‘those poor mothers and fathers must be going spare! How must it feel to not know where your baby is, whether they’re even still alive? How do they stand it? How awful would it be?’ And now I know.” Shaky breath. “It’s the absolute worst feeling in the world.”
“Oh, God, Mum, I’m so – I never meant – I wouldn’t have –” Harry’s hand flew to his mouth.

“We used to trust each other, sweetheart, you and I. We’d talk about everything. But these past few months I’ve started wondering whether I really know who you are at all. I couldn’t understand how you could leave me like that! We were always so close…”

To Louis’ shock, Harry hurled himself off the sofa (almost dragging Louis with him), threw his arms around his mother and hugged her fiercely.

“Mum, it wasn’t like that!” he insisted, “I never left because of anything you did!”

“Why, then, Harry? What happened to make you think you couldn’t stay?”

There was a pause whilst Harry deliberated over which lie he ought to tell, and Louis wondered whether he was stuck and needed helping out.

“I needed to sort my head out,” was Harry’s excuse, and it was a good job that the lie was muffled into her shoulder so that the uncertain, false note to it was a lot less obvious. “I’d…well, I started feeling things that I wasn’t so sure about, and…I’ve never thought about guys in that way before. It really mixed me up. So I took off for a bit so I could sort myself out, I didn’t think to tell you. And that’s how I met Louis.” Lifting his head off her shoulder, he looked helplessly over at Louis and raised his eyebrows, clearly asking for some help.

Louis took over smoothly, “Yeah, we met outside this – hostel – one night and got talking, and I guess things kind of…escalated. He needed someone to confide in who’d – um, been in the same situation before, I think – and then…well, you know how it is.” He hoped she didn’t notice the hitches as he struggled to come up with a plausible story. Wandering over to them, he let his fingertips trail down Harry’s arm, carefully holding him by the elbow and feeling Harry relax slightly at his touch.

“Could you not have phoned?” She directed this question at Harry, but Louis skilfully intercepted it.

“Ah. That was my fault. I didn’t think to steer clear of some of the, um…less reputable areas of town. Cheaper accommodation and less trustworthy companions come somewhat hand in hand, unfortunately, and someone must have had their hands in our pockets when we weren’t looking. Needless to say we both found ourselves phoneless and somewhat wallet-less only a week or so after we met, which made contacting people somewhat…difficult.”

Harry stared admiringly at him.

Begrudgingly, Anne nodded. “I take it you haven’t called upon your own parents first, have you?”

“No,” admitted Louis sheepishly, ruffling his hair up at the back.

Her eyes softened a little. “There’s a phone in the hallway. Go and call them – they must be worried sick. Tell them they can come over, if they like; the more the merrier, and I don’t think either of us two have any intention of letting my son out of their sight.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Styles,” Louis said gratefully, and then he bolted into the hallway to go and ring his mother.

“I know that was all fabrication, by the way, but I don’t suppose either of you have any intention of telling me where you’ve actually been for the last three months, or how you actually met, so I suppose I’ll have to swallow my curiosity and lump it,” Anne said. “But I can see that boy cares a lot about you, Harry, and vice versa, so as long as you don’t take off again, I’ll keep my nose well out.”
Harry had jumped in horror at the beginning of her little speech, but by the end of it he was limp with relief. “You know I’d explain if I could.”

“So I would hope, but you never know…he seems like a nice enough lad, Harry, even if his tongue is a little too clever for my liking. I get the feeling that he’s a very capable liar; I’d watch out for that if I were you. Other than that…you seem happy enough. I’m glad you came home.”

“So am I.” Harry squeezed her arm, his eyes fixed on the silhouette of Louis that he could just about see in the light of the hallway, gabbling excitedly down the phone to his mum (and if his voice wobbled slightly and he sounded somewhat tearful, then Harry just found it all the more sweet). “Thanks, mum.”

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He’d been stroking Harry’s hair for so long that the motion had become automatic, and his fingers slowly smoothed down the disarray of unruly curls which sprang back into place the moment he lifted his hand, over and over again, listening to Harry’s breathing rumbling contentedly underneath him, like a purring cat. It was a good job that Harry was so long and lanky and had such an enormous bed, because with the two of them cramped into it, there was little room as there was for any space between them – not that they would have wanted any. Harry was warm against him, and his hair was soft and skin silky smooth, and Louis was very much enjoying the solid heat of him because it meant that he wasn’t going anywhere.

They were supposed to be asleep. When Jay and Anne had popped their heads around the door about ten minutes ago to check that their sons were both safely cuddled up where they were supposed to be and hadn’t taken off again, Louis liked to think they’d done an excellent job of feigning sleep. Wearing a pair of Harry’s old flannel pyjamas from a year or so ago (they fitted him reasonably well; back then Harry would have been around his height) and with his hair fluffy, and with Harry similarly dressed in tartan pyjamas, lolling against him, they’d looked the picture of exhausted innocence.

Of course, that had all changed the moment the door clicked safely closed and they sprang back into a fierce embrace, lips locked, exchanging almost frantic kisses like their lives depended on it. After all, there was a lot of lost time to make up for.

Things had relaxed a fair bit now, of course; Louis really was quite tired, as was Harry, and they were both snuggled up together enjoying the sensation of being quite so close. There were things that needed to be done, another night when there were less members of the Tomlinson family holed up on the sofa or the floor or in the bathroom and various other places, having cheerfully invaded the Styles household much like Louis had invaded Harry’s bed (Anne had taken it all with remarkably good grace, called for a pizza and organized haphazard beds for everyone, since Jay and her family refused to leave without Louis and Louis was equally adamant that he wasn’t going anywhere). But right now…cuddling was nice, and cuddling was safe, and Harry was committing Louis’ smell to memory even better than he already had, his head resting on Louis’ chest while Louis lovingly smoothed his curls down against his head.

Lazily, Harry turned his head and craned his neck a little to steal another kiss, and they both smiled a little as their lips grazed against each other. Louis cupped his hand around Harry’s neck as if to pull him closer, but he didn’t deepen the kiss. Tonight he was tired.

“Do you think the other boys are okay?” Harry asked. When he was tired, his voice was lower and thicker and made Louis shiver as it rumbled so closely to his ear.

“Course. Knowing Niall, he’s probably in a similarly compromising position to ours with that
bloody sheep,” Louis snickered.

They both choked with laughter, and one of Harry’s large hands quickly clamped down over Louis’ mouth to stifle his explosive laughter. “Shut up, idiot! We’ll get split up if we don’t keep it down! Mum won’t let us wake anyone else up and stay in the same room for long.”

“She couldn’t make me move an inch from where I am right now,” promised Louis, pulling Harry’s hand away from his mouth.

“You don’t know my mother.”

“Nah, I could take her. She’ll never get past –” Louis automatically flexed his fingers, then frowned in surprise when, obviously, nothing happened. “Oh.” He flexed them again, perplexed, and then his sleepy brain seemed to reawaken, something stirring as he remembered. “Yeah, okay, forget that. Slipped my mind for a second…”

Harry’s fingers closed around the fabric of his pyjama bottoms, tightening and pulling them taut around Louis’ thigh. “Louis…”

“Oh, Harry, it’s been second nature to me for months, for God’s sake; a slight memory lapse is hardly unexpected, given the circumstances. I’m not about to get all depressed over it. I’m fine.”

“But –”

“But nothing.” Louis grabbed his hand and squeezed it tightly. “I’m not getting all bogged down in complications and miseries and what-ifs. That’s totally not me. I could do it, now I can’t, and that’s all there is to it. Now shush.”

Before the silence had been comfortable; now it was filled with Harry’s guilt and Louis’ determination that Harry was not going to blame himself, and they had both stiffened so that the position that had before been easy and natural now felt forced and kind of awkward. Harry shifted around to try and get back into the same old comfy position they’d been in before, but he couldn’t quite manage it now that they’d both gone so still.

“My fault,” Harry mumbled.

“No,” Louis said, “my decision.”

“I forced you to make it.”

“If I recall, you were the one telling me not to.”

“If I hadn’t –”

“No,” Louis growled, and Harry found himself being unceremoniously shoved off Louis’ lap, out of bed and onto the floor with a thump. He was so shocked at being thrown so rudely into the cold air and onto the ground that Louis would have laughed at him had he been less irritated by his insistence that Louis had to be emotionally destroyed over a decision that he himself had made, and perfectly easily, too. Glaring down at him, Louis folded his arms across his chest.

Harry blinked slowly at him. He had landed flat on his back and was staring up at Louis with a combination of surprise and acceptance, and as Louis watched, he swallowed. “Well.” Slowly, he sat up. “I guess I deserved that.”

“Yeah, you did,” Louis agreed shortly. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, you
fucker, so stop being all miserable and c’mere.” He held out his arms.

Cautiously, Harry picked himself up off the floor and slid back into bed, fitting easily into Louis’ arms. They both lay on their sides, facing each other, the tips of their noses touching, and Louis draped an arm over his waist as he kissed him on the corner of his mouth. Harry’s eyes fluttered closed and he melted into the kiss, quick and light as it was, and they snuggled more closely to each other, like it was another night spent in that draughty old building the first time they’d shared a bed, and cuddling up together was an instinct for self-preservation and they had to do it to keep warm.

“I don’t regret my choice for an instant,” Louis told him slowly, like he was talking to an idiot. (In all fairness, in his opinion he kind of was; he still couldn’t believe Harry hadn’t caught on to this already.) “I love you, so, so much. You’ve changed my life. These past few months…I’d never have gotten through them without you. I love all of the boys, and sure, I’ll miss them. I’d have given up my powers to be with them, you know that, right? Not because I feel for them in that way, but because if there’s one thing that terrifies me, it’s being alone…you came to me when I’d only been in that place for three days, and you thought I was insane, do you remember? I think if I’d been alone any longer, I actually would have been…and now, the thought of being by myself even for five minutes scares the shit out of me. Especially without you. You came when I needed you most, and when you left…”

How could he explain this? How could he explain that Harry had come to him and been the light to his darkness, a candle in a pitch black nightmare, and when he’d gone away again, it was like the candle had been blown out? How he’d been afraid that the kind of sparks needed to relight that candle could only be found in Harry’s eyes?

“You’re so beautiful,” Harry breathed, interrupting Louis’ mini-epiphany. “Fuck! Look at you.” He carefully caressed Louis’ cheek with an unsteady hand, and his eyes were wide (pupils blown out, but Louis pretended not to notice that) as he took in every centimetre of Louis’ face. “What did I ever do to deserve you? Someone was smiling down on me when they brought us together, you know.” Yeah, Louis was tempted to joke. And he had a bloody great stick in his hand and he was smashing you over the head with it to knock you out and kidnap you. But he didn’t think it was an appropriate time for jokes. Shame. That was quite a good one – if somewhat tasteless. “Funny, because that’s what I was thinking about you…that and about how lucky we’ve both been…how close I came to losing you. You’re incredible, are you aware of this fact?”

“What a shame it is that there are quite so many people within such close proximity to us…walls may not have ears, but little girls do. Otherwise you would not be talking right now.” His eyes glittered. “Your mouth would be somewhat occupied with, shall we say…other things?”

Weakly, Louis swallowed. “Perhaps you could have kept that to yourself…rather than taunting me in this way, Styles; I won’t get a wink of sleep from now on, I hope you realize.”

“I know. That was my plan.” And Louis hadn’t thought it was possible, but Harry’s grin grew even wider.

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“We really are going to have to get a place of our own, you know.”

It wasn’t the first time Louis had brought this up, and Harry was determined not to appearto eager, but he was quite glad that Lou had mentioned it. Their current living arrangement wasn’t the best – yo-oying between Jay and Anne’s respective houses, living in one or the other of their beds. Currently they were squashed up in Louis’ bed at Jay’s, crammed together like baked beans in a tin,
although at least the twins had vacated the bed by now and left them with a little more breathing room. Harry’s head was resting on Louis’ shoulder, and Louis’ folded hands lay in Harry’s lap. It was a nice, if a little warm setup.

“I know,” Harry sighed, because if the shower rotor wasn’t bad enough and the fact that even accommodating for how clingy they both were, neither of their beds were built for two, and the uncomfortable situation of having to ask their mothers to empty the house whenever they wanted some alone time, the constant presence of demanding siblings and the fierce protectiveness of their mothers wasn’t enough to make Harry wish they were anywhere but there, he didn’t know what was. “Soon, Lou. I’ll get a job or something, save up for a while, and we’ll get our own little place.”

“Well. We could do that.” Instantly, Harry got the feeling that Louis knew something he didn’t. “Or we could use the lovely cheque I got through the post this morning, in both of our names, with ‘a little compensation’ written on the back in some posh twat’s loopy writing.”

That made Harry sit up straight and pay attention, and no mistake. “What?! Compensation? How much for?”

“Twenty.”

“Oh.” Disappointed, Harry sank back into Louis’ arms. “Well that’s a bit naff. After all we went through –”

“Thousand.”

Harry choked. “W-what did you say?”

“Twenty thousand pounds.”

“You’re joking.”

“I’m not.”

“Twenty thousand pounds?”

“Exactly that.”

“Made payable to us?”

“Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson, yep.”

“We’ve got twenty thousand fucking pounds?”

“Well, I would have demanded twice that if it were down to me,” Louis sniffed, “the food they gave us at that hospital was awful.” But a grin had crept across his face.

“Christ.” Harry had sat bolt upright; now he collapsed against the pillows – and against Louis – completely stunned and more than a little ecstatic. It was absolutely surreal. “Christ. Twenty thousand pounds. The amount of money that man has must be insane. Twenty thousand pounds.”

“Well, it should be enough to buy us a little flat, don’t you think? Something modest, something small. Something very us. I’ve had my eye on a couple of little places; maybe we could go for a scout around…it’s not like we need anything much. One-bedroom flat with a decent kitchen, a living room, a fair-sized bathroom. Sound good?”

“Sounds mental,” Harry said, “but absolutely brilliant.” He turned, grabbed Louis’ chin and kissed
him dazedly right on the mouth. “God. Our own place.”

Louis dreamily lolled back against the headboard, his Spiderman duvet crinkling. “No twins. No teenage girls. No mums. Just us! Sounds like heaven.”

“Was it worth it, do you think? All we went through? If we had a choice, would you go back and change it all? Stop yourself being abducted that time?”


Harry’s answering smile was small, but it lit up the whole room. “I love you, Louis.”

Louis kissed him on the forehead. “I love you too.”

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