

## Keep a Place For Me

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# Keep a Place For Me

by [Carrigan](#)

## Summary

"In the beginning of 2012, just weeks before Harry's 18th birthday, two drastically different yet equally significant events happen in his life. The first is that Harry's television show "A Prince Among Men", ends after four years on the Disney Channel. The second, during New York's first snow of the year, is that Harry Styles sees Zayn Malik in person for the first time."

Or, Harry Styles has been in love with Zayn Malik for a very long time. Fortunately, Zayn Malik just so happens to love him back. Unfortunately, sometimes a relationship needs a bit more than love to work, especially when the past doesn't seem so keen to stay in the past.

## Notes

This fic was written for the [The 1D Collab](#) on Tumblr, which is a tinhat-free Big Bang hosted by some very lovely people!

I was lucky enough to have my Forever Friend [queerlyalex](#) make a lovely edit for me, and with this being the longest fic I've ever written I'm so happy with how everything turned out.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)



*I. Rose*

*A lovestruck Romeo, sings the streets a serenade  
Laying everybody low with a love song that he made*

In the beginning of 2012, just weeks before Harry's 18th birthday, two drastically different yet equally significant events happen in his life.

The first is that Harry's television show "A Prince Among Men", ends after four years on the Disney Channel. In the show, Harry had played the leading role of Samuel Northington, a British prince who went undercover to an American high school in the hopes of being able to experience life as a normal teenager.

But after a highly anticipating weeklong event featuring 4 straight days of hour-long episodes and a TV movie with countless guest stars, the show had come to an end. There was much speculation revolving around the possibility of sequels and spinoffs, but the general understanding seems to be that Sam Northington, Part Time High Schooler and Part Time Prince, is finished.

Jeff, Harry's long-suffering yet devoted agent, has already lined up a series of movies for him to audition for - sickly sweet, sugar-coated movies where he will kiss girls in the rain, and run along beach shores, and possibly die of a terminal illness at the end while a voice-over says something inspiring about living life to the fullest.

Harry can't say he's exactly moved to tears by the scripts he's read, but it does feel like slipping into a comfortable pair of shoes. He's doing chemistry reads with all the same people, the Mileys and Selenas and Demis who have played opposite boys like Harry Styles for years.

The roles are just stepping stones for Harry to launch his career off of - or at least that's what Jeff claims. Harry has the utmost faith in his agent, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't almost sick to death of reading for the same Nicholas Sparks-esque character, staring into the faces of the same directors, sitting across from the same actresses, spitting out the same lines.

A change has to come soon. Harry can feel it on the horizon, like the taste of sea salt in the wind, trailing stories of adventure through the air. Harry doesn't know how much longer he'll be willing to keep ignoring the feelings of restlessness growing inside himself. He longs to live a life that adds up to more than just "satisfied".

The second significant event, during New York's first snow of the year, is that Harry Styles sees Zayn Malik in person for the first time.

In contrast to Harry's uncertain future in teen romance dramas, Zayn at 19 has just become the youngest man to grace the cover of Vogue magazine. When Zayn entered the room, Harry first conscious thought was how much Zayn stood out in a party full of "California blondes", as Jeff likes to put it. Everywhere you look, even in New York, it's a sea of tousled blonde beach waves and ocean-blue eyes.

There's a softness to Zayn's cheeks that Harry had always hated on himself, but on Zayn it bears a look of youthfulness, and draws kind a subdued, dreamy quality to his face. There's something about the way that his wide, dark eyes travel around the room, skipping over Harry and not quite seeing him.

Zayn looks removed yet attentive, taking in his surroundings but rarely feeling the need to react, and Harry wishes that those doe eyes would look his way. Zayn's equally dark hair is long and parted down the middle, and it falls into his face and across his shoulders when he leans in to hear something that the guest leading him around the room whispers into his ear.

Harry spends most of his time at the management-sponsored event watching Zayn. It's an industry party, meant for agents to show off their newest and most promising acquisitions, but Harry isn't in the mood for mingling. Jeff can tell he's distracted and tries to get him to focus on this producer and that director, or that photographer and this editor, all of whom could give Harry his next big break.

But Harry's attentions remain on Zayn, and the way he seems to float around the room. He's wearing layers, a plush berry-colored sweater underneath a distressed-but-expensive leather jacket. Still, the layering does nothing to mask the slightness of his frame as Zayn flits from one corner to the next, hidden in the shadows until he's pulled into conversation.

Zayn is mesmerizing to watch, and an unbidden thought creeps into Harry's mind as he likens Zayn to a trapped moth testing the walls for escape. It's something about the way he gazes out of windows as people around him engage in conversation around him, as if all the things worth viewing are exactly where he isn't.

Harry wonders if it would be inappropriate to ask Zayn to run away with him for a midnight adventure. To escape with only their trailing laughter left behind as evidence, just like the teenage characters that Harry plays in movies do as they race through silent suburbs. Maybe Zayn would say yes and take him by the hand as they sprinted to the elevator, or maybe Zayn would find Harry childish and unhinged.

Harry knows which one he would hope for, but he doesn't know Zayn well enough yet to guess which scenario is more likely.

In the end, they do not talk that evening. For all that it matters, models need photographers, and actors need directors. They're here to talk to people that can help their careers, but since Zayn isn't doing any acting (yet), and Harry's modelling career had ended at six years old when he decided he preferred talking to the camera rather than simply smiling for it, Zayn and Harry don't manage to talk to anyone in common, or to each other.

Their paths intersect ever so briefly and diverge just as quickly as Harry watches Zayn get ushered off into a separate room. When he questions Jeff, he's told that's where the modelling division is gathering, looking to making connections and land magazine covers and fashion campaigns.

Harry looks for Zayn later as the party dies down after managing to slip Jeff's watchful eye for just a moment, but there's no sign of him. It's like Cinderella's left the ball an hour early, except Harry's got no glass slipper to take home with him.

Time moves on, at it is wont to do, and a month later, Harry sees Zayn on the cover of Vanity Fair. His lips are pouted ever-so-slightly and his face is cradled in one hand, expression delicate and somber like one of the nymphs from the paintings Harry's mom would point out to him at the art museum.

Harry buys the magazine, and every other cover of Zayn's that he happens upon. Zayn's photoshoots tend to evolve at the same pace that Zayn does, Harry notices. Zayn's hair gets longer, then shorter, then even longer still, until the ends wisp and curl at his collarbone. His face slims, and the softness of youth is swiftly replaced with a strong jawline and high cheekbones. All the while, the camera begins to focus less on the sharp details of his face, and starts to split its time with capturing the leanness of Zayn's body.

At some point during the summer of 2012, when Harry is sweating in the sweltering heat of Alabama for a movie shoot, he begins to dream about what the leanness of Zayn's body would feel like under his hands. If maybe the hard angles would turn pliant under Harry's attentions, or if there was whipcord strength underneath the one-of-a-kind couture Zayn wore for his work.

Harry doesn't dwell on these imaginings, not under the unforgiving Alabama summer sun, nor months later during the damp chill of London's winter when he returns home to the flat he hardly ever uses. He does, however, consider in length the sad pang in his chest as his magazine collection grows.

He tries to tell himself that it's a hobby, a special interest that he's investing a bit of time in. But somewhere along the line, the "interest" turns into looking up recipes on how to make samosas after reading in an interview that it's Zayn's favorite homemade meal. Because what if by some stroke of luck Zayn becomes Harry's neighbor, and then Harry has the opportunity to introduce himself with a plate of fresh samosas, and then Zayn falls in love with him?

And then of course, there's the way Harry's heart thuds in his chest with unbounding anticipation when Jeff tells him that Harry might get to go to Cannes this year to promote the indie film he had a role in, which is premiering at the festival. The same festival which Harry knows for a fact that Zayn will be attending this year.

Only for that anticipation to be replaced by a sickly disappointment that almost knocks Harry off his feet when scheduling conflicts demand that he fly to Canada for reshoots on his current movie that's in post-production. It's quite literally devastating, and it feels like the universe is getting a cruel laugh out of Harry's eternal pain and inability to meet the boy he has a crush on.

Okay, so perhaps Harry is a little bit dramatic and a tad too invested. But knowing that he's possibly maybe kind of a little obsessed doesn't stop Harry from being obsessed. And it doesn't help that his friends and family are basically enablers.

After seeing Harry's disappointment at not being able to go to Cannes, Jeff tries to make up for it by getting Harry a signed print of one of Zayn's photoshoots for his birthday. It's a poster-size version of the magazine page that Harry has had blue tacked to his wall for the better part of the last 6 months. It's a full-page editorial of Zayn, balancing on one foot atop a

rectangular black pillar as his other foot curves delicately over the edge, as if he's testing the temperature of an invisible body of water.

In the photo, Zayn is wearing a modified Japanese yukata, geometrically patterned in various shapes and shades of white and black, cinched and tied at the waist but billowy and long at the bottom like the train of a wedding gown. Zayn's hair is pinned back in an artfully messy bun at the nape of his neck, little wisps escaping and curling around his face and framing it delicately.

Harry gets the print framed of course, and hung properly in the living room of his flat - he was afraid if he hung it in the bedroom, Jeff would call him weird. With the photo maximised at its highest quality, you can practically count every lash fanned out against Zayn's cheeks. And if Harry stares at it long enough, then it is almost a surety that the peaceful expression on Zayn's downturned face will make an appearance in Harry's dreams that night.

(Sometimes, when Harry traces his fingers over glass protecting the silvery squiggles of Zayn's signature, Harry wonders if this is normal. But he figures everyone is allowed their emotional lunacies, even former Disney stars.)

Eventually, just over one year after being in the same room for the first time, Zayn and Harry's paths finally intersect again. Properly this time, at Paris Fashion Week, to which Harry is only in attendance courtesy of Alexa. And she had only brought him along because Pixie bailed on her.

They both know he's not really there to take in the fashion, but rather for Zayn, who will be opening and closing for Valentino. It's Zayn's first show for Fashion Week, which Harry knows because he has Zayn's schedule memorized. It's not creepy, despite what Alexa says. It just means that Harry cares.

It's pointless for Harry to pretend he's not nervous, and when Alexa pats his knee to halt the nonstop bouncing of his leg, not even her sardonic smile can calm him down. Logically speaking, Zayn is just a person. A perfect, multilingual, visually stunning person, but a person nonetheless. This shouldn't be so nerve-wracking.

But as the lights dim on the audience, and the runway becomes illuminated, Harry's heart still kicks into overdrive. The music starts, something with a lot of bass and lyrics in a language Harry can't understand, and as the curtain separating the backstage from the runway parts, Harry's anxiety grows tenfold.

Alexa had explained to Harry what an honor it was for Zayn to be chosen to open and close for Valentino, especially as an "androgynous" model. Harry hated that word and he knew that Zayn did too (based on an interview Zayn had with Harper's Bazaar, which Harry had read).

Zayn likes to say that he is a "fashion model", and that fashion is about the artistry of clothing, not about gender. Whether Zayn is wearing a dress or pants or a skirt or a suit, he only ever wants to make the clothes look beautiful. That's all he cares about.

That is the mindset that Harry carries with him as Zayn comes out in his first look. He wasn't sure what to expect - Alexa told him that this was technically a womens' line, but obviously

they saw something special in Zayn if he was here.

Zayn's first look is a dress, which doesn't surprise Harry so much as make him wonder yet again how Zayn can walk so gracefully in heels. They've got a braid crown in his hair, and the rest (which had gotten even longer, the last Harry saw) pinned back in an artful bun. The dress, which Alexa coos over, is sheer with golden brocading wrapped around his body like intertwining vines.

Harry thinks Zayn looks regal like this, beautiful and deep in concentration with a slight sway to his hips that causes the ends of the dress to swish playfully around his ankles. He looks like an angel, shimmering and splendid and untouchable, and Harry's heart hurts a little bit as he thinks about the poster on his wall that seems so insignificant now.

Zayn returns back down the runway, and the show continues on. There are more identical looking models, and more identical looking dresses, until Harry's untrained eye is hardly able to tell them apart. Alexa shoves at him discreetly when he starts to get antsy, and Harry tries to act like a person worthy of being in polite company.

Somewhere during the middle, when Harry begins to get restless again, Zayn appears once more. He's in another sheer dress, but this time with an ornately decorated houndstooth cloak trailing heavily behind him. The champagne fabric of the dress is long and flowy, and small golden flowers dance along the fabric around his feet as he walks.

It looks straight out of something from Game of Thrones, like Zayn is a highborn Prince and Harry is a lowly commoner vying for his affection. As Zayn returns down the runway, shocking waves of self-doubt begin to ravage Harry. All at once he begins to realize how ridiculous he was to think he could just turn up to Paris Fashion Week and start a conversation with one of the top models in the world.

Harry must go a bit pale, because Alexa nudges him with her elbow in question. He gives a weak smile, and tries to loosen the tight grip he has on his chair that has his knuckles turning white. Harry loses count after a dozen of how many more models come out, but before long, Zayn is gliding back out in his final look.

Alexa tried to explain to him the significance of wearing the final outfit. She likened it to "saving the best for last", and also having the best model the best. It was a coveted spot, one that came down to a mix of skill and connections. Picking a closer was all about beauty exemplifying beauty, and Harry starts to truly understand as Zayn comes down the runway.

Right then and there, Harry can truly declare that it will be his favorite showing of anything he'll see during the entirety of Fashion Week. There's no exaggeration to say that seeing Zayn takes his breath away. It's like he's staring at his wildest dream - like the print hanging on his wall, but living and breathing in full color, right in front of him.

A dangerously wide and tantalizingly low V neckline of blood red velvet cuts severely down Zayn's chest, twisting up into thickly tied shoulder straps that frame his exposed shoulders and collarbone just so. The velvet disappears into the golden pleating of an impossibly tight waistband, then billows out into thick-spun gold. The ballroom skirt, like a burnished antique

that has been restored into couture, is decorated with black and red near-identical replicas of the exact butterfly tattooed on Harry's stomach.

There hadn't been much posing in this show - there wasn't any time. If Harry's estimation was right, there were close to sixty outfits that had been shown. But at the end of the show, with a coy smile curving up his lips, Zayn makes time for a small twirl at the end of the runway. The light catches on the swirling fabric, and it looks weightless as he spins.

As Zayn makes his way back, well-placed hands and swaying hips inject movement into the heavy-looking gown. It's hypnotic, the pendulous rhythm of the skirt and Zayn's quiet confidence melding together in a mesmerizing display of fashion and beauty.

This, Harry thinks, is art.

Harry is knocked out of his reverie as the crowd around him begins to clap, and the models begin to reappear and make their final rounds. They come out rapidfire, bunched together and circling each other to make one lap around the runway and disappear back behind the curtain like high fashion spectres.

Finally, after the last model returns backstage, Zayn reappears, linked arm in arm with the designers. The applause increases in fervor as Zayn delivers soft smiles to the crowd, standing between the creative directors like a crown jewel. The designers wave, thanking the audience, and Harry figures he's sat next to someone important when one of the designer blows a kiss in his general direction.

The action must jostle Zayn, because he turns to see who the designer is waving to, and in the process manages to lock eyes with Harry. Ever so briefly, for just one moment in time, Zayn sees him. It's insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but in that second it feels like everything.

Zayn keeps walking, and his head turns ever so slightly to peer at Harry from the corner of his eyes. But just as quickly he's facing forward again, head high and neck elongated. The picture of grace and elegance as he makes his way to the end of the runway, smiling to cameras and onlookers alike.

Harry makes no effort to hide his stares when Zayn and the designers return back down the runway to leave. If this were a cartoon, Harry imagines there would be telepathic rays pulsing at Zayn screaming 'Look at me! Look at me!', but the patheticness of it all doesn't stop Harry from staring anyway.

As Zayn passes him by for the final time, his head dips demurely to gaze at Harry from underneath his feathery lashes, and Harry's lips part with a soft gasp. Harry feels liable to fall out of his seat as he leans forward as much as he can, trying to catch that final glimpse of Zayn before he disappears behind the thick curtain that quite literally separates them.

Harry has always believed in fate and serendipity. He believes that the universe can bring people together, people that were meant for each other and meant to love each other. Something soft and romantic and idealistic in Harry's chest wants so badly to believe that a

person like Zayn, who manages to stand out even in this haute couture world of statuesque beauty, could see Harry and consider him someone worth knowing.

The lovestruck thoughts flitting through Harry's brain must show on his face, because Alexa's prodding him in the ribs again with a bony elbow, and he tries to look less starstruck. He doesn't think he succeeds, because she just rolls her eyes in that half-fond/half-exasperated way she does when Harry's around.

As the show officially ends, the crowd begins to rise and disperse. The majority of the audience mills about, chatting and networking and doing the socialite things that Harry *should* be doing - the things he promised Jeff that he would do while he was here. But tagging along with Alexa means backstage access, and after a few minutes of buzzing around and waving to familiar faces, she's tugging him towards the back of the venue.

Alexa and Harry and a few people he has no chance of recognizing are ushered into a small hallway leading backstage. The hallway leads to a thick metal door instead of the huge black curtain decorated with golden sunbursts, and even when it's closed Harry can hear the post-show cacophony taking place.

It's not until the combined smell of hairspray and nouveau riche are battering his senses, as models and photographers alike scurry past him, that Harry realizes he might be in over his head. Alexa is fully in her element, clasping hands with models and breaking out into hurried French, kissing cheeks and waving to friends and frenemies alike.

Harry tries to stick close to her, but it's not long before Alexa is disappearing into a swarm of chattering models. He scrambles for a moment, hesitating to follow after Alexa into the crowd until it's too late. Not for the first time, Harry's feeling like he doesn't know what the fuck he's doing.

Alexa always said that "industry types" can smell fresh meat, and right now Harry's feeling like a uncooked steak that's been thrown into the lion's den. Gaggles of sharp eyed stylists and models look him up and down as they walk past him, taking in his suit that doesn't cost £10,000 and his general air of someone who is completely out of his element.

Harry only wanders on his own for a moment before someone's tugging on his sleeve. When he turns around it's not Alexa like he was expecting, but Zayn. *Zayn*, in a bright red silk robe that stands out stark against his skin. He's practically luminescent amongst the sea of black robes that pass them by. Tiny golden starbursts litter the crimson fabric, and the gold "ZM" monogrammed into the left pocket leaves no guesses as to whom he might be - these must be the perks of being the face of Valentino.

"Harry, right?" Zayn looks up at Harry expectantly, eyes wide and bright, and Harry stutters out what he thinks is a confirmation that he is indeed Harry Styles. Zayn smiles, and Harry's heart skips a beat, and it's still all very pathetic on Harry's end. "I thought it was you. I recognized you from that show - my sisters loved it."

Harry's mouth gapes, and he can't seem to conjure a single word worth saying. He's frozen in place like a deer in headlights. His sudden mannequin impersonation doesn't impress the people that have to push past him, and it earns Harry a few derisive looks. Zayn seems to take

pity on him, tugging on Harry's sleeve again and leading him to a vanity that appears to be reserved for Zayn and Zayn only.

It's littered with stacks of makeup and hair styling products, some that Harry recognizes and some that look too expensive for him to even look at. Zayn climbs into a directors-style decorated with the same golden-red fabric of his robe, and Harry tries not to focus on the way the slit in the robe exposes a slice of pale skin on Zayn's thigh.

"I saw you in the front row - just wanted to say hi." Zayn's smile is soft, his face pleasant and welcoming like the first sunrise of spring after a cold and lonely winter. Harry could start at him forever, and just bask in his calming energy and peaceful aura and all the other hippie talk Alexa lives by. "Did you like the show?"

"Oh God, it was amazing - perfect, actually." Harry manages to find his words, but he never has been one to know the line between passionate and rambling, and it shows when he begins lavishing praise unto Zayn and can't seem to stop. "It's like watching art come to life right in front of your eyes, and you can't look away. You make it look easy, though. I'm a total klutz and I couldn't walk two steps without falling on my face."

Zayn laughs, a youthful and happy sound, his eyes crinkling with mirth. Harry's only thought is that he would do whatever it takes to keep that look, that *smile* on Zayn's face for the rest of his natural born life.

"Thanks," Zayn says, ducking his head modestly. "I still get so nervous sometimes, but when you're in the moment you just kind of go for it." Harry notices how Zayn talks with his hands, wide gesticulations with long, thin fingers, and Harry finds himself wanting to kiss Zayn's palms, and rub them with rose oil until they were soft and fragrant with spring.

"Well rest assured - everything about you today was flawless. As always, really. This whole thing is like, frying my mentals. It's like when there's too many beautiful people around my brain short circuits." Harry's words shock a laugh out of Zayn, bright and free, and Harry laughs along with him.

"You did look a bit lost before I found you, mate. Who knows what could have happened to you if i hadn't come to your rescue." Zayn's smirk turns sharp, and his eyes glitter mischievously.

"Well if it's my destiny to be the damsel saved by the dashing prince, then I will humbly accept my fate." Harry smiles, the cheeky one that shows off his dimples and has been the focal point of his headshots since 2009.

"You're a bit of a sweet talker, aren't you?" Zayn's own smile has turned coy, and Harry can feel more of his personality breaking through. "Bet you're the life of the party at all the STONE events." Zayn is of course referring to the mixers that their shared talent agency STONE Management host. Mixers just like the one where Harry had seen Zayn for the first time.

"Oh no," Harry say, stepping closer to Zayn and leaning one hip on the vanity. "I always get the jitters at public stuff like that. Like *this*." Harry gestures with his free hand to all of the

models milling about and networking with the various personalities that have filtered into the crowd. “But a pretty face always puts me at ease.”

“Okay, that one was a bit cheesy, mate.” But Zayn’s laughing, eyes crinkled and nose scrunched, so Harry considers the line a complete success. “Did you steal that one from a script?” Zayn’s eyes squint with faux suspicion, and Harry has to let out a laugh of his own.

“Excuse you, my cheesy charm is all my own.” Harry gives Zayn his own suspicious look with one eyebrow raised. “And I thought you said your *sisters* watched the show. How would you know what my scripts sound like?”

Zayn rolls his eyes, but it doesn’t stop the flush that’s intensifying across his cheeks from spreading down his neck until it’s disappearing beneath the collar of his robe. Harry wants to chase it, follow it below silk and see where it ends - *if* it ends.

“You can’t blame me for watching a show about a fit prince who travels to America to fall in love. That’s like, every person’s *dream*.” Zayn says it so matter of factly, that Harry is compelled to agree with him just upon principle. But he wouldn’t be Harry Styles if he didn’t push a few buttons along the way.

“Fit, you say?” Harry leans in further, smiling as he does so and feeling very accomplished when Zayn’s eyes dart down to his lips and then back up. “Well, if you think Sam Northington is ‘fit’ then I’ve got someone for you to meet.”

“Oh really? And who might that be?” Zayn balances his chin on his fist, and watches Harry expectantly with amusement in his eyes.

“I’d love to introduce you to him over dinner.” Harry makes the offer with a leap of faith, hopefulness in his voice and his heart thundering in his chest. But when the words leave his mouth the mood shifts, and Zayn’s face immediately falls. Harry feels like he’s done something terribly wrong, and is about to apologize when a bright British accent calls out Zayn’s name.

Before Harry can conceive what’s happening, Zayn is glancing at a clock on the vanity and cursing, practically jumping out of his chair to shove various items cluttering the tabletop into a Valentino duffle bag sitting on a nearby stool. Harry’s confused, *very* confused, and is wholly unprepared for Naomi fucking Campbell to beeline towards Zayn.

“Darling why aren’t you dressed yet? The show’s been over for ages - I leave you alone for five minutes and you lose the entire plot.” Naomi signals over her shoulder and a pair dark jacquard-patterned trousers of materialize into her hand, which she hands to Zayn to put on. “You know that we are on a very tight schedule today, what has gotten into you?”

“I was having a conversation - normal people stop to do that, sometimes.” Zayn gets the trousers on with all the grace of someone who wears clothes for a living, and slips out of the robe to pull on a pink silk button up that Naomi hands him. Zayn gestures to Harry, who startles and remembers that he is an actual person and not an inanimate object. “This is Harry. Do you think you can muster up enough politeness for a ‘hello’?”

“Firstly, your tone is deplorable today, and I do not appreciate it. Secondly, I am always polite. It’s in my nature.” Naomi had seemed quite content to ignore Harry’s existence, yet she deigns to anoint him with her gaze, unimpressed as she hands Zayn a coat to put on. “And what, pray tell, am I supposed to do with you?”

“Um -” Harry starts, before being cut off.

“Don’t answer that, it’s a trap.” Zayn is already buttoned up and slipping his feet into a pair of flats, and Harry’s just now realizing that he’s about to leave without Harry having his phone number, or a Facebook friend request, or *anything*.

“Nice to meet you?” Harry offers, eyes darting between Zayn and Naomi nervously, and Naomi turns back to Zayn and shakes her head.

“Does this new companion mean you’ve cancelled your *dinner plans*?” Naomi speaks with an underlying meaning to her words that Harry can’t hope to understand, and Zayn’s eyes narrow. “I’m joking, sweetheart. Mostly. Somewhat. Now come along, you can play with your friends later, Zayn. That’s why it’s called *fashion week*. Say ‘bye-bye’ now, the car’s waiting.”

“It was nice meeting you, Harry.” The tension from earlier is gone, and Zayn smiles at him before Naomi takes Zayn’s hand in hers, and begins leading him away. Something about the sight of it has fear gripping Harry’s heart, and he starts after them, calling out Zayn’s name.

“Wait, can I have your number?” Harry knows that he probably sounds frantic, especially considering Naomi can walk unreasonably fast in a crowd full of people, and Harry is already getting separated from them.

“Ask your agent!” Zayn shouts back, one hand flying up to wave at Harry as the crowd converges between them.

“My agent?” Harry asks confusedly, bumping into a photographer who gives him a dirty look.

“How do you think he got the signed poster?” And just like that, the top of Zayn’s head disappears beyond the sea of people, and he’s gone.

Harry stands in the middle of the corridor, paying no mind to the bodies that jostle past him, and he thinks that now he understands why there are so many movies and songs about “Love at First Sight” - it’s the most beautiful feeling in the world.

## II. Plum

*He finds a streetlight, steps out of the shade,  
And says something like, "You and me, babe, how about it?"*

Harry had been successful, if you could really call it that, after frantically calling Jeff to ask if he really did have Zayn's phone number. Jeff had spent several moments laughing, long and heartily, as if he was bent over and slapping his knee while watching the funniest comedy he'd ever seen.

But after Jeff had wiped away his tears of laughter that presumably were borne from his unending enjoyment of Harry's bruised ego, he managed to compose himself somewhat, told Harry to give him a few minutes, and promptly hung up. Harry, at this point used to Jeff's brusqueness, did indeed wait more than a few minutes (twenty three, to be exact), and was rewarded with an eleven digit mobile number.

The first text Harry sends is nerve-wracking, to say the least. It takes far longer for Harry to construct the message than perhaps any other text he's written in his entire life, and writing it easily qualifies as the most terrifying thing he's done in a long while.

Harry eventually settles on *'Hiii, it's Harry Styles - we met @ the Valentino show! You were so amazing!!! :) I managed 2 get ur # hope thats ok. Wud luv 2 hang out :)'* and he eventually summons enough courage to smash the Send button before tossing his phone to the foot of his hotel bed like a bad game of hot potato.

Zayn doesn't respond that night, no matter how long Harry stares at his phone while some French rom-com flickers silently on the TV. He tries not to take it personally - Zayn is one of the top models in the world, and it's fashion week. One of the busiest times of Zayn's year. But the sickly roil of disappointment still tumbles through Harry's belly as he lays down to sleep that night.

Harry actually doesn't get a reply from Zayn until 37 hours, 27 minutes, and 19 seconds after he'd sent his original message - not that Harry was counting, or anything. The fact that he was lying awake at 7 AM, brooding and restless and slightly heartbroken, had nothing to do with the text he'd sent two days ago.

When Harry's phone had pinged with a notification, he'd actually expected it to be Alexa telling him how and why she would be ditching him for the day. Instead, it is a message from a contact marked as "Zayn(?)", reading *'hello harry styles :) glad you enjoyed the show <3 if u still want 2 hang there's a party @ naomi's place 2nite~ u cud stop by and we could chill? lmk and i can get u in ;) x'*.

The text has Harry springing up in bed until his back is pressed against the headboard. Harry tries to tell himself to relax, even as his chest heaves and his heart feels liable to burst

through his ribcage. Being invited to parties is not a new concept for Harry. In fact, if being invited to events was an Olympic Sport, Harry would definitely be a gold medal contender.

But being invited to a party in the Hamptons at one of the Olsen twins' houses was a very different scene from being invited *by Zayn Malik* to a party *at Naomi Campbell's home*. Harry spends several long minutes just trying to comprehend that thought, and quickly pinches himself to make sure he isn't in the throes of an implausible Disney-like dream.

Harry glances back down to his phone in his hand, screen dark after minutes of being unused, and briefly wonders if this is real life. He's inclined to think this isn't an elaborate prank after all, as not even Jeff would care enough to take it this far. Which means that Zayn Malik really is inviting him to a party at Naomi Campbell's home.

*'i would love to come! please lmk the details and i will def be there! :)'*

Harry is startled when his phone rings just seconds after his message is sent. Zayn's contact flashes across the screen, and when Harry swipes to answer he's greeted with a cacophony of unintelligible voices and shrieking laughter and something continuously brushing against the microphone. After a few seconds, of Harry staring at the phone in confusion, Zayn's voice finally rings out.

"Hello? Harry, are you there?" Zayn sounds out of breath as muffled French (or what Harry thinks is French) echoes in the background, followed by the crackle of Zayn's hand covering the microphone as he shouts to someone. A door slams, and Zayn finally returns to the phone. "Sorry, hi, can you hear me?"

"Yes, hi! I can hear you, I'm here. I got your text, I'd love to come!"

"Oh my God, Harry, I'm so sorry. That was my asshole friends thinking they're funny. You don't have to come to any party, or anything."

Harry's heart drops, and if Zayn didn't sound genuinely apologetic, Harry would start to believe this was some kind of cruel prank after all.

"Oh. I mean, if there's no party, then... I hope this still means I get to see you again?" It's hopeful, a quality Harry's voice seems to take on frequently when Zayn is involved. Zayn pauses on the other end of the line, and Harry waits.

"There is a party. At Naomi's. I just meant that you don't have to feel like, obligated to come. I know that it's not everyone's kind of scene..." Zayn's voice trails off, distracted-sounding like he's thinking about something.

"I could come! If you wanted me to. I wanted to get a full Fashion Week experience, and what better way than partying with Naomi Campbell and Zayn Malik?"

"Are you sure I wouldn't be dragging you away from anything? If you're busy -"

"No, no, don't worry about that. My friend has been ditching me this whole week, so really you'd be saving me from another night of sad and lonely boredom." Harry is not too proud to

make himself sound pitiful and deserving of Zayn's charity. Zayn goes quiet again. "But if it's like, a private kind of thing - I mean -"

"No, it's not private. Not *super* private anyway. I - you really want to come?" Zayn questions, as if he really thinks there's any place on the entire world that Harry would prefer to be rather than in Zayn's presence.

"Yeah, absolutely! But be warned: my French isn't the greatest, so you're going to have to cover for me with all your cultured, European friends."

"I don't think 'cultured' is the exact word I'd use," Zayn chuckles, "But, yeah. If you wanna come by, you're definitely welcome. I had a great time chilling with you after the show, and \_"

Zayn cuts off in the middle of his sentence, pausing again as silence breaches the middle of their conversation. Harry tends to consider himself a good listener, and it seems like Zayn has more to say, so Harry wants for him to continue.

"And sorry about, like, not texting you back? It's been... kind of a crazy few days." Zayn says, voice stilted. Harry wants to believe he's only talking about the modelling aspects of his life, but something in his voice sounds... off. And it's not that Harry knows Zayn super well or anything, but Harry knows 'off' when he hears it.

"No worries, I know this is like, a super busy time for you. I'm glad you had time to spare me a thought." Zayn chuckles again, and Harry really truly loves that sound, dark and warm and heady like a sharp French roast.

"Oh I'm sure plenty of thoughts have been spared for Harry Styles, mate."

They talk for a while, about nothing really. Details for the party, Zayn's impromptu schedule changes, off-the-wall last-minute requests from designers that Zayn couldn't turn down. And then things like how Harry is enjoying Paris, if he's really spent most of his time in his hotel room, and how bad his French *really* is (which Zayn gets a huge kick out of).

Bit by bit the sad tension ebbs from Zayn's voice. Harry feels accomplished, deep in some primordial space inside himself that flares up at the thought that he's brightening Zayn's day just a bit. Bringing a smile to his face, learning that when Zayn really laughs it's throaty and giggling and the most perfect sound Harry's ever heard.

Because, the thing about Harry Styles is that he likes to make people happy. He likes cheering people up when they're having a bad day, and he loves to carefully plan and prepare gifts for friends and family, and he afterwards resishes in their awe as they marvel at how thoughtful Harry is. He loves to see bright smiles on peoples' faces, and know deep down that he brought a piece of joy into someone's life.

It's that kind of thinking, the idea that thoughtfulness is the greatest gift, that had Harry wandering around an international food market hours after his phonecall with Zayn ended, trying to find turmeric, or "Safran des Indes" as Harry learns it is called in France, fennel

seeds, garam masala, and a handful of other ingredients and spices necessary to make samosas from scratch.

Harry cares about things like making good first impressions and putting his best foot forward. He cares so much that he was willing to endure some very rude and borderline hurtful comments from Alexa when she checked in on him as he was leaving, and saw he was carrying a pastry box filled with handmade mincemeat samosas. Alexa laughed (a lot) but patted him on the head fondly and set him on his way.

The taxi ride to the address Zayn had sent him is inconsequential, if nerve-wracking. Harry spends the drive making small talk with the driver, who knows just enough English to keep things interesting. It's only early afternoon, and Fashion Week is still well underway, and Harry finds himself people-watching as they get stuck in a particularly bad spot of traffic. All told, the drive takes about twice as long as it should have, thanks to the added congestion of fashionistas from around the globe flocking to the already crowded city.

The driver stops in front of a regal-looking white building, old in construction but obviously expensive. He smiles to Harry and signals that this is his stop, and Harry realizes very quickly that the reason the trip took so much longer than expected was because the 19th Century French colonial was situated directly across from the Eiffel Tower.

Harry pays and stumbles out of the cab confusedly, turning in circles and wondering if maybe he gave the wrong address. Zayn had told Harry to let him know when he arrived so someone could come down and let him in, so he pulls out his phone to send Zayn a text. He types out a quick *'i think im here, not sure if im @ the right place??? white building with gold door, right?'*

Only a few seconds pass before Zayn sends back a *'yup! i'll b rite down :)'*, and so Harry mills about for a few moments, trying to look like he belongs. He tries to be on the look-out for Zayn, self-consciously smoothing non-existence wrinkles from his suit. Alexa told him that it was better to be over-dressed rather than under, so he'd gone with an all-black attire, with just the slightest hint of pattern in the jacket and pants.

Harry paces nervously on the sidewalk, hands gripping into his pink pastry box that the cardboard begins to dent. He forces his grip to loosen, not wanting to ruin all his hard work before Zayn gets to see it. Just as Harry is in the middle of giving himself another pep talk, a blonde head pops out of the doorway and peeks out.

Harry wonders if Zayn sent one of his friends to come get up, then his eyes widen and his jaw goes slack as he realizes that the shock of bright golden blonde locks actually belong to Zayn. He waves at Harry and gestures for him to come inside, and Harry's legs feel like they're moving on their own volition.

He can't even focus enough to take in the sight of the building's high ceilings or the tasteful decor in the foyer, because Zayn somehow became a full blonde since the last time Harry saw him *two days ago*. Harry points it out, much to his own chagrin at his lack of tact.

"You're... blonde." Harry says dumbly, taking in the sight of the loose waves that tumble thickly over Zayn's shoulder, while one side is pinned back with a red carnation. Zayn's

beauty is always some level of otherworldly, but he looks downright ethereal, even now when he's off the runway.

"Yeaah," Zayn replies, dragging out the word. "It's like, a thing for a show? I was supposed to just wear a wig, but then I decided I wanted a change, so..." His sentence drops and he shrugs, ducking his head. "Yeah. Blonde, now."

Harry reaches out a hand to brush a lock of Zayn's hair over his shoulder from where it's fallen into his face. Zayn looks up at him, eyes still as dark and doe-like as Harry remembers, and he thinks he could just look into those eyes for the rest of his life.

"It's really nice, and change is good, yeah? I like it. Do you like it?" Harry asks, watching as Zayn's gaze drops again as he toys with the ends of his newly-golden hair. Zayn's brow furrows as if he's genuinely considering Harry's question, and his cupid's bow lips purse.

"I think... yes. I like it." Zayn looks up at Harry again, as if he's looking for confirmation that he's allowed to like it, then gives a half-smile when Harry nods. Zayn's face is soft and tentative, matching in sentiment with the white oversized sweater that makes his slim frame look even slighter. The sweater is contrasted with black jeans that are artistically cut and distressed to display fishnet tights underneath.

Harry wonders if Zayn picked out his bright red combat boots on his own, or if everything in his closet is meticulously procured by a team of stylists that work day and night to ensure Zayn Malik looks like the Vogue coverboy that he is.

"So, what's in the box?" Zayn gestures to the pink pastry box, and Harry's grip tightens reflexively. He clears his throat, and once again has to force his fingers to loosen around the pink cardboard.

"Oh, this, uh..." Harry starts to feel nervous under Zayn's curious eyes. He inadvertently mimics the way Zayn's gaze had found the floor minutes ago, staring down at his baked gift. "It's uh... samosas. That I made." Harry looks up at Zayn to see surprise on Zayn's face, then drops his eyes back down in embarrassment. "I'm realizing just how... weird that is, but, it's - yeah. Exactly what it sounds like. I read that you like them and I made you some."

Harry thrusts the box towards Zayn, and he takes it with wary hands. He opens it, peering inside at the samosas that are packaged delicately in their own little paper carriers. It wasn't Harry's first time making samosas, but he'd put extra care into making sure they looked and tasted good enough for presentation.

"I'm sure it's not near as good as your mum's, but I know you've been working a lot lately, and I thought you might like something to remind you of home." Zayn keeps staring into the box silently, but Harry's never really been one for quiet moments so he keeps talking. "Sorry if it's shit - I worked in a bakery once, but that was just promo for 'A Prince Among Men', so."

Harry is about to keep rambling, but a quiet sniffle stops him. Zayn closes the box with care, and a hand comes up to wipe under his eyes. He realizes with horror that Zayn is *crying*, and

Harry is instantly mortified. He gets hit with a flash of terror at the idea that Naomi might shove a stiletto heel into his brain stem for making Zayn cry.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry, I didn’t - I didn’t mean to offend you, or -” Harry reaches out to place a hand over Zayn’s, which is resting on top of the closed box. This has backfired so completely, and Harry wishes he’d just tossed the box in the trashcan like he’d contemplated doing so many times between the trip from his hotel to here.

“No, Harry, it’s fine - it was really sweet of you, and I really appreciate it. I’m just -” Zayn looks up at Harry, eyes glassy, “I’m just remembering how far away home is. That’s all.” He gives a sad, homesick smile and huffs out a small laugh. It’s sad watery thing, tugging at Harry’s heartstrings until his chest aches with the force, and before Harry can second-guess himself he pulls Zayn tightly into a hug.

“Tell me if this is weird.” Harry says into Zayn’s hair, which Harry learns smells like jasmine and lavender and sunshine. Zayn’s chin hooks over Harry’s shoulder, and the box digs into Harry’s side when Zayn’s arms wrap around his back.

“Not weird. Thanks.” The corner of the box is sharp and jabbing, even through Harry’s shirt and suit jacket, but he finds that he doesn’t mind much at all.

That’s how Naomi discovers them, her sharp eyes taking in the scene as she calls out Zayn’s name. It takes everything in Harry to fight the instinct to jump away, and he succeeds, if only just barely. Instead they separate easily, Zayn’s breath puffing out warm against Harry’s neck as lets out an indecipherable huff.

“I have to go put something away in the kitchen first.” Zayn doesn’t turn to face Naomi when he speaks, discreetly wiping under his eyes again. He grabs Harry by the hand, and drags them deeper into the flat. Harry looks back to see Naomi’s narrowed gaze staring after them and waves in greeting out of politeness, but he still looks away out of fear that he might spontaneously burst into flames.

“I get the strangest feeling that she hates me,” Harry whispers, as Zayn leads Harry down a white hallway lined with tasteful art pieces. The whole place feels like a museum, sterile and unlivd in, and Harry can’t help but notice the way that Zayn’s bright red boots are the only source of color that he’s seen.

“Yeah, that happens a lot. Try not to take it personally? She’s harmless for the most part.” Zayn still has Harry by the hand, and he doesn’t even have the time to be nervous about that before they’re pushing through a set of wide metal doors and into the kitchen. Regrettably, Zayn is dropping Harry’s hand before he’s even properly appreciated the handholding, setting the pink box on a large marble island.

Zayn turns back to Harry, teeth biting into his bottom lip as he fiddles with the ends of his sweater. Zayn shuffles towards Harry, boots scuffing into the light tile but leaving no marks behind. He steps in close, bracing one hand on Harry’s shoulder to lean up and press a kiss to Harry’s cheek.

“Thanks. Again.” Zayn smiles, a light flush running across his cheeks that no doubt matches the fiery blush on Harry’s. “I know we like, just met or whatever? But thanks for being nice.”

Harry has the urge to say something sappy like ‘I want to spend every waking moment being good to you’ or ‘I would do anything to try and be worthy of the smiles you give me’, but thinks perhaps it’s too soon. He settles instead for a wordless shrug, belying the speechlessness that even Harry Styles can succumb to under the right circumstances.

“So,” Zayn says, clearing his throat and tucking some hair behind his ear. “How would you like to meet some of Paris’ most hilarious and pretentious models of Fashion Week?” Zayn’s words come out self-deprecatingly, like he expects Harry to make a joke about vapid models and the materialistic nature of the fashion world.

“Only if you promise to tell me if anyone makes fun of me in French.” Harry pouts his lips, putting on his best puppy dog face. He bats his lashes, hoping it looks as cute as Harry imagined in his head, and is rewarded with a bright laugh from Zayn that has his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Of course, of course. You have my word.” Zayn bows his head solemnly, as if sealing a pact between two allies, and Harry is hopelessly enamored. Utterly taken by Zayn’s sly smile that only turns up one side of his mouth, and the way the flits between cheeky jokes and rolling eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Well in that case,” Harry says, offering his arm for Zayn to take, “Lead the way.” Zayn does indeed take Harry’s arm, shaking his head in what Harry thinks is charmed disbelief, until they push through the doors again. Zayn takes them down another set of hallways, and their twin footsteps echo softly off the walls. “Any tips? You know, for the crowd?”

“Nah, not really. Just stick by me, and I’ll promise you’ll get out of this alive.” Zayn looks at Harry, a sharp grin on his face as they can start to hear the din of the party even through the closed doors. “Minus an appendage or two.”

Harry squawks indignantly just as Zayn pushes through a different set of golden doors, and they’re greeted with raucous cheering as they enter the room. There’s less people than Harry would have guessed, maybe around three dozen. Some faces are familiar from magazine covers, and others are just particularly beautiful.

Zayn and Harry make their way over to group that’s still waving and cheering at their entrance, and Zayn introduces two people as the “assholes” that sent Harry the text earlier in the day. Neither of them (Joan and Jourdan, Harry learns are their names) seem even the slightest bit abashed or embarrassed, and instead give smug looks at Harry and Zayn’s still linked arms.

“Do my eyes deceive me, or has Zayn brought El Príncipe to our little Fashion Week party?” Joan drops her mouth in mock shock as Jourdan laughs beside her. “I cannot believe that for once, Zayn has actually taken our advice.” The pair share a look as Jourdan covers her mouth in disbelief.

“Never in my *wildest dreams*, Joanie.” Jourdan shakes her head, looking Zayn up and down with a sharp smirk and a bright glint in her eyes. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Sorry, are you implying that you two stealing my phone and harassing Harry was ‘advice’, or did I hear that wrong?” Zayn is incredulous, but the two women do not seem the slightest bit intimidated by his glare. If Harry’s being honest, he finds it quite adorable too. Like a rumpled little golden puppy, frowned up and in need of cuddles.

“Well I for one am pretty satisfied with how things turned out.” Harry dares to wrap an arm around Zayn’s waist, and Zayn rolls his eyes but steps in closer until they stand pressed together. Joan and Jourdan share another self-satisfied look, and Harry shares a conspiratorial wink with them as Zayn scoffs beside him.

“Ooh, I like this one, Zaynie! Please tell me we’re keeping him?” Jourdan reaches out to pinch Harry’s cheek, and considering the fact that with her heels on she’s got several inches on him, Harry blushes when she starts cooing at him. “He’s so adorable, I just want to eat him up!”

“Oi, he’s a person, not a biscuit! No eating.” The women gasp dramatically, and Zayn narrows his eyes at them. “No eating. He’s a friend, not food.” Harry laughs, caught completely off-guard but pleasantly surprised - he does love a man who can quote Pixar in casual conversation.

Joan and Jourdan just smile sharkishly at them, and Harry is instantly glad that Zayn has made it clear he’s off the menu. It’s not that Harry wasn’t instantly smitten with Zayn’s friends, but their matching pearly grins have just the slightest hint of danger to them. He doesn’t miss the way their calculating eyes evaluate his presence, and Harry can appreciate that Zayn has people like this in his life.

The introductory moment is cut short, however, when Zayn’s ever-present and watchful caretaker makes herself known. Naomi’s voice cuts sharply through the room, causing people to instinctively give her attention and part the crowd to let her pass, regardless of the fact that it’s Zayn’s name that she’s calling. She stops periodically to give perfunctory greetings to guests, but is very clearly making a beeline for Zayn.

“Zayn, dearest,” Naomi takes Zayn’s hands in hers, moving him just so until he has to move from Harry’s grasp. “I need you to help me with something in the kitchen.” It’s a completely transparent lie, absolutely see-through, and Zayn’s eyes widen just the tiniest bit. He looks over at Harry, then back to Naomi, who tilts her head to the side expectantly.

“Harry, I’ll be right back, yeah?” Zayn barely has the words out before Naomi is tugging him away, and Harry thinks that this is becoming a very familiar sight indeed.

Jourdan and Joan beside him share a silent and knowing look, and they each take sips from champagne flutes that have materialized in their hands. The moment isn’t awkward per se, but Harry has the feeling that they know something he doesn’t, and there’s really not much that can be done right now to make him feel like anything other than an outsider.

They make conversation with him for a few moments, easy chatter and unmemorable small talk. But as other unfamiliar faces stroll over, it's not long before Harry is slipping away to blend into the crowd, and pushing into the hallway. He remembers vaguely what direction the kitchen was in, and so he heads the way he thinks is right.

Harry knows he's found the right place when he sees the familiar wide metal doors, and overhears the telltale sounds of Naomi and Zayn's voices.

"If you really cared about me -" Zayn says, petulance thick in voice, before Naomi cuts in.

"I would what? Let you make an endless series of mistakes while I stand silently by?"

"You're not being fair. He's nice, why does it have to be anything more than that?" If Harry had any doubt that he was the 'mistake' they're referring to, it flies right out of the window. It stings a bit - a lot, actually - but he's still a stranger to them. Harry wants to be someone worthy of Zayn's affections, and he's not sure that one box of samosas is enough for that.

"You want to talk about fair?" Naomi scoffs. "*Fair?*" She repeats incredulously, and then breaks off into rapid French that Harry has no chance of following. Her voice sounds angry and her words pointed, like each one was molded with barbed wire.

Before flying to Paris, Harry spent three weeks trying to learn basic French, in an attempt to put all his compounded nervous energy to use. But actually standing here in the moment, all he remembers how to say is 'Tu es le plus bel homme que j'ai jamais vu' and 'La bibliothèque est à gauche'. Both of which would be less embarrassing to have said, rather than what Harry actually blurts out when Naomi's voice gets exponentially louder as she storms out of the kitchen and almost bumps directly into Harry.

"Uh, bonjour?" Harry's eyes are wide, and he's sure that his face displays every ounce of the terror that he's feeling inside. Naomi's eyes narrow as she glares at him, and for an instant he just knows that she's about to have security toss him out on his ass.

"Eavesdropping is *rude*." Naomi's arms cross over her chest, and Harry hadn't forgotten for one second how quickly Naomi's effortless charm can traverse into intimidation. Zayn doesn't seem to be affected by it however, and he steps around Naomi to stand in front of Harry, intercepting her ire with a disgruntled look on his face.

"He wasn't eavesdropping, we just talk really loud." They have another silent conversation, which models seem to be so fond of, while Harry's eyes bounce between them like a tennis match. He freezes in place, as if staying completely still means they won't see him, and maybe Naomi will forget he exists and let Harry go back to holding Zayn's hand.

"Je veux que tu sois heureux," she says, voice soft and eyes softening the longer she looks at Zayn. Deft fingers tuck a lock of Zayn's hair behind his ear, and she takes his face in her hands, stroking his cheeks with her thumbs.

"Oui." Zayn looks down, gaze turned to the floor, but Naomi lifts his chin until he's looking at her again. Her lips purse and her brow furrows just slightly, and she seems to be considering the details of his face as if she's seeing him for the first time.

“Nous allons essayer de cette. Peut-être qu'il restera, ou peut-être pas.” Naomi shrugs, her hands still holding Zayn’s face, and he leans into her touch. “Peut-être il sera meilleur.” Zayn’s eyes flutter close, and Naomi stares into Harry’s eyes, face going instantly steely. “Ou peut-être pas.” Naomi leans down to place twins kisses on Zayn’s cheeks, miraculously leaving not even a smudge of the red lipstick she’s wearing, and then walks away without another look.

Tension leaks out of Zayn’s body, and he lets out a heavy sigh. He stares after her for a moment, and Harry wonders what the hell he just witnessed. He gathers up enough courage to ask just as Zayn spins towards him, and Harry is taken aback as Zayn takes a swift step forward to places his hand on the back of Harry’s neck and pull their bodies together for a kiss.

It’s quick, far too quick, but warm and sparkling like fireworks on a hot July night. Harry has just enough time to get his hands on Zayn’s waist before he’s pulling away, and Harry just barely scrounges up enough self control not to chase after his lips.

“She likes you,” Zayn whispers against Harry’s lips, and when he smiles Harry can feel it. Wants to taste it. Wants to have it pressed up against his skin while he sleeps, wants to wake up to it in the mornings, wants to know what that smile looks after a decade of Harry putting it on Zayn’s face.

“I won’t argue if it means we get to do that again.” Harry is only slightly joking, but Zayn still laughs, and that’s what really matters anyway. Harry leans in that final centimeter until his lips are connecting with Zayn’s again, and he would be lying if he said it didn’t feel more ‘right’ than anything in the world he’d ever experienced before.

“I have a hotel room...” Zayn’s voice is hushed, barely a whisper, and Harry can feel something dark and heady settle in his belly. Deeper and more powerful that want - stronger, like desire that’s been stoked over hot coals until it’s burning neon bright. “Would you like to see it?”

Harry says yes (of fucking course he does).

### *III. Scarlet*

*And all I do is kiss you, through the bars of a rhyme  
Juliet, I'd do the stars with you any time*

Harry understood very early on when he and Zayn first started dating that he was Zayn's first in a lot of aspects. While Zayn hadn't exactly written Harry a dissertation on what his romantic life was like before their relationship started, Harry was always under the impression that aside from a few awkward first dates, Zayn's love life had been fairly undeveloped before Harry came long.

And it wasn't like there was a sense of pride or anything that Harry was Zayn's first. It doesn't bring him any pleasure to see the sad, slightly lonely look Zayn gets when Harry asks certain questions. Like if he'd ever been in love before - Harry assumed it was the isolation of Zayn's career taking off that made his face go cloudy.

It takes four years, four months, and twenty-two days for Harry to learn in startling detail just how wrong his assumptions were.

Harry learns at a music festival, of all places. They're in LA to watch some American friend of Zayn's, who sings sad music for cool kids that never wear their real hair color and only communicate with long, meaningful looks. Despite Jeff's constant insistence of labelling Harry as a pretentious hipster, scenes like this festival have always been more suited to Zayn.

He blends right in, hair recently cut shorter than he's worn it in years, the seafoam green ends tickling foreignly around his neck while his dark roots stand out against his winter-pale skin. With his form-fitting yellow sweater and dark jeans with matching suspenders, Zayn could pass for any typical 20-something kid that moved to New York with dreams of becoming the next Warhol.

Except Zayn never really blends in, not when he still walks through life with that slightly wistful otherworldly face, always drawing looks even if he's not being recognized. Something in Zayn, something about the soft glowiness that hums under his skin and the ethereal cut of his cheekbones sets off a deep longing in Harry's chest.

Like a wolf howling to a full moon, close enough to see but too far touch, there in all the ways that matter but intangible in all the ways that matter more. Harry hates feeling like that, as if there's some part of Zayn hung from the sky just out of Harry's reach, twinkling in the corner of his eye like a shooting star, darting from one part of the universe to the next.

The feeling, as if Zayn is liable to slip through his fingers like so many strands of thinly pulled fairy floss, usually fades when Harry takes one of Zayn's soft hands into his. And so he does just that, revelling in the heady warmth of Zayn's smile that Harry still hasn't gotten used to after all these years.

With his black and white Brogue boots on, courtesy of a limited edition collaboration with Doc Martens, Zayn is almost as tall as Harry. It means that when they're tucked away on the

side of the stage, swaying against each other as some indie band plays, Harry can press his lips against Zayn's and hardly need to lean down.

Harry's slides his hand down the small of Zayn's back, finding that spot that seems like it was made just for the curve of his hand. They've always been able to fit together with relative ease, and there is peace and belonging to be found in the curl of Zayn's smile. All Harry really needs is Zayn in his arms, and everything else tends to just fade away.

They stay like that for a while, swaying to music they aren't really paying attention to, until a production assistant of some sort comes to usher them backstage into the artists' area. Zayn's friend (Christopher, as Harry had learned in the car ride hear) is preparing to go onstage as the current artists finishes up, and Zayn and Harry have been given the okay to greet him.

Zayn is practically vibrating, suddenly buzzing with so much frantic energy that Harry almost doesn't notice the actual buzzing of his phone in his pocket. Harry lets Zayn pull him towards their destination as he manages to fumble his phone out of his jeans. A quick glance at the screen tells him that it's Jeff calling, and Harry squeezes Zayn's hand to get his attention.

When Zayn turns in question, Harry shows him the incoming call. A disappointed frown floats across his face, and Harry tries to bury the guilt that rises to the surface. Over the years they've made it a priority to be present in the moment, and make necessary time for each other. And while that reminder used to be reserved for Zayn's busy schedule as the highest paid male model in the world, the past six months have been non-stop for Harry.

Not that the countless meetings and phone calls have really done him much good. It's been five years since he left Disney (or 5 A.D., as Zayn calls it), and Harry finds himself still seeking that bit of legitimacy in his career. Being a Disney star wasn't anything to be ashamed of, and Harry is very adamant about that fact. But he'd be lying if he said it doesn't sting a bit that the only recognition he's gained from it all are a bunch of dusty Teen Choice and Kids Choice Awards, and one coveted MTV award for best kiss.

But Zayn gets it. Even if his career is and has been more established than Harry's, he understands the grind and the fact that Harry has goals and wants more for himself than starring in B Horror Films involving sharks and radioactive waste. Harry watches as the disappointment on Zayn's face melds into something softer and a little less recognizable in this dim lighting.

"I'll come find you in a sec, yeah? I'll be right there." Harry answers the call and greets Jeff, mouthing *'Just one minute'* to Zayn while holding up a finger. Harry stares after Zayn as he's guided further into the artists' area by the impatient PA, and tries not to feel dismayed when Zayn disappears around a corner without turning to give Harry a 'second goodbye' like he usually would.

In hindsight, Harry should have just let the call go to voicemail. Jeff had only been calling to let him know that he'd been passed on for a movie deal they were working on, a mainstream multi-picture that would have at least kept Harry in too-big-to-fail blockbusters for the next decade. But something about "experience" and "chemistry" had caused the studio execs to pass over Harry.

As it is, the conversation does nothing for Harry's mood. Though Jeff makes a point to mention that he's already starting on negotiations with a different studio for an "even bigger project", Harry's night still feels irreparably soured. He wants to be able to come home with a win, so to speak, instead of this incessant onslaught of "no thank you"s and "maybe next time"s.

At this point Harry would prefer to just go back home and have a pity party while Zayn stroked his hair and told him he was smart, kind, and important. And while Zayn would usually oblige Harry's desire to watch cheesy rom-coms and mope, this isn't one of the times where Harry can ask in good conscience for Zayn to bail.

Christopher, Zayn's friend who was apparently one of the "reclusive and elusive" art types, was going to be using some of Zayn's old modelling pictures for his stage background. So not only was Zayn going to reunite with his friend after several years, but Zayn was also technically part of the show. They haven't even seen the final edits of the pictures yet, which Zayn attributes to his "respect for the artistic process."

Harry stashes his phone back in his pocket with a huff, running a hand through his hair agitatedly. It's longer than Zayn's for the first time since they've been together, and he doesn't really buy into the whole "Rockstar Vibe" that Zayn claims it gives Harry. But for right now it's enough that later tonight Zayn will coo in Harry's ear sympathetically, calling him "petite lion" with all of French airs that Harry still can't emulate without Naomi laughing him out of the room.

After a few minutes of shuffling through crowds, Harry is able to make his way back to the artists' area, where he flashes his fancy backstage pass to the security team. This time, without Zayn, Harry has to navigate through a small group of people who collectively form an entire rainbow with their various shades of dyed hair. Their eyes quickly take in Harry's skinny jeans and Chelsea boots and non-vintage designer shirt, and their attentions flit away just as fast.

Harry isn't a household name here, not amongst these people who have actually read all the books that Harry's interior designer had put on his bookshelf for aesthetic purposes. Books that remain pristine and untouched, stark in their opposition to the well-worn and thumbbed through duplicates that Zayn had added after he moved in, filled with highlighted passages and margins scribbled to the edge with notes.

That out-of-place feeling creeps back up Harry's spine as he's pointed in Zayn's general direction, an itch in his palms that doesn't go away when he rubs his hands together. It's not a feeling foreboding, per se. Not in a fully aware sense, at least. More like his brain is telling him to go wait outside for five more minutes, even as his feet continue to propel him forward.

The ominous feeling doesn't start to make sense until a few seconds later, when Harry rounds a corner and sees Zayn interacting with his "old friend" for the first time. This person whom Zayn has never referenced in direct conversation, but was worth flying from New York to LA to see. Distant enough that they haven't seen each other in close to five years, but close enough that that one of the world's most in-demand models lets you use his image for free.

The pieces start to fit together, somewhere between realizing that the curve of this stranger's hand fits on the small of Zayn's back just as well as Harry's does, and the way Zayn smiles like he hung the fucking moon. Somewhere between the way they bend towards each other like two kindred fucking willow trees, and the familiarity in how Zayn's hand smooths over shorn and dyed hair.

Zayn catches Harry's eyes, and as his smile widens Harry tries to remind himself that there's a place for himself here, with Zayn and with Zayn's friends and in the parts of Zayn's life that Harry is beginning to understand he knows very little about. Zayn reaches up a hand to press his thumb into the small furrow in Harry's brow, and Harry lets out a breath he didn't even know he was holding.

"You good?" Zayn asks quietly, and he's probably assuming that Harry's call with Jeff wasn't exactly a positive one.

Though he's correct in that, he's missed the mark on his assumption that the call is the cause of the tension in Harry's body. Zayn runs a hand down Harry's arms, staring at him imploringly, until Harry nods that he's okay. Zayn seems satisfied, and presses a quick peck of a kiss to the corner of Harry's mouth.

"C'mere, there's someone I want you to meet." Zayn links their fingers together, and though it feels like Harry's suddenly got lead in his boots he allows Zayn to take him over to the The Stranger. "Haz, this is -"

"Frank. Nice to meet you, man. Heard a lot about you." 'Frank' offers a hand for Harry to shake, which he accepts confusedly. 'Frank' and Zayn make some sort of meaningful eye contact, and Zayn nods with understanding.

"Okay, so we're giving our alter egos, are we? Well I'm 'Zayn' with a Y, and Haz this is Frank with an Ocean." Zayn straightens a bit as he looks over at Frank, and considers him for a moment. "Apparently he doesn't go by Christopher anymore."

"Only in private company, Zed." Frank looks like he's about to say something else, but a harried looking PA buzzes over to him, listing off updated stage times and technical difficulties. After she scurries away, Frank turns back to them, running a hand over his short-cropped pink hair. "Well that's my cue - hope you guys enjoy the show." He taps Zayn on the elbow and nods to Harry in goodbye, and ambles off into what Harry assumes is the direction of his stage crew.

Zayn stares after him, considering him once again, and then turns to Harry. He's not sure how to act, or what to say. Saying basically any of what Harry is thinking right now would be an acute overreaction, so he settles for silence as he and Zayn are led to a row of seats tucked into a gated off section of the festival.

It's too loud for casual conversation, which Harry uses as an excuse to spend his time Googling "Frank Ocean" while Zayn watches the final steps of the stage being constructed. Harry doesn't know what he's hoping to find, or rather what he's hoping not to find, but he's only halfway through Frank's Wikipedia page when the stage lights up with the indication that Frank's performance is starting.

It's about what Harry expects, artsy and minimalist with undertones of deep and mindful angst. It's exactly Zayn's kind of scene, with thought-provoking lyrics and brightly dyed hair, but Harry still finds himself caught off-guard when Zayn is able to sing along. He tries to recall if he's heard these songs in their home, playing through speakers on the weekends while they cleaned, but Harry can't remember.

As the first song ends, Harry claps when everyone else does and squints to try and make out the lines of Zayn's face under the aesthetic lighting. Not for any particular reason, he tells himself. Just because he's allowed to look at Zayn's face whenever he wants.

Frank doesn't seem like the type to soliloquize or monologue, and so he introduces the next song briefly as a story about two people in a relationship who love each other, but aren't on the same "wavelength". Harry refrains from rolling his eyes, and wonders briefly if the call with Jeff was really bad enough to sour his mood so terribly that just the word "wavelength" makes his teeth grind in irritation.

It doesn't really register at first, when the first picture is projected on the screen, what exactly Harry is looking at. It's Frank, obviously, hugging someone whose back is to the camera with their face buried in Frank's neck. Long blonde hair tumbles over bare skin, miles and miles of skin that Harry has spent the past five years memorizing in person and in print.

Onstage, Frank croons about cocaine and virgins and lost love, and Harry does not imagine the way Frank's eyes continuously skirt heavily over their tucked away corner. Harry is not imagining the way Zayn has stopped singing along beside him, stiff and polite in that media-trained way he does when he can't speak or act freely.

Frank sings "Keep a place for me, I'll sleep between y'all it's no thing", and Harry tries to wonder what Zayn is thinking. He stares very intently at the side of Zayn's statuesque face, while Zayn resolutely does not look back, and Harry instead thinks that perhaps he doesn't want to know.

The song fades, and Zayn claps but Harry does not. Not as the beat lazily drifts into another rhythm, and the screen goes dark in preparation to transition into, presumably, another photo of Zayn. Harry tries to consider scenarios where this ends up being some big misunderstanding. Just a bout of miscommunication and unfounded assumptions. Just a *mistake*.

Unfortunately, that's not the way Harry's luck is set up.

What Harry gets instead is the pale expanse of Zayn's back, hair tossed over one shoulder as he leans on his arm. White sheets pool around his waist but he looks bare otherwise, and even without his face showing, back to the camera, his entire aura is just as serene and ethereal as Harry has always known it to be.

In the end, just a few songs into Frank's performance, two distinct but yet equally startling realizations have Harry gripping the seat of his chair until his knuckles are white and his hands are stiff and aching.

The first is that this time when Frank sings, “If I could see through walls, I could see you’re faking, if you could see my thoughts you would see our faces”, he doesn’t bother to hide his stares. He fixates, “We both know that deep down, the feeling still deep down is good”, pacing up and down the stage until his eyes inevitably cut right back to their dark corner.

There’s no ambiguity, not in “Still remember, had you going crazy, screaming my name, the feeling deep down is good”. There’s no safe place to hide in this ugly tension that crackles with a direct life of energy from the stage to the seat directly next to Harry. It rankles, like bad blood curdling underneath Harry’s skin, and he feels sick to his stomach.

The second realization, exponentially more blood-curdling than the first, is the fantail tattoo that trails up the base of Zayn’s spine. It had been so new the first time Harry had kissed it, pink and tender and begging for the care of soft lips. That’s how it looks now - now, as in the the picture of his naked boyfriend on the screen.

Now, as in the flush that has risen to that exact spot on Zayn’s neck when Harry looks at him. Now, as in the exact image that is burned into Frank’s mind, an image that Harry had believed belonged only to him. Was known only to him, and explored intimately with only Harry’s lips and eyes and fingertips.

Frank keeps staring.

Even under the dim lighting, Harry can see that familiar look on Zayn’s face. The sad, slightly lonely one that he gets when certain songs play, or when buried memories surface. Harry’s heart clenches in his chest, and the polite smile on Zayn’s face is brittle at the edges, but it does not fall.

The serene smile stays in place, and Zayn remains ever poised, just like he’s supposed to.

Harry, in contrast, decides in that moment that he doesn’t quite feel like doing what he’s supposed to anymore. His chair clatters roughly against Zayn’s when he stands to leave, and Zayn looks at him in shock. Harry wonders if maybe it’s because Zayn’s forgotten that he was even here, and he uses that anger to propel him in a general direction that amounts to “anywhere but here.”

It doesn’t take long for Zayn to catch up with him, and a part of Harry knows that it’s because he wanted Zayn to. Harry wants more than anything for there still to be an explanation to this. Something, *anything*, to take away the nonstop horror rolling through Harry’s head that’s screaming “*Someone else in the world has a piece of Zayn’s heart, and that was the only thing in the world I thought I truly had, and I don’t know how to cope with that.*”

“Just tell me if you slept with him.” Harry’s sitting on a curb, far enough from the noise and the crowd that he can hear himself think again. Except every thought in his head is awful, so perhaps that wasn’t a success. Zayn is staring at Harry with alarm in his eyes, like a trapped animal, and Harry feels like his whole world is crumbling apart.

“It’s not what you think. If you want to leave, I can call the car, but let’s not do this here - please?” Zayn sounds like he’s trying to appease a toddler that’s preparing to throw a

tantrum, and Harry supposes that's exactly what he is. An illogical child, on the verge of a meltdown because his friend played with someone else at recess.

"All those songs? They're about you?" Harry stares down at his hands folded in his lap, and his face feels like it's on fire. He can't tell if it's the embarrassment of it all, or the simmering rage at Frank's unabashed and unapologetic ownership of Zayn's past.

"Harry, *please*." Zayn is starting to sound desperate, but Harry doesn't want to look at him. He doesn't want to oblige the hands tugging at his shirt, begging him to see reason. Maybe Harry just wants to be upset that the one good thing in his life was someone else's good thing first.

"It all makes sense now... In Paris, when I first met you, he was there. Right?" Harry turns to Zayn finally, raising an eyebrow in question. Harry nods as Zayn just stares, deer in headlights. "Of course, instead of telling me any of that, you took me to his fucking show, and you made a fool out of me while he sang to you. Frank fucking Ocean showed naked pictures of my boyfriend while singing songs about taking his fuckign virginity, and -"

"Harry, stop it! That's - none of that matters! If you want me to say 'I'm sorry', then I am! But none of that matters anymore. It was one weekend *four years ago*!" Zayn's cheeks are ruddy with heat, like a fever taking hold underneath his skin.

"The same weekend he left, you had me in your hotel room - the *same* hotel room?." Harry feels detached, like he's dissociating from the whole process. The easy solution would be to just *get over it*, but with the songs and the pictures and the fucking *eye contact* - Zayn and Frank don't act like two people who have gotten over it, so how the fuck is Harry supposed to? "He sees me as your four year rebound."

"They're just *songs*, Harry. He writes sad songs, and yes, some of them may be about me. But they're just words. It doesn't mean anything anymore."

"He was in love with you. *Is*. He *is* in love with you. God, I can't believe I never saw it." Harry rubs his hands roughly over his face, trying to feel something, *anything*, other than the emptiness inside of his chest. "You get so *sad* when you talk about Paris, and it's because of *him*. Jesus fucking Christ, how did I never see it? You're in love with him."

"Why are you doing this?" Zayn's voice sounds watery and confused, like he can't understand what's going on. "I get that you're upset, but - Harry, I love you. Don't turn our relationship into something ugly just because of some fucking *song lyrics*. I'm here, I'm out here right now with you, and I've been here with you for four fucking years. How does that not tell you where I want to be?"

"But that's the thing, Zayn." Harry turns, looking into Zayn's red-rimmed eyes that still manage to tug at every single one of Harry's heartstrings. "You wanted him first. And if he'd stayed for a day longer, we wouldn't even be here at all. We wouldn't even fucking exist." Harry watches the way Zayn's breath stutters, how his face goes pale with something akin to grief.

Harry stands, brushing dust off his jeans, as Zayn reaches for him with one trembling hand. Zayn shakes his head in incomprehension as Harry backs away just out of reach of his grasp.

He lets out a pained little breath, and Harry runs his own shaking hand through his hair.

“I think, uh, you should call your car. Don’t - don’t follow me.” Harry starts walking, again with only a destination of ‘anywhere but here’ in mind, and ignores the shouts of Zayn calling his name. His breaths feel like acid in his chest, each one more corrosive than the last, flaying his insides and burning him alive.

It’s been four years, four months, and twenty-two days, and it ends with Harry walking down West 39th street with a giant hole where his heart used to be.

Harry thinks this must be what heartbreak feels like.

## ***IV. Maroon (interlude)***

***Well, you can fall for chains of silver, you can fall for chains of gold  
You can fall for pretty strangers and the promises they hold***

“Don’t be upset, darling - this is for the best. You’re just giving him time to decide what he wants, and that’s wonderful of you.” Naomi’s voice is cloyingly sweet in his ear, sugar-coated to the point of toothache. “There is no greater strength than putting your partner first, and you should be proud of that. It’s truly wonderful of you.”

Harry doesn’t feel all that wonderful. In fact he feels hungover, even though he hardly had anything to drink at the venue. His head is pounding, and he feels terribly dehydrated, and there’s a voice in the back of his head screaming that he’s making the worst mistake of his life.

“I’m so glad you called me. Zayn is emotional right now, and not thinking straight. Some time apart will be good for both of you. Just a breather - you’ve practically been attached at the hip for four years. That’s bound to cause some strain.” Naomi says this very matter-of-factly, as if leaving his boyfriend should have been the obvious resolution to this situation, and Harry would be stupid to think otherwise.

“Why do I have to leave for him to choose me?” Harry mumbles, petulantly and halfway under his breath. He’d walked away out of frustration and anger that’s been building about everything in his life *except* his relationship. Harry doesn’t feel strained, he feels like he wants to hear Zayn say that their love means more to him than some hipster he fucked four years ago.

Harry wants to hear it, and then fistfight Frank for being an asshole, and then fuck Zayn until he forgets that Frank ever existed. In that exact order.

“Because sweetheart, he’s simply not ready. Young love can be so fragile, and the last thing you want to do is stifle it and end up pushing him away. Some breathing room will give you both time to find your priorities and your balance again.”

“*Zayn* is my priority. *Zayn* is my balance.” Harry knows it sounds childish, but it’s the truth. He’s been in love with Zayn since he was 17 years old, and Harry is absolutely terrified of the possibility that he if he leaves Zayn won’t ask him to come back. The very idea makes him sick to his stomach.

But Harry is even more terrified that Naomi is right. That Harry is going to end up being the stifling, jobless boyfriend that makes Zayn feels trapped and suffocated until he just wants to run away. Right now, Harry doesn’t have anything to offer Zayn except his failing career and his love, neither of which feel like they’re worth very much right now.

“You’re doing the right thing, Harry.” Naomi whispers in his ear, running her slender manicured fingers through Harry’s hair. She’s always hated his hair, especially when he started growing it out. He heard her once saying that it made him look like mediocre rockstar past his prime. But he leans into her touch anyway, just for the comfort and the reassurance, even if it isn’t real. “I’m very happy you’ve made this decision.”

Later, Harry will understand why there are so many nearly-identical songs about regret. It kind of sneaks up on you, when you’re vulnerable and least expecting it. But later will be too late, and in the present moment, all Harry does is blur the line between “good intentions” and “the road to hell”.

It feels like fucking up.

## *V. Red Ochre*

*And all I do is miss you, and the way we used to be  
All I do is keep the beat, the bad company*

There are two inescapable truths about “child stars” that most, if not all, vehemently deny.

The first is that they’re all a little bit (or a lot) fucked up. Not just regular millennial levels of fucked up, but a specific brand of neurotic narcissism that made them equal parts adore and despise the sight of their own face.

The second truth, less depressingly, is that through varying degrees of separation they all fucking know each other. Whether it be through an agent, the friend of a friend, or passing each other like phantoms in a casting room, their world is small enough that once you hit a certain level of fame and notoriety your lives are bound to intersect in one way or another.

But knowing someone in the business and *knowing* someone in the business are two very different things. And on an unspectacular rainy Monday, Zayn finds himself in a Moroccan restaurant sat across from a person he knows far too well, and yet somehow not at all.

Harry had picked the restaurant, a well-loved Londoner haunt that drew just the right kind of “I don’t care who you are, I’m only here for the food” crowd. Harry is making his way through a plate of lamb sausages while Zayn nibbles at his prawns, and not for the first time Zayn curses Harry’s ability to seem absolutely unphased when he really wants to.

“You seem surprised that I came,” Harry says apropos of nothing, and Zayn knows it’s not because he wants to have a conversation, but rather the fact that Harry hates quiet. Silence make him antsy, gets him fidgeting and twitching in a way you would expect from someone who grew up in front of a television camera. It’s in Harry’s DNA to fill the little pockets of silence that form when conversation lulls or never starts, a fixation to fill his every waking moment with noise.

But at the moment, Zayn isn’t in the habit of indulging Harry’s neuroses, and so he doesn’t reply. Zayn chooses instead to continue picking over his prawns, even though they’ve gone cold long ago. It gives him something to do with his hands even if he’s not particularly hungry. Zayn’s appetite is surprisingly non-existent, considering it’s early afternoon and he’s had nothing but Starbucks and gum all day.

Or perhaps Zayn’s lack of appetite isn’t surprising at all, given that the last time he and Harry occupied the same space they were breaking up. And not the cute kind of breaking up that the characters on Harry’s tween dramas used to do, with choked-back tears and tortured looks.

Theirs was more resigned anger, with Harry hurling words like darts at a board until one was sharp enough and aimed just perfectly to hit dead-on. The only resemblance the breakup might have had to a tv show was the way Zayn crumpled to the floor of their flat after a sad, lonely ride home. Or how days later Zayn found himself crying into a shirt Harry had left behind, mesmerized that it managed to still hold Harry's scent.

So maybe their breakup was a little bit tween drama. But in Zayn's defense, it still feels like the worst thing he ever went through, even a full six weeks later. It stings, like a wound that never healed quite right, and the pain flares every time he looks at Harry.

They're here now to presumably discuss the future of whatever remains of their relationship after Harry spent a month and a half freezing Zayn out, refusing to talk to him or see him. It was cruel and tortuous after four years of never going more than a day without at least hearing Harry's voice, and a part of Zayn still resents that Harry was able to do it so easily.

Which is why Zayn chooses to stare blankly at his plate of prawns instead of dignifying Harry with a response. Never mind the fact that Zayn was the one who demanded that Harry meet with him as soon as he caught wind that Harry was back in London. Zayn is allowed his petty moments, after everything he's been put through.

Zayn's avoidance doesn't get to last much longer though, as eventually Harry continues on talking, even in the face of unresponsiveness. Zayn knows that he'll keep poking and prodding until he gets a response, a reaction. Any form of attention will do, even if it's negative - this Zayn knows for sure.

"I have to assume Naomi knows you're here, considering the whole world still *raves* about how close the two of you are. And we both know you could never keep a secret from her." A thoughtful frown appears on Harry's face, and he tilts his head up to the skylights in the ceiling like he's considering something. "Or maybe this whole 'meeting' thing was just an elaborate scheme to prove once and for all that you're. She always did come up with the most sinister plans."

"Harry," Zayn says sharply, and he resents the annoyance that creeps into his voice. Mostly because of the way Harry's head tilts to the side when he looks at Zayn, and how one side of his mouth curves up as his hair falls into his face. Whatever Harry was looking for, he found it, and this is the side of him that's impossible to talk to.

One thing Zayn learned about how Harry interacted with people, was that everything had to be a fucking psychoanalysis. Like he was collecting secrets and lies and hidden truths, and then hoarding them close to his chest for future use. Harry likes to know shit just for the sake of knowing it, regardless of whether it's none of his business.

He'd never been that way with Zayn - they'd always had their guards down around each other, no implications or expectations. They were just themselves, fully and freely, and it was one of the best and brightest parts of Zayn's life. Now, Zayn can't help but scowl at the shit-eating grin on Harry's face, and feel enraged at the sight of it.

"Oh don't look at me like that," Harry rumbles, the picture of smug satisfaction as he leans back in the booth and stretches his arms out against the headrest, already looking full on lamb

and Zayn's innermost thoughts. "You know," he runs a hand through his hair, pushing it forward for volume then pushing it back for the 'effortlessly tousled' look, "For a minute I had this crazy idea that maybe you would have *missed me* after all this time."

Zayn's eyes narrow, shards of flint stabbing at Harry until he's tousling his hair again, his tried and true tick that remains the top reason he keeps his hair long - other than maintaining his rockstar aesthetic, of course. Zayn doesn't bother hiding the sneer on his face that betrays how much that snide little line gets to him. How it's a particularly acerbic taunt considering Zayn's the one who chased Harry around the globe for weeks and bombarded his phone with calls for even longer, and was met with a wall of nothingness.

"How are you this much of arsehole so early in the morning?" Zayn's retort is cutting, jaw clenched and body tense as he glares daggers into Harry. He doesn't get to sit here and play games, as if they're old pals joking about a petty falling out.

Zayn's not going to allow Harry to play their breakup for laughs, not when Zayn was the one wallowing in grief while Harry gallivanted across all of Europe with a different model every week. Traipsing around arm-in-arm with people that Zayn had to walk alongside and pose next to, as if the whole room didn't know that the same opportunists smiling in Zayn's face had been papped draped across Harry's chest inside bars in Monaco or beaches in Ibiza.

"If not now, then when?" There's a wry smile on Harry's face, and Zayn recognizes that self-deprecating tone. It wasn't so long ago that those words would have had Zayn cooing over Harry, brushing his hair out of his face and whispering flattery into his ear until he was flushing red under Zayn's attentions.

"Why do you have to be one at all?" A sudden exhaustion takes over Zayn in that moment, and the angry tension leaks out of his body until he's hunched over his plate. Zayn watches as the smile slips off Harry's face, until Zayn is staring into a familiar blankness. Zayn sighs, and picks at his prawns again. He's not even pretending to eat them anymore, just poking at them with his fork.

When Zayn looks back up, Harry's still staring, the slightest furrow to his brow. Zayn raises a derisive eyebrow in question as Harry's elbows brace on the table. He leans in, still searching Zayn's face for something, and Zayn feels his heart speed up just a bit under the intensity of Harry's eyes. He forgot what an experience it is to have all of Harry Styles™ focused you.

"Does Naomi know you're here? Does *Frank*?" Harry asks, and his head tilts to the side again. That dangerous inquisitiveness is back now that he's shaken off Zayn's earlier reproach. Zayn tries and fails to stop the blush rushing to his face, but he can feel the heat in his cheeks, and Harry pounces on the weakness like the predator he is. "I can't imagine you told Frank the full story, and Naomi obviously wouldn't even look at him twice without your seal of approval."

Harry's words are too close to the truth, and Zayn shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Harry latches on to that moment of uncertainty from Zayn, quickly regaining the upper hand and running away with it. It's straight out of the Harry Styles Playbook, and Zayn can't believe he fell for it.

“I guess I should thank you for not giving me the fucking boot.” Harry’s smirk has gone sharp, and he rolls his eyes at the appalled look that clouds over Zayn’s face. Harry leans back in his seat, looking the part of the cat that caught the canary. “I just mean that it was quite gracious of you not to have *Mummy Dearest* blacklist me as I tried to get my *second* career off the ground.”

“Harry -” Zayn can’t get a word in edgewise, but this is already going too far. Naomi is the executive producer of a cable drama about models that Harry signed onto months ago. Regardless of what she does or doesn’t know, it’s borderline offensive that Harry could look into Zayn’s face and say these things.

After four and a half years of dating, Harry should at least know Zayn well enough to not insult him by insinuating that he’d never jeopardize Harry’s career because of their problems, or allow Naomi to fire him on the basis of their breakup. Cruel is one thing that Zayn has never been, not to anyone. Harry, however, can dole out acidity and vengeance in spades.

Zayn can’t seem to find any words worth saying, and he tries to get his heart rate under control but all Zayn can think about is what a terrible idea this was. They had absolutely left things on bad terms - the worst, most frigid silent treatment of terms. But Zayn thought they’d be able to remain civil enough for him to at least convince Harry that they should try couples therapy. Anything to avoid flushing away four and a half years of love and commitment due to jealousy and miscommunication.

Zayn can’t tell if Harry is actually getting a semblance of enjoyment out of this, or if this is all a brave (if mean) front to hide a hurt that Harry won’t let Zayn fix. Harry just watches Zayn impassively, an amused smile as he takes a sip of a red ice-blended drink that turns his lips a bright crimson.

For a split-second Zayn’s mind is transported back to a summer in Rome, where he and Harry spent a day eating nothing but raspberry gelato until their bellies ached and their mouths were stained a near-permanent pink. They laid on the veranda of their rented villa, trading fruit-flavored kisses until the sun dipped below the horizon, and Zayn thought it was magical that love could be this saccharine. Like pure sugar running thickly through his veins, cloying and heady like a candied aphrodisiac.

And then the second is over. The memory fades, receding to the past where it belongs as Zayn is thrust back into the present. Back to reality, with this Harry and his cruel blood-red mouth. Red from taking a bite out of Zayn’s heart and spitting it out, grinning around the ochre coating his teeth. Harry licks his lips, so much darker than the sweet-pink of fresh gelato, and he’s unabashed at Zayn’s stares.

Zayn thinks if he were to kiss Harry now that it would taste of iron and regret.

“Haz.” Zayn’s surprised at how strong his voice sounds calling Harry’s name, and Harry’s face falls into a frown. “Why do we have to do this?”

Harry’s eyes narrow, and just as Zayn knows that he wasn’t expecting Zayn to call this meeting, Zayn also knows how much Harry hates the unexpected. He prefers his life to be

surrounded with a specific level of control that is firmly in his own reigns, and Zayn has always had a habit of ruining it and throwing everything off-kilter.

“I just...” Zayn fidgets with his fingers for a second, eyes dropping to the table as he continues, “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. We never really talked about any of what happened, and I’m sorry for the part I played in it.” Zayn looks back up and Harry’s staring, the blank face that makes Zayn’s stomach turn with its emptiness. “But it doesn’t have to be like this. It feels like we’re in different places, and -”

“Different places?” Harry interrupts, and his head shakes a little and his eyes widen. His back is straight and rigid, and Zayn can see that whatever his intentions were this has already gone horribly wrong. “I’d actually say we’re in the same place for the first time - I’m in love with you, and you’re in love with someone else, and I’m the only one that’s not okay with that.”

Zayn can feel himself go pale and cold, and he feels like his head is liable to float off his body and into outer space. His jaw goes slack, and his mouth works for a few seconds around words that all feel horribly insufficient.

“Oh, am I not supposed to say that out loud?” Harry purses his lips with faux concern, then shrugs as a bitter smile curves up his lips, abrasive as it scrapes against every part of Zayn that’s still sensitive to Harry’s attentions. “My bad. You’ll get over it though, I’m sure, just like you got over me.

“It’s not like that Harry. It never was.” Zayn shakes his head trying to conjure up the words that have been just out of his reach, whatever words need to be said to fix them.

“Isn’t it though? Because I haven’t seen much evidence to contradict the idea that this little meet-up wasn’t your way of trying to atone for breaking my heart and fucking off to go be a manic pixie dream girl with Frank. But I guess I’m still pathetic as ever when it comes to you, so here we are.” The steely blankness on Harry’s face drops a stone in Zayn’s stomach, and he can feel the exact moment that he loses his nerve.

Zayn slides out of the booth, and he can feel his legs shaking underneath him, and he can hardly bring himself to look at Harry. He wants to say this isn’t the Harry he knew, but it absolutely is. It’s the corrosive center that’s covered with so many layers of spun sugar that Zayn’s still got the stomach ache and the surface burns from finding out where one stopped and the other began.

“This was a mistake,” Zayn says, standing at the edging of the booth, voice more watery than he would prefer.

“Yeah. It was.” Harry picks his phone back up and taps away at the screen, effectively ending the conversation. Zayn turns and leaves, resolutely not checking to see if Harry watches him go.

## *VI. Violet*

*And there's a place for us, you know that movie song  
When you gonna realize it was just that the time was wrong, Juliet*

For Zayn's birthday last year, his mum got him a fancy coffee maker that could be programmed to have a fresh brew ready for him every morning when he woke up. Zayn never claimed to being an early bird or technologically savvy with coffee makers, but Harry had dutifully spent hours reading the manual, putting the damn thing together, and implementing extensive research on how to make the perfect brew.

And so for many months, barring a work excursion or other extenuating circumstances, Zayn was greeted at mid-morning with the smell of a fruity Ethiopian roast percolating, and the sight of Harry's back stretching out a t-shirt that probably used to be Zayn's at some point. The view tended to give Zayn some incentive to pull himself out of their warm, comfy bed, and Zayn harbored more than a few suspicions that Harry was using this knowledge against him.

Harry, always an early riser, was usually content to leave Zayn to his late mornings. Before Zayn had even stirred, Harry had most likely already completed a morning run, a shower, a quick breakfast, and made a few business calls during his spare minutes.

But Zayn's favorite moments were when Harry would crawl back into their bed as Zayn was waking, arms wrapped around him and humming tunelessly in Zayn's ear. It was blissful, and peaceful, and warm. Everything that a home, their home, was supposed to be.

There's an emptiness to Zayn's mornings now. A distinct absence in the spaces that Harry's presence used to fill. It shows in the empty clothes basket on Harry's side of the closet, and the dead battery on his Fitbit, and the coffee maker that sits unused.

It's obvious, in the way Zayn wakes to still air and closed curtains. No Harry to sing Ariana Grande songs in the kitchen, no commotion from Harry inevitably walking into a dresser or dropping something on his foot. Just Zayn, waking grief-stricken into an unnerving silence, saddened by the stillness of his own home.

Zayn's head and heart throb with grief, intensified by the rotten memory of the ill-conceived meeting that had transpired yesterday. Some part of him had thought that they could still brush this off as a terrible misunderstanding. Harry would apologize, Zayn would pretend to not want to work things out even though he desperately did. And then after a sufficient amount of groveling on Harry's part, they would get back to normal. But instead here he lays, with no Harry and no bliss and no peace.

Hours after Zayn had stormed out of the restaurant, leaving chunks of his heart behind for Harry to feast on, the Google alert that Zayn still has set up for Harry's name pinged his phone. And he was, of course, greeted with yet another headline of Harry stumbling out of yet another nightclub with yet another B-List celebutante.

It's not just Zayn's pride that's hurt, though the disrespect does leave his face stinging and red like a slap to the face. Everything feels tainted now, like if Zayn were to touch the memories of their lives together, his hands would come back sticky and soiled. Never in his wildest nightmares would Zayn had imagined that something as stupid as pictures during a concert would upend his life like this.

It feels like it was over too soon. Like an ending wasn't even printed on the pages of their story, just an abrupt cut in the middle of a sentence that left Zayn gaping and exposed and so very confused. They were supposed to make it. Everyone said so. And yet here Zayn lies, in his cold bed and empty flat, wondering how the fuck everything could have gone so goddamn wrong.

Zayn is startled out of his self-pitying reverie by the two-tone chime of his doorbell echoing up the stairs. He's tempted to ignore it, just turn back over in bed and return to his very important task of lamenting how shitty his life got in just a matter of weeks.

Going ghost has always been a personal skill of Zayn's, but lately he's been even more notoriously antisocial and avoidant. Even Joan and Jourdan have been giving him his space, and sticking to just periodically checking in to make sure he hasn't permanently cocooned himself in his sheets.

Naomi and Zayn's mum, in their overbearing yet caring ways, have been tag teaming him with phone calls, but Zayn has become a pro at dodging them both. He's mostly likely only a few more "accidentally missed calls" away from Naomi "surprising him" by showing up at his flat unannounced, and it's that sneaking suspicion that has him checking the door cam on his phone to see who it is.

Zayn is expecting it to be one of the two mothers in his life, and is surprised to instead see the unmistakable profile of Christopher's face. He never took up calling him "Frank", in public or private, but Chris has never protested, and Zayn has never questioned. Zayn is trudging down the wood stairs and cracking open the door when his visitor presses the bell again.

"Um... Hi?" Zayn starts, for lack of any better greeting. "What are you doing here?" It's not that Zayn doesn't want him around, but they've apparently gone from seeing each other once every four years to doing surprise pop-ups at each other's places, and Zayn is a little thrown off by the change of pace.

Chris, however, completely bypasses Zayn's greeting and doesn't wait to be invited in. He just sidesteps his way into the door, ignoring Zayn's incredulous face as he toes his shoes off. He heads deeper into the home, and Zayn wonders if maybe he's accidentally woken up in some parallel universe where this is once again normal for them.

When Zayn trails after Chris dazedly after closing and locking the door, Zayn finds him making himself comfortable in the kitchen. He's never been in the flat before, and Zayn's not even sure where he got the address from. But Chris is rifling through drawers and opening cabinets like it's muscle memory.

"Okay, stop." Zayn rubs his hands over his face, suddenly feeling very confused and very overwhelmed as Chris starts unloading grocery bags on the counter. "What are you doing,

and why do you have groceries, and who sent you?"

Chris slows, pulling out a carton of eggs as he eyes Zayn silently. When they were together, if you could even call what they did "together", Chris was always the spontaneous one. Always the one to do the memorable and exciting things that got Zayn's heart racing. And Zayn had always been content to let him take the lead.

But this isn't even close to being how things were. Zayn has seen Chris more in the past two months than he has in the past two years, and it's discombobulating to say the least. Zayn doesn't understand what this is, or what they're supposed to be doing, and he doesn't think there's enough processing power in his heart to deal with whatever Chris is planning *and* grieving his relationship with Harry.

"You want me to answer in order?" Chris' words come out teasingly after a few moments of silence, and Zayn feels an unbidden flush rise to his cheeks.

It was always hard to maintain any sort of ruffled emotions in the face of Chris' unwavering coolheadedness. Something about his steadfast composure was a staunch dichotomy to the neverending tide of emotions that Zayn seemed to constantly be battling. Harry always used to say that Zayn had the perfect Serene Self-Possessed Smile, like an actress from the Golden Age of American Cinema. Pretty and poised and made for the screen.

But in this moment, Zayn feels more like the 17 year old that used to look at Chris with stars in his eyes, like he was seeing life and passion for the first time. Zayn feels off-kilter and naive and so very young, and he's not sure if he hates it or if he missed it.

"Okay, so, in order," Chris starts, pulling a carton of eggs out of a paper bag, "Breakfast, breakfast, and no one, but a nice woman named Jourdan did tell me where to find you."

"You're here for... breakfast?" Zayn asks incredulously. "Chris..." Zayn sighs, gearing up to explain just how bad of an idea this is. The last time they saw each other, it was after the blogs and gossip columns had started reporting Harry and Zayn's separation, and after Harry had screened yet another of Zayn's phone calls.

Chris invited Zayn to some kind of retreat that one of his inner circle friends was planning. A week at a secluded resort in the mountains of Sweden that had been rented out to host a who's-who of creative types. A humbling blend of top level writers and designers and musicians who all wanted to get away.

Zayn can admit that some part of him went out of spite. Out of an urge to do something, *anything* that would get Harry's attention - even if it meant pissing him off. And Zayn could pretend that on some level it was still a business trip, sitting and working with designers, prototyping and brainstorming and basically anything other than sitting in his depressing and empty flat wondering where Harry was.

It didn't stop the guilt, though, when perfectly innocent pictures of him and Chris sitting at a campfire went viral, and the rumors of whether or not he was moving on started up with an almost hysterical fervor. It didn't feel good thinking about people's suspicions, and whether or not Harry agreed with them.

Judging by Harry's "manic pixie dream girl" comment at the restaurant, he'd already drawn his own conclusions, and none of them were good.

"Yes, Zayn, breakfast. You know, that thing people do where that actually eat when they wake up? Where are your pans?" Chris digs through more cabinets until he finds what he's looking for, and Zayn does not find himself amused.

"I know what breakfast is, what I *don't know* is why you would show up unannounced to make breakfast at my *home*." Zayn folds his arms over his chest defensively as Chris stares up straight to sigh at him. When they got back to London after the trip and Chris had seen the pictures, he left like he always does and Zayn hadn't heard from him in almost a month. Needless to say he's not exactly Zayn's favorite person in the world either.

"I saw that Styles was back in town." Chris says the words easily and with a shrug, and Zayn's arms drop limply to his sides. Chris was never one to mince words, and does not shy around being direct. "Figured we should talk. See where your head is at. Plus," he says, shrugging again, "I missed you. And I considered all of those things as valid reasons to come over and make you breakfast, so I did."

Chris stares at Zayn unabashedly, no shame or sheepishness in his tone. Zayn remembers that when they were together he often found himself envying the sureness of Chris' every move, how he always seemed so secure in himself and his words and his life. Zayn wanted to feel just a modicum of that surety, then and now, but unsurprisingly enough it doesn't come.

For lack of anything better to do, Zayn shuffles across the kitchen to grab pans and mixing bowls out of a top cabinet as Chris' eyes trail after him. Breakfast is easy and simple, Zayn thinks, as he sets the bowls in front of Chris and leans on the counter. And "easy and simple" are two things that Zayn is desperate for right now.

"You still like your pancakes as flat, crispy abominations?" Chris asks, as he starts pulling out measuring tools from somewhere, maybe Zayn's cabinets or maybe not, and starts to make quick work of opening up the dry ingredients.

"Do you still like your eggs with nauseating amounts of hot sauce?" A smile comes to Zayn's face as he peeks into one of the shopping bags and predictably finds a bottle of Chris' favorite brand of Louisiana hot sauce.

"Touché." Chris hands Zayn the carton of eggs, and just blinks when Zayn rolls his eyes with a huff. Zayn's grumbling is genuine but fond, and he goes about cracking them anyway because if Chris is left to do it on his own they'll be filled with shells.

Cooking together is a familiar but quiet affair, until Chris starts humming Purple Rain under his breath. The morning sun filters in through the curtains that Chris had opened, and it's not long before Zayn is compelled to start up the soundbar mounted on the wall so Prince's voice can fill up that last bit of space in the room.

Zayn laughs as Chris begins a somewhat impassioned performance, pointing and swaying as he sings into his makeshift microphone that's dripping with pancake batter. The noise and the

energy makes the flat feel like a home that's actually being lived in, and it eases some of the gloom that's been hanging in the air

The Prince performance is followed by an Usher singalong, and when cooking is done, they don't even bother sitting to eat, instead just standing around the kitchen island eating pancakes and eggs while cycling through R&B's greatest hits.

"Fancy a cuppa?" Zayn asks, while Chris unloads his his plate in the sink. Zayn's always been able to go with or without tea, but between his parents, Naomi, and Harry (mostly Harry) the cupboards are constantly stocked with various brands and varieties. And in any case, a cup of tea is just that much more time Zayn doesn't have to be alone with himself and his thoughts.

When Zayn makes his way carefully to the living room with their tea (black with honey for Chris and plain green for Zayn), he finds Chris looking at a picture that Zayn and Harry had taken on their first real vacation together. They had been lounging on the beach in Australia, and Harry had gotten so sunburnt that when they came back he could hardly sit or lay down without feeling like his skin was on fire.

"You guys are a cute couple," Chris says, devoid of any inflection or underlying meaning that Zayn can pick out to determine what he means. "Or, were, I guess?" Chris sets the picture back down, then makes the short walk to the couch. Zayn follows him, setting the tea tray down on the coffee table before joining Chris on the couch.

Zayn suddenly feels awkward again, like the two phases of his life are meeting and encountering each other in ways that had never been intended. He's not sure what to say, either - if he and Harry are indeed a 'were', or if there's something that still ties their relationship to the present to anchor them in 'are'.

In lieu of anything to say, Zayn instead sips at his tea exactly the way Naomi taught him - silent, delicate, and proper. A prim display of behavior and etiquette befitting of someone who often found himself in polite and abiding company.

"So are we just not gonna talk about it then?" Chris adds more honey to his tea, and the clink of his spoon against the cup as he stirs makes Zayn set his own cup down. Not out of any sense of decorum, but rather because Zayn doesn't want yet another reminder of the contrast between Chris' unapologetic sense of existence and Zayn's crutch of formalities.

"Talking has never much been our strong suit, if we're being honest." Zayn doesn't intend the bitterness that creeps into it voice, but it's there nonetheless. Whether the result of their recent interactions or wounds that are still tender to the touch, it's impossible to tell. More than likely, it's a raw and dangerous combination of both.

"I know I owe you an apology for how things went down after the retreat. I wasn't sure if you would even be interested in hearing from me, what with the whole world thinking that I was your rebound."

"I never cared what the whole world thought." The words come out of Zayn in a rush, too quickly for even a blush to form on his face. "I only ever cared what *you* thought, you were

just always too stubborn and private to tell me.”

“Ouch... Tell us how you really feel.” Chris’ flat voice does nothing to assuage Zayn’s budding irritation, and Zayn moves to get up from the couch. Chris isn’t capable of having serious conversations, not with Zayn at least, and at the moment Zayn isn’t in the mood to put up with more jokes from another ex that make light of his failed relationships.

Zayn gets stopped, however, by a hand on his wrist that tugs at him until he flops back on the couch. Chris sighs loudly, throwing his head back like he’s preparing himself to face a harrowing challenge. For him, talking about his feelings probably does feel like the equivalent of Roman gladiators battling wild animals.

“Okay, okay, serious moment. I get it, I’m serious now. Look,” Chris’ hand travels down Zayn’s wrist until their fingers fit together, and Zayn allows it. “You know I was never good at this shit - the talking part. But it was fucked up the way shit happened with us, and I hate that more than anything it meant I couldn’t talk to my best friend anymore.”

“Nothing stopped you from calling me except *you*. That was your choice, just like leaving was your choice. *Everything* was your choice, and every time I gave you space to come back you just took it as a chance to leave again.” Zayn watches Chris’ head drops, his expression hang-dog and heart-wrenching even when Zayn is currently pissed at him.

“What if -” Chris raises his eyes, squeezing Zayn’s hand where their fingers are still linked, “What if I wanted to come back again? For real, this time. Would you let me?”

“Frank -” Zayn starts apprehensively, already feeling the way the conversation is moving and tilting in a direction that isn’t safe, let alone easy and simple. “This isn’t -”

“You know that if you wanted, I would make it work this time, right?” Chris’ words cut through Zayn so effectively that he can’t even remember what he was about to say. “It could be us, like you always thought it was supposed to be.”

Zayn shakes his head, but his throat feels tight and the words bouncing around in his head won’t come together to make coherent sentences. There’s so many thoughts feelings competing for airtime that Zayn can’t comprehend any of what’s rising to the surface, except that sickly undercurrent of guilt that returns to his belly.

But as Frank leans in, eyes fluttering closed as he haltingly presses closer and closer, Zayn doesn’t stop him. It’s a heady rush of past and present when their lips come together for the first time in over four years, and Zayn sighs into it, overcome with a nostalgia of the first time they touched.

The kiss tastes like the honey that Chris always overloads his tea with, but also like the kinds of what-ifs and patched over heartache that could only come from a love that was too good to be true. Something that burned too hot and too fast until it was nothing but ash and forgotten promises.

It tastes like a closed chapter.

“That was... anticlimactic.” Chris is aiming for nonchalance, but at one point Zayn knew him better than anyone else in the world, and that kind of insider knowledge of someone inner workings doesn’t just go away. And so Zayn is so very acutely aware of the watery tone in his voice, and the way he ducks his eyes to hide his equally watery eyes.

Zayn pulls him into a hug, letting Chris’ head fall into the nook of Zayn’s neck like the last time he’d really left Zayn, in Paris when he’d been offered his first big break and was faced with an impossible decision. Despite everything, there was always an underlying comfort in the knowledge that there was an unexplored and unventured option waiting somewhere in the past.

With each other, with their failed relationship, there was always a place to go back to. To regress to. But now they’ve just exposed it, taken away the smoke and mirrors to reveal the last final trick of the heart. It’s out now. The fork in the road is no longer a mystery, but just a dead end. From here on, there is no more looking back at what could have been. There’s only forward.

“You know I’ll always love you, right?” Zayn whispers into Chris’ short cropped hair, cradling his head as Chris nods against him. They both know that there are things Zayn wants that Chris can’t give. A place and a *person* come home to, stability, roots in the ground to build around.

But the love doesn’t end just because this part of their story does. It will stay where it is, the foundation of a home that has been rebuilt and remodelled, ready to be the perfect fit for a different life and a different love story.

They stay like that for a while, finally sharing the grief that’s been festering in them for years. Pressed together, two lovers lost but ready to be found again, giving solace for a sadness that only the two of them can truly understand.

Later when Zayn is walking Chris to the door, after the Sun has moved several positions in the sky, Zayn kisses him again as he leaves. A quick peck on the lips that echoes goodbye, and solidifies their ending. Zayn watches as Chris ducks into the car that’s waiting for him, and Zayn finds that it doesn’t hurt like it did for years ago.

It doesn’t hurt like Harry hurt him six weeks ago. And maybe that was the point after all.

Zayn goes back inside, heavier and lighter in equal measure, and tries to consider where the story is supposed to take him now. But then again, perhaps he is well overdue for a surprise ending.

## *VII. Red-Violet*

*Juliet, when we made love you used to cry  
I said "I love you like the stars above, I'll love you till I die"*

Despite the assumptive reports of some judgemental and frankly cruel gossip sites and blogs, Zayn did not get high for the first time as a young teen on the mean streets of Bradford. It was actually well after he'd been discovered, at a house party in the Hollywood Hills that was being thrown by some child star or another.

Years later, Zayn will find out that Harry had attended that same party with a co-star, probably sat in the next room over sipping overpriced beer he was pretending to like. But the point was that Zayn was well into his teens, practically an adult, when Christopher "Frank" Ocean handed him a blunt for the first time.

Zayn had mostly taken it to feel cool, which probably wasn't the best of reasons to begin with. But he and Chris were in a room full of kids that spent their free time surfing and spending their parents' money, while Zayn was just the pretty boy that was quiet in a way that people didn't find cute and Chris was artsy in a way that wasn't accessible yet accessible to them. So weed gave the two of them something to focus on in the crowd other than talking to people.

Another inescapable truth about child stars, and to some extent all famous people of a certain level, is there's only so many places you can get your drugs from. They've got to be trustworthy enough that they won't tell your business, get caught, or sell you laced shit. That list was slowly becoming more scarce, but Zayn had a connect in London that had never let him down.

It's that accessibility, coupled with a lack of any better ideas, that has Zayn ringing the doorbell of Jeff's lesser used London home as he waits for Harry Edward Styles to answer. Zayn is met with silence for several moments, until he holds up a white paper bag sealed closed with a rose sticker, and hears the front door speaker come to life with a familiar voice.

"The bag can stay," Harry says monotonously. "But you can go."

"Sorry," Zayn replies, eyes rolling up to the sky as he bounces on the balls of his feet, "Baggie I are a package deal, and we couldn't bare to be separated. Guess you'll have to let us both in." Zayn wasn't actually sure if it would work, but after a few seconds more of silence, his efforts are rewarded with click of the door locks being disengaged.

"Are you really bribing your way in here with weed?" Harry leans against the doorframe with one arm raised above his head and an incredulous look on his face. While a normal person would probably focus on the fact that Harry was very shirtless and apparently working out again, all Zayn can see is his hair, not even long enough anymore to curl around his jaw.

"Yes," Zayn says, waving the bag back and forth. "Is it working?" He's asking genuinely, because Harry is nothing if not unpredictable these days. And while Zayn came fully

prepared to have a door slammed in his face, that doesn't mean he actually wants it to happen.

Harry heaves a beleaguered sigh, rolling his eyes as he turns his back to Zayn. He doesn't say anything, just pads deeper into the house, leaving Zayn to lock the front door. Moments later, Zayn finds him in the living room, sprawled in the middle of a leather L-shaped sectional that could probably comfortably seat 10 people.

"Did you bring papers?" Harry's arms stretch against the back of the sofa, and Zayn pauses for a moment to take in the sight of him. He seems so different now, from the 19 year old Disney star that made homemade samosas for Zayn, and stared at him like he was made of gold.

But Zayn supposes he's different now too. Whatever Harry thought of him before, it's changed. He's no longer the perfect, untarnished ideal from Harry's imaginations that Zayn had managed to live up to for four years. Whatever Harry thinks of him now, it's not the same as it used to be.

"Yeah I brought papers. Can't trust you to have any good ones, now can I?" Zayn flops down on the couch, a respectable yet inoffensive distance away, and the tiniest of smiles comes to Zayn's lips when Harry scoffs at the comment on his taste in rolling papers. It's true, and they both know it - Harry is better at rolling, but if left on his own, he'll pick the most expensive yet shittiest brands of paper and strains of weed.

Zayn leans back into the cushions as he opens the bag up, and Harry's fingertips skim the back of his neck where Harry's hand hangs off the back of the couch. Neither of them move, or say anything, and Zayn tries to pretend he isn't acutely aware just how much he's missed Harry's touch.

Zayn dutifully hands Harry the the plastic baggie of weed, stamped with another rose symbol, and the packet of rolling paper from the pocket of his jeans. Harry takes them both silently, and he leans forward to pull a nearby coffee table closer to the couch, then goes about preparing the joint. Zayn tries not to miss the brief point of contact Harry's fingertips had with his skin, but finds that he's not very successfully.

"So, does this mean that you're going to actually be civil with me for more than five seconds?" Harry is making quick work of setting up his 'station', and Zayn raises an eyebrow when Harry digs a grinder from between two cushions, though Harry just shrugs in response.

"Well, you know what they say - the way to a man's heart is weed." Harry goes about grinding, a specific three step process he's 'perfected' which probably makes no difference in the quality of the joint, but Zayn begrudges him his eccentricities. "How'd you know I was here, anyway?"

"Jeff told me," Zayn answers, and Harry nods, seemingly unsurprised but otherwise showing no outward reaction. "He might have hinted that he wants us to work it out." That was a way of putting it lightly - the only reason Zayn hadn't been able to track Harry down when he was 'travelling' was because half the time he wasn't telling Jeff where he was going either.

At this Harry chuckles, empty and hollow, and they both know why. Disappearing off the face of the Earth, except to be papped coming out of seedy clubs sopping drunk, didn't exactly make for healthy agent-client relations. And it's no secret that's Jeff's been spearheading the campaign for them to 'talk' and 'work things out' and 'get their heads out of their asses'.

Whether his reasoning stems from true altruistic intent, or the desire to get Harry off his couch, remains to be seen. Zayn assumed it was a true half agent/half best friend mix of both. If Jeff hadn't set into motion the events that brought them together in the first place, Zayn doesn't think they would have had the four years they did. But still, Zayn knows that Jeff prefers 'Harry Styles In Love and Working' over 'Harry Styles Broken-Hearted and Not Working', and Zayn assumes that Harry knows it too.

"Yeah, I bet he does. Deadbeat clients don't make the best house sitters, apparently. Though I doubt he'll leave me homeless as long as I book a gig soon. Fingers crossed." Harry waves his crossed fingers, a sardonic smile on his face, then starts tapping the ground up weed into a rolling paper.

Zayn frowns, not just at the way Harry talks so sarcastically about his own life and career, but because Zayn is wondering how long these cracks and fissures has been spreading and growing while both of them pretended they weren't. Not just the rifts in their relationship, but the way their unaddressed problems have had a tendency to spider web their way into other parts of their lives.

"Oh God," Harry sighs when he spots Zayn's look, "Don't do that face. It was just a joke, don't make it a *thing*." That's always been a habit for Harry - saying things that by all means should be worrying, and then playing it off to be nothing, absolutely nothing at all.

"You know I don't like those kinds of jokes..." Zayn's frown deepens, and he wonders if maybe they had addressed any of this shit at absolutely any point before everything imploded, maybe Zayn wouldn't have to pry a conversation out of Harry with the promise of weed.

"Yeah, well..." Harry shrugs, "That's about all the humor I've got these days, so you'll have to manage." The hyper focus he's giving to situating the weed inside the rolling paper is at least partly to avoid having a meaningful conversation. But that knowledge doesn't stop Zayn from taking time to appreciate Harry's joint rolling skills.

Like most things in Harry's life that he does regularly, he has a particular method to his madness when it comes to rolling. He does it expertly, deft fingers tucking and turning the translucent paper this way and that. Zayn watches the tip of his tongue slide against the edge, lips curling around it to seal the whole thing closed, until he's holding a perfectly shaped joint.

Harry offers Zayn the first hit, a courtesy they have always abided by for whomever actually brought the weed. Zayn digs a lighter out of the pocket of his jeans, and hands it over to Harry as Zayn takes the joint between his fingers. Zayn leans in as Harry flicks the lighter to life, and their eyes meet ceremoniously as it sparks.

Zayn becomes suddenly very aware of Harry's shirtlessness as he stares, lighter still flickering as Zayn inches the tip away from the flame. He inhales deeply, letting the smoke fill his lungs until he's all cloud on the inside, and his eyes dip closed. It's been a while, long enough that the burn feels foreign and good in his chest.

Zayn's eyes crack back open as he passes to Harry, and Zayn exhales as Harry takes a hit of his own. He doesn't look at Zayn this time, instead ducking his head as he lets the smoke puff out before pulling it back in. Harry leans into the couch cushions, handing the joint to Zayn as he drapes his arm against the back of the couch again.

Harry's fingers graze across Zayn's neck again, except it feels intentional this time, and the barely-there touches have Zayn melting into the leather. The weed is hitting him quickly, though time seems to crawl as they take hits and pass the joint back and forth. It's not long before Zayn is relaxing into the now solid press of Harry's hand into the back of his neck, and getting right to his expertise activity when high: talking too much.

"I kissed Chris - Frank, whatever." Zayn waves a hand uncoordinatedly in the air, and the tracing of Harry's fingers on the back of his neck stills. The weed is nullifying whatever nervousness or conversational inhibitions he'd usually have, but Zayn still has the thought that this probably isn't a "normal" conversation.

"Oh." Harry's too high to be angry, but his face does go a little sad, a remorseful and nostalgic kind of gaze as he drops his eyes to the floor. His free hand that hasn't resumed outlining Zayn's fantail tattoo rubs at his eyes, and he tips his head back to stare at the ceiling unblinkingly.

"It wasn't the same," Zayn says, not intentionally cryptic, but it's what's on his mind.

"Wasn't the same as what?" Harry's head turns to face Zayn, and it's hard to fight the temptation to just stare at the slow rise and fall of his chest instead of trying to have a meaningful conversation.

"Like it used to be, I guess, when he was the only thing I ever knew. Wasn't the same as you." Zayn licks his lips, feeling the heaviness of Harry's stare on him as he tries to explain. "And I tried not to like, feel guilty about it or whatever? But it just felt like the person was wrong, or, I dunno." Zayn shakes his head, trying to loosen the cobwebs that are forming on his brain.

"I didn't sleep with any of them," Harry says in response. When Zayn looks up in confusion, he continues, "All the models I kept getting papped with, after you went to *Sweden* with Frank? I didn't sleep with them. Some of the girls were gay, which was chill. I mostly just got drunk and cried a lot, which was less chill. But they were nice about it at least."

"Oh..." Zayn blinks slowly as the thoughts process in his head. "Good. I fucking hated every single person in those pictures. I deleted so many contacts from my phone." Harry snorts out a laugh, and Zayn wonders how he could have missed such a ridiculous sound so much.

"Why'd you cut your hair?"

“Naomi made me do it for the show,” Harry groans, running a self-conscious hand through his hair, ruffling the chocolate little curls that are just barely longer than Zayn’s hair. “Her only motive in life... is to ruin me, and make me look ‘*respectable*’, whatever that means...”

“No, it looks good.” Zayn reaches up and brushes a fallen curl back off Harry’s forehead, and his pout morphs into a rosy blush that swirls into his cheeks. “I like it. Change is good sometimes, yeah?”

“Yeah...” Harry’s voice is low and soft, like liquid velvet, or some other artsy metaphor that Zayn can’t think of right now. Maybe it’s the weed that’s making him feel all soft and fuzzy, and able to conveniently forget how fucked their relationship currently is, but Zayn can’t help the way his hand drops from Harry’s hair to brush across his thumb brushing against the high flush in Harry’s cheeks. He revels in the way Harry’s lashes flutter, and the way his lips go all pink and wet after he licks them.

“Zayn, I -” Harry doesn’t get the full sentence out, as he’s interrupted by the press of Zayn’s thumb against his lips.

“Joint’s almost gone. Let’s finish it, yeah?” Zayn watches as Harry nods, and he slips the joint from Harry’s fingers. Zayn takes a drag, long and dizzying, before dropping the stubby joint in an ashtray on the coffee table. One surprisingly graceful move has Zayn bracing his hands on Harry’s shoulder to swing one leg over and balance in Harry’s lap, straddling him.

Zayn presses in close, eyes downcast to take in Harry’s face as he exhales a steady stream of smoke that Harry takes in dutifully. His eyes are half-lidded when Zayn leans back before their lips can touch, and Harry’s hands settle on Zayn’s waist as he lets out their shared pull from his lungs. Harry’s hips lift as his head falls back against the couch, and Zayn knows that he isn’t imagining the sudden heaviness between them.

“We probably shouldn’t do this.” Harry’s says, even as his fingers dip underneath Zayn’s shirt, skimming the soft skin there until shivers are running up Zayn’s spine. But Harry doesn’t push Zayn away when he begins to press in again, with a different intent this time.

“Yeah, probably,” Zayn replies, and that’s the end of it, as Zayn’s lips fit against Harry’s and Zayn moans into his mouth. They go from zero to sixty in an instant, with Harry’s hands roaming warm and hot up Zayn’s back until his shirt is hiked up so far that it practically comes off on it’s own.

That first press of skin to skin, chest to chest after so long, has Zayn moaning again, and he falls into Harry’s touch. Zayn is hard before it feels like he’s even blinked, and he wraps his arms around Harry’s neck to grind slow and dirty against the hardening length in Harry’s sweatpants. Harry’s grip on Zayn’s waist tightens, and the groan from low in Harry’s throat sends static crackling through Zayn’s veins.

They get lost in the kissing for a while, an unhurried matching of lips and tongues that has Zayn’s blood boiling and his mouth tingling. But when Harry’s hips rise on their own accord to press insistently against Zayn, they both gasp and seem to remember the plot and endgame. Harry doesn’t miss a beat in getting the zipper of Zayn’s jeans down, and with a bit of clumsy maneuvering both of their bottoms get kicked off into a pile on the carpet.

The sight of Harry licking a broad stripe up the palm of his hand almost makes Zayn come right then and there. Harry fits that hand around both their cocks, gripping tight at the base and then following with a slow pull. Zayn's toes curl almost painfully, and he thinks he might cry a little. Jacking off hadn't exactly been his top priority, and this is the first sexual touch his cock has experienced in weeks.

A mix of precome makes the glide smoother, and Zayn buries his face in Harry's neck. His fingers find a grip in the short, foreign curls of Harry's hair, and Zayn presses a kiss into that sensitive spot behind Harry's ear. It has Harry groaning and bucking his hips, just as Zayn knew it would, and all pieces start to feel like they're falling into place again.

No matter the other issues, they still know each other's bodies in the most intimate ways. Even now, when the rest of their relationship is in turmoil, they can still be good at this. Bodies moving together in sync, creating something more intimate than fucking, and more devotional than sex.

"Tell me you missed me," Harry whispers, his words puffing warm and heavy against Zayn's skin. His hand speeds up around them, a sudden urgency to his movements. "Say it, please, please, say it."

"I missed you, I missed you so fucking much, I love you."

Harry comes just like that, muscles tensing as he curses in Zayn's ear, breath heavy and hot as his hips jerk through his orgasm. Zayn rides through it with him, feeling like he's super-charged as Harry pumps his own cock through aftershocks, all while bringing Zayn closer to the edge.

Zayn can feel his own orgasm building deep in his belly, but before it can take hold Harry is turning them and guiding Zayn's body down until he's being pressed into the sofa. Before he can even miss Harry's hand on his cock, Harry has one hand firm on his stomach as he swallows him down to the base.

Firelights go off behind Zayn's eyelids as his eyes snap shut, and the only thing that stops his hips from pushing deeper into Harry's mouth is the guiding hand on Zayn's belly. It's almost too much too quickly, as Harry fits his free hand around the base of Zayn's cock to pull him off with short, twisting strokes. Harry's mouth is tight and unrelenting around the head of Zayn's cock, and Zayn tangles his hand back in Harry's hair just to have something to hold onto.

Zayn can't tell if seconds or minutes or hours pass, but all too soon his orgasm is being yanked from the depths of his body, and he's barely aware of his own voice moaning out Harry's name as his hips jerk. Every cell in his body is alight, firing off energy that shoots from his head to his toes and back again, until he's quite sure that his consciousness has left his body.

Everything becomes hyper-sensitive after only a few moments of Harry licking him through the aftershocks, and with his chest heaving Zayn pulls Harry up with shaking hands to share a kiss. It's deep and filthy and tastes like a combination of his own cum and the best weed in

London, and Zayn thinks that if his brain wasn't already dead he could probably go again off of this alone.

A slight tremble runs through Harry's body, and Zayn runs a hand down his back. Zayn doesn't know whether the tremors are physical or emotional in origin, but it doesn't matter as Zayn whispers quiet nothings into Harry's ear, just like he used to, until Harry stills in his arm.

Zayn sighs into the crook of Harry's neck, petting gently at the soft hairs there. Harry's hand searches around the couch until it finds Zayn's, and he quietly links their fingers together. They slot together perfectly, just like they always did, like their hands were made to hold each other, no matter separation the body was feeling.

Zayn thinks this must be what forgiveness feels like.

## VIII. Raspberry (*exitlude*)

*Juliet says, "Hey, it's Romeo, you nearly gave me a heart attack"  
Underneath the window, singing "Hey, la, my boyfriend's back"*

The next morning, Zayn wakes peacefully for the first time to sunlight streaming in through curtains, even if they're curtains in the spare bedroom of Jeff's house that Harry has been occupying. Zayn tries to find a way to say 'I missed you, and when you left it was like a piece of me was gone. I can live without Chris - Frank, whatever. I was *always* living without him, that was the whole fucking reason it didn't work. But I can't live without you. And I don't want to. I don't want to ever do that again.'

Instead he says:

"Please don't leave again" and "I love you, please stay."

In turn, Harry tries to find the poetic line between sappy and meaningful, which in his head sounds like 'Whatever you can give me, I'll take it. But I just want to be enough for you, and I feel like I could spend the rest of my life trying and never being what you need, and that scares the shit out of me, because I've never tried so hard for anything in my life and nothing's ever hurt worse than being gone from you.'

Instead he says:

"I've been dreaming about you for my entire fucking life, I just didn't know it until I was looking in your eyes, and it felt like I found exactly what I'd been searching for."

From the beginning, from the very first instant, Zayn has carried the fear that one day Harry will wake up and realize that he was never in love with the Real Zayn. Just an idea of him that was always soft and beautiful and infallible and most importantly, *perfect*. A rose-colored ideal that was couture-covered and picturesque, like a painting inside of a glass case that had only ever been viewed from the perfect angles under the perfect lighting.

It's a heart-wrenching, gut-punching, throat-clogging *fear* that one day Harry will get a peek inside the case, and realize that a painting is just oil on canvas, and the only value is the one that is arbitrarily prescribed to it. And once that's gone, so is the meaning and the love, and Harry with it.

Zayn says as much in so many words, cries as much in so many tears, in so many echoes of '*Will you still love me when I'm no longer young and beautiful?*' reverberating in his head.

In return, Harry's offers his heart and a story.

Their first date, their first *real* date, weeks after Paris when having breakfast in a crowded Indian restaurant because it was the only time Zayn and Harry would both be in London before scattering across the globe again. Harry retells how sharing naan rolls at 9:30 in the morning with Zayn felt like Harry's favorite kind of modern romance.

Not because Zayn was a fair-hearted maiden waiting to be swept away from a monotonous life by Harry, but because he showed up 15 minutes late, harried and apologetic and lamenting the terrible London traffic. Because he ate with his hands and licked his fingers after every bite, and because every sip of his chai came with a slurp and a moan as if it was the best tea he'd ever tasted in his life.

Because he took time to chat in Urdu with a friendly old woman who'd seen him on a magazine cover, and wanted to tell him he was lovely and a great inspiration to her grandchildren (for whom Zayn happily took a selfie video and signed an autograph for). Because he laughed when Harry couldn't handle his spicy eggs, then ordered them both yoghurt and stole pieces of Harry's melon as he pouted.

Harry had already gotten his glimpse beyond the glass. He'd smudged the pristine surface with his fingers until he'd found the latch to open it, and found that the art was even more beautiful without the barrier between them.

Home is where the heart is, but home is also where the people know you and love you for who you actually are, not what you appear to be on magazine covers and on runways. In Harry's arms, pressed against his chest when their breaths sync up and Zayn is safe and wanted and peaceful, Zayn feels at home.

## End Notes

The end~

I hope you enjoyed reading this - it was a real journey for me, but in the end it all came together. If you'd like to talk about it, you can hmu [@solozayonce](#) on tumblr and you can also reblog the [fic post](#) which includes a link to my fic tag, to give you an extra helping of Angst™

Thanks for reading <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!