

out of the woods

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out of the woods

by [countthestars](#)

Summary

“Hi,” the boy says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the counter, body language open in invitation. Niall half expects him to tip his chin up and bare his throat, but instead his smile grows wider, pulling crookedly at his mouth.

Notes

i once went to a tow yard to collect stuff from a friend's totaled car and i've wanted to write a dirtbag werewolf fic about that experience ever since. thank you to the lovely mods who organized this fest and brought so much needed wolf fic into existence, and big, big thanks to ferryboatpeak for beta'ing an earlier draft of this; any remaining mistakes are my own.

title from the song of the same name by taylor swift.

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

There's no bell above the door, but Niall still looks up when it opens. The hinges make a terrible squealing racket because Louis lost the last can of WD-40 and keeps forgetting to buy more. Niall's not sure what excuse he's going to use for falling asleep in the backroom when he's supposed to be working, but Louis has them by the dozen. He snores softly now, the bill of his hat pulled low over his eyes and his chin resting against his chest.

Well. It's not Niall's concern if Bobby chews Louis out for sleeping on the job again. He drums his fingers impatiently on the worn, wooden counter as the door bangs shut with another squeal of hinges, making the man who's just entered visibly startle.

It's dim in the narrow office, if not by design then by more of Louis' laziness; one of the fluorescent bulbs overhead is out completely, and another flickers with a low, droning hum. Light glances off the various license plates nailed haphazardly to the clapboard and the laminated map of town that dominates the wall opposite the counter. The overall effect is crowded and a little unsettling. It doesn't invite customers to linger.

The corner of Niall's mouth twitches as their newest patron's eyes jump around the space, clearly coming to the same conclusion. He's younger than Niall first thought, early 20s at the most, with broad shoulders and gangly limbs he hasn't quite grown into, like a puppy with oversized paws. His hair just brushes the collar of his flannel shirt, pinned back from his face with a backwards cap.

He meets Niall's eye and grins, looking suddenly at ease. He's got even, white teeth. Dull canines. Niall sniffs in once, just to be sure, but catches only stale sweat and faded citrus.

"Hi," the boy says, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the counter, body language open in invitation. Niall half expects him to tip his chin up and bare his throat, but instead his smile grows wider, pulling crookedly at his mouth. He's got big eyes the color of sea glass and a pair of mismatched dimples. *Trouble*, Niall thinks.

"How can I help you?" he says politely, idly fingering a pen next to the ancient computer. He twirls it over his fingers, again and again, and the boy's eyes drop briefly to study the movement before finding Niall's again.

"They, uh," the boys says, lifting his cap and pushing his fingers back through his hair before settling it on his head again, "they said my truck was towed here, and that I could collect my stuff?"

Niall nods, reaching for the log book. "License plate?"

It only takes a minute or so to complete the transaction. The boy – Harry, his driver's license proclaimed, Harry Styles – gets a lost expression on his face when Niall gives him directions to the tow yard. With a sigh, Niall scoots out from behind the counter.

"I'll just show you, yeah?"

Niall leads Harry back out the creaking door and lets it slam with a vindictive bang, though Louis has slept through worse. They pick their way around the building and through the open, rusted gate to the side, gravel crunching underfoot. Niall flaps a hand in the general direction of Harry's truck; or, well, what he assumes is the general direction – Bobby's parking method resembles a long standing game of Tetris more than anything else. When he glances over his shoulder, though, to make sure Harry's got it, Harry's eyes are wide, his lips slightly parted.

“Shit,” he breathes. “That's a lot of cars.”

Niall huffs out a surprised laugh. “Yeah, well. What'd you expect? It's a tow yard, bro.”

“What do you do with all of them?” Harry asks, slipping his hands into his pockets and ambling forward. He doesn't seem to be in much of a hurry, studying each vehicle in turn, from dented, mangled fenders to crumpled doors to twisted hunks of metal that hardly resemble a car at all, anymore.

Shrugging, Niall follows him at a safe distance, leaving a few feet between them. He can feel the itch under his skin already, though the moon won't be full until tomorrow night. “Strip 'em for parts, sell what we can.”

Harry lets out a low whistle at a t-boned jeep, the side of it punched through as if it were made of paper. Won't be much to salvage on that one.

They wind their way slowly through the yard, cars parked several deep, bumper to bumper. Harry seems morbidly fascinated with the graveyard of metal, and pulls up short with a sudden intake of breath.

“That's my truck,” he says after a moment. Niall stands next to him, taking in the badly damaged front bumper, the missing passenger side headlight, the wheel well bent completely out of shape. The driver's side doesn't look too damaged, which explains the lack of visible injuries. Niall would bet Harry's got some impressive, seat belt-shaped bruises on his chest, though. He has the sudden urge to say something stupid, like “sorry” or “my condolences,” and bites his tongue instead.

Shaking himself from whatever trance he's fallen into, Harry pulls a key from his pocket and unlocks the door on the driver's side, setting down the backpack he's brought along before swinging himself into the cab. He pokes around for a moment, throwing a few items out onto the ground, swearing audibly as he tries to wrench open the uncooperative glove compartment.

Niall's waited long enough, and left the counter unsupervised with a snoring Louis to boot. They don't get a lot of customers, true, but Niall doesn't want to catch an earful from Bobby. He starts to head back to the office, taking a more direct route than Harry's meandering path, and nearly leaps out of his skin at the sudden honk.

“Sorry,” Harry says, a sheepish smile on his face as Niall turns to stare at him through the cracked windshield. “You just seemed so... unflappable.”

“You don't even know me,” Niall points out. His heart leapt into throat at the sudden, earsplitting noise, and it slides back down into his chest with a wet scrape.

Harry pokes at the pine tree air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror, watching as it twirls back and forth. “Let me buy you a drink, then, and see if we can't fix that.” With another blinding grin, he adds, “You'll have to drive, though. I'm afraid my truck is out of commission at the moment.”

“Ha,” Niall says, which isn't quite the 'no' he means to say. He opens his mouth to try again, and what comes out is, “I don't get off 'til six.”

Harry catches the air freshener between his thumb and forefinger, stilling it. “I'm in no hurry,” he tells Niall. The fractured glass of the windshield obscures one of his eyes, splintered with fine lines that radiate out like a spiderweb.

Nodding slowly, Niall says, “alright,” not even bothering to try to wriggle free.

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The only bar in town worth going to is a few blocks' walk from the tow yard. Harry's arm brushes Niall's every other step, but he doesn't move away, and neither does Niall. He's never been one to back down from a challenge, and there's something cocky about the way Harry's mouth curls, like the whole world has been set up just for his amusement.

The Wolf's Den boasts the same clapboard walls as the office at the tow yard, but stickier floors that no amount of mopping can scrub clean. Not that Bressie doesn't try. He keeps the scarred tables rubbed down, too, though the wood has long lost the ability to gleam, and the padded stools tucked under them and along the bar are mostly split, stubbornly held together with duct tape.

Bressie's behind the counter now, an imposing hulk of a man in the beam of early evening sunlight that falls across the floor as Niall pushes open the door. He gives Niall a brief, friendly nod, and quickly schools his expression into something neutral when he catches sight of Harry over Niall's shoulder.

It will get back to Bobby sooner rather than later. Nothing spreads faster than gossip in this town. At least Bressie is a direct source, which means the story's not likely to be exaggerated before it reaches Bobby's ears.

Niall orders a local brew on tap, taking a big gulp as Harry rocks back on his heels, hemming and hawing over his choice. “I'll have what he's having,” he decides at last, gesturing towards Niall.

“Sure thing,” Bressie, says, filling another glass before sliding it across the bar to Harry. His gaze flicks to Niall, one eyebrow ticking up, and Niall nods.

“Put 'em both on my tab. Thanks, Brez.”

Harry doesn't protest more than, "I'll get the next round," trailing after Niall to a secluded table tucked in a dingy corner, away from the few regulars sitting at the bar. Bressie'll still be able to hear everything, of course, but Niall at least likes the illusion of privacy. He sits with his back to the wall and Harry takes the chair across from him, dropping his backpack on the floor next to him and sipping carefully at his beer. When he lowers his glass, there's a thin line of foam clinging to his upper lip.

Niall hides his smile with folded lips, hands clasped around his sweating glass.

Harry seems content to sit in silence, gaze alternating between his drink, Niall's face, and the wall behind him. The rustic decor's not changed a bit since Niall was a kid, sneaking glances through the open door because Bobby wouldn't let him inside. It's not all that interesting to look at, but then Harry hasn't seen it hundreds of times.

"So," Niall says at last, when the quiet has dragged on too long. "What brings you here?" He doesn't mean the bar, or the stool that creaks under Harry as he shifts his weight.

Harry takes another thoughtful sip, holding the beer on his tongue a moment before swallowing. "Was just driving through, really, when someone rear-ended me. Pushed me right into an overpass, even though I slammed on the brakes." He shakes his head. "Asshole just kept on driving, too."

"Dick move," Niall confirms, trying not to think about how hard Harry's truck must've hit that overpass to look the way it did in the tow yard, or the sound the metal made as it folded in on itself. He clears his throat. "Where were you headed?"

Flapping a hand noncommittally, Harry says, "Oh, you know. Nowhere in particular. Maybe the coast. I got a buddy out there that might be able to hook me up with a job." He frowns down at his beer. "Truck's totaled, though – obviously, you know that." Niall nods in agreement, and Harry continues, "No idea where I'm gonna get the money to replace it."

His tone implies it's more of a mild inconvenience than anything else, despite the fact that he's stuck in the middle of nowhere with no truck, and presumably little money. He looks up at Niall, dragging his tongue over his lip to lick away the foam. "You know a cheap place to crash for the night?"

"Um," Niall says, distracted by the wet flash of pink. Behind the bar, Bressie slams down a glass with more force than necessary. He's not normally a clumsy person, Brez.

"Maybe someone with a couch?" Harry suggests hopefully, dimples popping. "I don't even need a blanket."

"It gets cold in the mountains at night," Niall tells him. They're not really in the mountains, more like the foothills, but whatever heat the sun might offer during the day leeches away quickly when dark falls. Harry will be shivering in just his flannel shirt and jeans.

Humming thoughtfully, Harry says, "Guess I do need something to keep me warm, then." Under the table, his ankle bumps Niall's, pressing gently for a moment before moving away, a beat too long to be anything but deliberate. Niall curls his toes inside his shoes and chews on

the inside of his cheek, tries to remind himself it's just the moon that gets him like this, his skin stretched too tight over his bones, blood crackling in his veins.

Harry polishes off his beer and pushes to his feet. "I'll get the next round," he says, though Niall's only about halfway done with his. Bringing the glass to his lips, he chugs the rest, feeling the alcohol unspool warmly in his midsection, loosening him up from the inside out. He lets his eyes slip shut, ignoring the weight of Bressie's gaze from behind the bar as Harry orders two more drinks.

The pub is slowly filling up, and Jesy'll be in soon to help Brez with the night rush. Niall should tell Harry not to bother wasting his money on booze and give him a ride to the bus station so he can find a town big enough for a motel for the night, or maybe make his way all the way to the coast to meet his friend, line his pocket with the funds to replace his truck.

There's a pizza waiting for Niall at home in the freezer, a new episode of that detective show he likes. A routine as steady as the phases of the moon. A life that someone like Harry doesn't fit into.

Instead, Niall mutters a quiet thanks as Harry slides a fresh beer across the table to him, their fingers brushing for a heartbeat.

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Two rounds turns into three or maybe four, and by the time they stumble outside, the only light left is the nearly full moon and the far-away twinkle of the handful of stars bright enough to outshine it. Harry immediately wraps his arms around himself, his backpack hitched over one shoulder.

"It's freezing," he complains, rubbing his palms up and down his arms.

"Told you," Niall says, cutting across the deserted street and down the block. Harry follows him, tripping over the curb and swearing softly. He catches up easily with his long legs, gangly as they are, and his shoulder bumps Niall's as he falls into step with him.

Instead of turning right, back towards the tow yard, Niall takes a left, down a quiet street lined with rundown houses that seem to hunch in on themselves, curled shingles peeling from the rooftops and rusted gates swinging gently in the breeze. He runs his fingers along the chain-link fence that borders the sidewalk, and they come back coated a dull orange that he wipes off on his already dirty jeans.

They cross another street and Harry manages to clear the curb this time, eyes on his feet. There's a park at the end of the block, not quite visible from their vantage point, but filled with the shrieks and laughter of children. They'll likely be sent to bed without dinner if they don't get home soon, Niall thinks, and abruptly feels old. Crotchety, even. He snorts, and Harry shoots him a look. Niall shakes his head. Harry doesn't push.

He slows halfway down the street, turning through an open gate and up the front walk to a squatting, red-bricked apartment building with black metal bars over the first floor windows.

Digging his keys out of his pocket, he lets them into the moldy-smelling lobby and up a creaking staircase to the door with a dull brass seven nailed to it.

“Home sweet home,” Niall says, flicking on the overhead light and locking the door behind them.

Harry looks around with mild curiosity, and doesn't offer any polite lies about how nice it is. He does toe off his shoes and line them up by the door, which Niall finds weirdly touching, and asks if he can have a glass of water.

“Help yourself,” Niall tells him, gesturing to the narrow kitchen area off to the side of the main entrance. “Cupboard next to the sink.”

While Harry busies himself filling up a glass with tap water and gulping it down, Niall roots around the closet for an extra blanket and pillow. He sets them down on the couch, which has seen better days, but at least doesn't smell musty. He takes a sniff and reconsiders. Well. Not too musty.

By now, word will have gotten back to Bobby that Niall left the bar with a stranger. If he gets Jesy's version, he'll know about Harry's dimples as well. Niall's too old for a whooping and too headstrong for a lecture, but as he closes the curtain to block out the moon, he knows it won't stop Bobby from trying.

He turns around at the sound of the couch creaking and finds Harry settled back on the cushion, his big toe poking out of one of his socks. Smiling up at Niall, he takes off his hat, running his hand through his hair to shake his curls loose.

“Where would you have slept, if I hadn't let you stay here?” Niall asks him, suddenly curious.

Harry shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe a park bench? Normally if I can't find a place, I just sleep in the truck.”

Sinking down onto the other end of the couch, Niall studies him. His clothes are worn, but not threadbare. The holes in the knees of his jeans look intentional, and although his hair is a bit greasy without the cap covering it, his cheeks are smooth, clean-shaven.

“That's quite the nomadic lifestyle you lead.”

Those even, white teeth of his flash again. Leaning back, Harry stretches one arm over the back of the couch, his ankle propped up on his opposite knee. “I've tried settling down. Even went to school for a few years, got myself halfway to a degree. But it's – I get this itch whenever I stay in the same place too long. It's hard to explain. There's just so much world to see, you know? Feel like I'm – like I'm wasting my life away, if I'm not trying to see it all.”

Niall thinks this over, picking at a seam in his jeans with bitten down nails. He saw the Pacific once, dug his toes into the sand and watched the water swirl around his ankles, pulling at his skin with cold, wet hands. It was the smallest he ever felt, a perfect fit inside his own skin.

Bobby didn't much like trips, though. Too much unfamiliar territory. Too much risk. Why bother, when there was an endless stretch of woods surrounding them, branches reaching up to the full moon, the worn footpaths as familiar as the lines on Niall's palm.

"You got that itch now?" Niall asks, glancing up to meet Harry's eye.

"Ah," Harry says, tipping his head back and letting his eyes fall shut, "think I might've scratched it, for a bit."

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Niall leaves Harry on the couch, unfolding his blanket and punching the lumps out of his pillow. He slips into the bathroom to wash his face and clean his teeth, avoiding his own reflection. Rubbing a hand over his jaw, he curls his lip at the stubble that scratches his skin, but doesn't reach for his razor.

The room is dark when he steps out of the bathroom, only a thin sliver of silvery light showing through a gap in the curtains. Harry's a shapeless lump on the couch, and he doesn't stir as Niall pads softly across the floor and into his bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him. Shucking his shirt and jeans and kicking them in the general direction of his laundry basket, Niall flops face down onto his bed, not bothering to burrow under the comforter.

It's always hard to sleep the night before a full moon, and tonight is no exception. Niall's still got his own itch, and it makes him restless, tossing and turning, sweat pricking his temple and under his arms even though his window's cracked to let in the chilly air. A jog helps sometimes, burns away some of the energy that makes his nerves sing, his heart thump in an erratic beat.

So does a wank. Niall hesitates for a moment, but the walls are paper thin, and Harry's easy snoring is audible. If he wakes up, Niall will hear in time to stop, he reasons.

Rolling over onto his back, he places a hand on his belly, breathing deep. He lets his hand slowly slide lower, along the thin trail of hair that starts just below his bellybutton, until his fingers bump the waistband of his boxers. He's half hard already, just from the adrenaline, and he releases a hiss through clenched teeth when he slips his hand under the elastic, fingertips brushing his cock.

Normally, Niall is disciplined and economical with his touch, but the fire he's kept banked all night roars to life, and he's fucking up into his own fist as soon as he fits his hand around himself. His back arches off the bed, heels digging into the mattress, and he breathes harshly through his nose, eyes shut tight.

He doesn't register the creak of the door opening until it's almost too late, and nearly falls off the bed in the scramble to cover himself.

"Sorry," Harry whispers, barely more than a smudged silhouette in the doorway. Niall blinks, just able to make out the blanket Harry's got wrapped like a shawl over his shoulders, the way his long hair stands out like a lion's mane. "Didn't mean to scare you again."

Niall shakes his head, pulling his own covers a little higher to hide his bare, sweat-slick chest. "It's fine," he manages, sounding only a bit breathless. "Um, what d'you...?"

"It's cold," Harry says, drawing his blanket tighter across his shoulders. He takes another step forward into the room, holding onto Niall's gaze. His lips are the color of a bruise in the dark, catching in the faint moonlight when he licks them.

"Do you, ah, need another blanket?" Niall asks. His heart thuds audibly against the cage of his ribs, threatening to burst.

Harry doesn't stop stalking slowly closer, until his knees bump the edge of the mattress. "No," he says, unwinding the one he's got from his shoulders as he crawls onto the bed. Niall doesn't know what's happened to the flannel shirt he was wearing earlier, but the black t-shirt he had on underneath pulls tight across his shoulders, and his bare thighs flash a milky white beneath the hem of his boxers.

"Your couch is lumpy," he tells Niall in a low, almost husky voice. The mattress creaks under his weight, his knees digging into it on either side of Niall's scrawny legs, caging Niall in.

"Better than a park bench," Niall points out, unable to drag his gaze away from Harry's wet mouth. He's close enough now that Niall would only have to lean forward a bit to brush his lips against Harry's. Under the blanket, he's still desperately hard, thighs tensed to keep his hips still. A drop of sweat slides down his spine and he grips the sheets, digging his nails in hard enough to tear the fabric.

"Rather be here," Harry whispers. He lets his lips part the moment Niall lunges forward to crush their mouths together, one big hand wrapping around the back of Niall's neck to hold him in place. The other drags slowly down Niall's chest, shoving the blanket out of the way. He doesn't hesitate at all when his fingers find nothing but bare skin, and Niall's cheeks burn as Harry thrusts his tongue into Niall's mouth at the same time he gets his hand around Niall's cock.

Paper thin walls, Niall thinks. How long did Harry wait outside the door listening before he pushed his way inside?

He's a hot, heavy weight in Niall's lap now, and it's no easy feat to flip him over onto his back. Harry blinks up at him in surprise for a moment before his mouth curls into that wicked smile, reaching his hand up to pull Niall's face down for another kiss. He groans into Niall's mouth when Niall grinds his hips down, the thin, sticky material of Harry's boxers the only barrier between them.

Harry's cooperative as Niall drags the offending garment down his long legs, and takes the time to strip off his shirt when Niall pauses long enough to dig lube and a condom out of the drawer in his bedside table. His bare chest is mottled purple and blue, and Niall shifts his weight, careful not to press down on the bruises.

"Barely even hurts," Harry says in a whisper, and Niall leans down to slot their mouths together, one hand cupping Harry's soft cheek, the other trailing lower. The noise Harry

makes at the first touch of Niall's fingers makes something in Niall's gut clench, and by the time he's writhing against the sheets, Niall's panting just as hard as he is.

"Fuck me," Harry all but snarls when Niall's worked three fingers in, curling them to make Harry hiss and buck his hips. A part of Niall wants to watch Harry fall apart like this, leave him a sweaty, gasping mess with just Niall's hand between his legs, but Niall's skin is still too tight, his bones grinding against each other.

He roughly shoves Harry's thighs further apart, lining himself up and pushing in with one smooth thrust. Harry bites his lip hard enough the skin goes white, but he hitches his legs around Niall's waist, encouraging him to move.

It doesn't last long. Harry comes first, with this choked little noise in the back of his throat, spilling between them. Niall follows with a ragged gasp, pulling out and rolling to the side before he collapses on Harry's bruised chest.

Almost immediately, Harry curls into him, anchoring one arm over Niall's waist. Niall gets a noseful of his hair, and it should make him tense, the overwhelming smell of someone who isn't pack so close to him. Harry snuffles a bit, his breathing gradually slowing, and instead of pushing Harry away, Niall tentatively wraps his own arm around Harry's shoulders.

"I'll give you a ride to the bus stop in the morning," he promises, to remind both of them that this is only temporary.

Harry mumbles something inarticulate, pressing his face into Niall's sweaty neck.

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Niall wakes up in an empty bed, muscles looser than they normally are the day of a shift. The sheets still smell like sex and sweat, and it takes him a moment to remember – *Harry*.

Rolling to his feet, Niall hastily pulls on yesterday's boxers, wincing at the tackiness still stuck to his skin. Shower jumps to priority number one, after he figures out what's happened to Harry.

The question is answered before he even gets the bedroom door open when the scent of fried eggs and slightly burnt toast reaches his nose. Niall pads towards the kitchen on bare feet, where Harry is hovering over the stove, and pulls up short at the hunched figure sitting at Niall's tiny kitchen table.

"Louis," he says, voice a croak.

Louis slowly looks up from the steaming cup of coffee in front of him, a smile on his face that spells nothing but trouble. "Well, look what the dog dragged in."

"What are you doing here?" Niall hisses. Harry's bare back is towards them as he pokes at the eggs; he's got twin dimples just above the waistband of his boxers that Niall didn't notice last night. He wants to get his mouth on them, and when Louis' smile grows wide enough to show off sharp canines, Niall knows it's written all over his face.

“Shut up,” he warns, before Louis even says anything.

Louis mimes zipping his lips and swallowing the key, which makes Niall roll his eyes. Idiot idiot *idiot*. The speculation at the bar was one thing, but here's proof served up for Louis, along with a hot plate of eggs.

Harry's smile is almost shy as he slides another plate in front of Niall. “Hope it was okay to make breakfast,” he says. There's a mottled bruise just above his right collarbone from Niall's teeth, lighter than the ones from the accident. Niall looks down at his eggs, poking at the runny yoke with his fork.

“This looks great,” he says, addressing his plate.

“Delicious, H,” Louis adds, shoving a large forkful into his mouth and chewing noisily. “You're an even better cook than Niall.”

Niall glares at him, but Harry just laughs. “That so? Guess I'll have to try Niall's cooking sometime to compare.” Underneath the table, Harry's foot finds his, rubbing their ankles together. Niall carefully moves his foot away. Harry's expression barely flickers.

“You can use the shower first,” Niall announces the second he's cleared his plate, fork scraping to get the last of his eggs. They really were good, despite the way they've turned Niall's stomach into knots. Or maybe that can be attributed to the knowing look Louis gives him, dawdling over his own food.

“Okay,” Harry agrees, sounding a little uncertain. He's still got a few bites left, he quickly downs them before standing to take his plate to the sink. Louis' eyes flick back and forth between them like he's watching a particularly tense tennis match.

“I can wash up,” Niall tells Harry sharply as he turns on the tap, tepid water gurgling out. Wincing at the wide-eyed glance Harry shoots him over his shoulder, he tries to soften his voice. “Since you were nice enough to cook, I mean.”

Harry scratches the back of his neck. “Uh, thanks,” he says. “I'll just...” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, gesturing to the bathroom.

Pushing to his feet, Niall picks up his own plate, then reaches for Louis'. “Towels are in the closet.”

With one last lingering look at Niall, Harry disappears into the bathroom, the grumble of the fan kicking on a second later. Louis grabs onto his plate, resisting Niall's efforts to clear the table.

“I'm not done, bro,” he complains as Niall wrenches forcefully, pulling it from his fingers.

“Too fucking bad.” Stacking it on top of his plate, he drops them both in the sink along with Harry's, reaching for the dish soap as he turns on the water. He adjusts the temperature so it's lukewarm, mindful of the water heater's limited capacity and the rumble of pipes as Harry starts his shower.

“Grouchy this morning,” Louis notes, hopping onto the counter with his coffee mug in hand. “Which is weird, considering you look like you just had the best sex of your life last night.”

Niall flicks a piece of soggy egg down the drain, along with a half-eaten bread crust. He turns on the garbage disposal with a growl that's loud enough to drown out Louis, but not the noise in Niall's head. “What the fuck are you doing here, Lou?” he asks after he flips the switch back off, eyes on his hands, still covered in suds.

“Heard a rumor, didn't I, that you were parading a boy around last night and took him home with you. Had to find out for myself if it was true.”

With a sputter, Niall gapes at Louis. “Taking him to Brez's is hardly *parading him around--*”

“Bullshit,” Louis interjects cheerfully. “You knew damn well what you were doing.”

Pursing his lips, Niall drops his attention back to the sink. He scrubs vigorously at a dish until it's sparking, and then keeps going until his fingers hurt. “I'm not going to sneak around. I don't care what anyone says.”

Louis takes a sip of coffee, heels drumming obnoxiously against the lower cabinets. After he's deemed the pause dramatic enough, he asks, “Not even Bobby?”

Niall stills, the dish slipping out of his soapy fingers. “He may be alpha, but he doesn't control my life, you know. I can make my own choices, same as you.”

“Yeah, well. I'm not his son, am I?” Louis pretends to study his nails. “Don't have 'future alpha' stamped across my forehead.”

“Neither do I,” Niall mutters. Louder, he adds, “Look, it was nothing, okay? He's not even – whatever. We run tonight. You know how it is. I just needed something to take the edge off. That's all it was.”

He looks over in time to see Louis raise a brow. “Okay, but does Harry know that?”

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The water goes cold halfway through Niall's shower, but he stands under the spray for a long time anyway, eyes closed and head tipped back. His skin is wrinkled by the time he steps out, toweling himself off roughly. There's still a twinge in his muscles from last night, and red scratch marks down his back from Harry's nails.

Niall dresses in the bathroom, pulling a clean t-shirt over his head. He rubs the damp towel over hair, then paws at it hopelessly, trying to get it to lie flat. Giving up, he slinks back into the living room, where Harry's curled up on one end of the couch, scrolling through his phone.

He looks up at Niall, smile a bit tentative. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Niall echoes. “Louis leave?”

Harry nods. "Yeah, said he had to get to work." Setting down his phone, he clasps his hands together. "Um, so listen. If my being here, uh, this morning I mean, made things, you know, um--"

Niall holds up a hand to cut him off. "Nah, it's fine bro. Louis is just... Louis."

"Right." Chewing on his lower lip, Harry studies him with an unreadable expression, eyebrows furrowed. With a sigh, Niall plops himself down on the couch next to Harry, leaving a foot or two of space between them. It was easy to close that distance last night, but in the light of day, it feels like a mistake.

"So," Niall says as brightly as he can manage. "Did you still need that ride to the bus station, or...?"

"Oh. Um." Harry shoves a hand through his damp hair. "Thing is, I couldn't get a ticket until tomorrow?"

Niall stares at him. "Tomorrow?"

With a wry smile, Harry says, "You can tell me if I've worn out my welcome."

He'll be out in the open, sleeping on a park bench. Defenseless under a full moon. Niall shakes his head. "Don't be ridiculous. 'Course you can stay another night." He quickly adds, "but I have to, uh, work late tonight. You shouldn't bother waiting up for me."

Harry doesn't have anything at all to say to that, and carefully keeps to his side of the couch.

-

The sun has barely passed its midway point in the sky before the apartment walls close in too tightly. Niall suggests they go get lunch, his leg jiggling despite his best efforts to keep still, and Harry agrees readily enough, despite the awkward tension between them.

Everything in town is within walking distance if you don't mind walking, and anyway Niall's hands are too jittery to be trusted with a steering wheel. He pulls a beanie low over his hair, not that it'll do much against prying eyes, and ignores of exasperated amusement on Harry's face.

"Small town, eh?" he says, nudging Niall's shoulder.

"People like to talk," Niall allows, locking the door behind them and pocketing his keys. It's sunny out, not a cloud in the sky, and Niall's hair will be damp with sweat before they even make it to the cafe.

Harry just laughs, following Niall down the stairs and through the musty lobby. He's quiet as they walk, the soles of his shoes scuffing against the sidewalk with each step. In the bright afternoon sunlight, the peeling paint and sagging porches of the houses they pass are even more apparent. The town is as worn as its inhabitants, and it's not often outsiders like Harry stay longer than it takes to make arrangements for their towed cars.

They both ignore the curious looks Harry gets at the cafe and order their food to go. Niall carries the grease-stained bag, stomach rumbling at the smell, while Harry shoves a straw through the lid of his drink, taking a loud slurp.

Niall leads Harry to another park, this one without a playground or the loud children playgrounds attract; really little more than a stretch of stubby grass dotted with a few trees. Settling amongst gnarled roots, Niall pulls out his double cheeseburger and inhales it in a few bites, starving for calories as his body prepares for the shift.

“Guess I should have made more eggs,” Harry comments, nibbling at his fish sandwich with a lot more restraint than Niall had shown.

“Which place is your favorite?” Niall abruptly asks him, trying very, very hard to eat his fries one at a time. “Like, of all the ones you've been to.”

If Harry finds the change in topic odd, he doesn't say. He takes a sip of his coke, face scrunched in concentration as he mulls the question over. “I don't know if it was my favorite place, exactly, but probably my favorite memory of a place... I was drunk in Jamaica, dripping wet from the ocean, toasting everyone while wearing some girl's dress.” He smiles, eyes far away. “I don't remember the toast, but I remember the feeling.”

“Why were you wearing some girl's dress?” Niall asks after a moment. When he pictures it, the dress is blue and sheer, Harry's pale skin visible through it, and the sun is setting on white beach tinged pink in the light. He stuffs four fries into his mouth, biting down so hard he nearly takes his fingertip off.

“Oh, I traded my shirt for it,” Harry says. “You know how it goes.”

“Can't say I do,” Niall mumbles around a half-chewed mouthful of fries. Swallowing painfully, he manages to get out, “Do you ever, like...”

Harry waits patiently for Niall to find the words, tracing patterns in the condensation on the side of his drink. His knee is nearly touching Niall's thigh, his skin showing through his ripped jeans. He's got a fresh shirt on; gray instead of black, the collar stretched with age, and his hair is loose, curls catching strands of gold in the light.

“Do you get homesick?” Niall finally asks. “Being a ramblin' man, and all.”

“Allman Brothers. Nice.” Harry stretches his legs out, leaning back against the trunk of the tree. He makes it look easy, relaxing with a stranger in the middle of a town that treats him like an oddity, stranded with no car or means to get out on his own. “Sometimes?” he says, a question in his voice. “I get homesick for all the places I've been, I guess, but then I go to a new place, and make new memories, meet new people, and there's no room to feel like that.”

Knees folded into his chest, Niall bites at his lip. “Does it ever get lonely?”

“Nah,” Harry says easily. He catches Niall's eye, and something in his expression looks almost wistful. “You wind up with friends all over the world. Hard to be lonely when you've always got somebody to call, isn't it?”

Niall chews on a cold fry, trying to imagine it.

-

Harry falls asleep, back still pressed to the rough bark and head drooping forward. Niall gathers up their garbage and tosses it out before settling back down on the grass next to him, running his fingers through the strands and pulling bits up until his skin is stained green.

The itch isn't so bad, out here in the open without walls caging him in, Harry's calming scent keeping him tethered without chafing.

-

Niall leaves the apartment long before sundown. Harry still looks puffy-eyed from his nap in the park, and seems to buy Niall's flimsy excuse that he should stay inside because Niall doesn't have a spare key to give him to let himself back in. The tension is back, his blood a low simmer, and Niall keeps his head down as he treks towards the woods. Normally Louis picks him up, despite it being a manageable walk, but Niall needs the time to clear his mind.

Harry's scent still clings to him even though they didn't touch the rest of the day. The apartment is too small, the close quarters making it inevitable. Bobby'll have something to say about that as well, Niall's sure, and he won't be wrong.

It was stupid, letting an outsider in so close to the full moon. He's under Niall's skin now, and he'll take his unanswered questions with him after a night of howling, to places where there aren't unspoken rules about silence.

Niall's still twisted up when he reaches the edge of the thick woods that surround the town. The trees are dense, the undergrowth shadowed even during the brightest days, and if it weren't for the single, winding road that leads to the interstate, the town would be cut off from the outside world completely, nestled in its little valley in the foothills.

Bobby's tow truck is the only vehicle that frequents that road more than delivery trucks, and even then he doesn't go far. Harry's crash must've been fairly close for Bobby to get the call. Niall doesn't know whether to be thankful for it or not.

As the woods loom closer, Niall lifts his head, eyes scanning the treeline. Louis' already there, laughing with Liam, his arm around El's shoulders, and Jesy and the girls have made it as well, huddled close with their heads bent together.

Bressie' hulking figure towers over the slim one next to him, and Niall swallows. Bobby lacks Brez's height, but no one underestimates his quiet authority.

The rest of the pack is scattered throughout the woods, preparing for the rising moon, and Niall takes his place on Bobby's other side, hands shoved in his pockets but his shoulders square and rigid.

Bobby nods at him in acknowledgment. For a long moment, he doesn't say anything at all, and Niall's fingers curl into fists in his pockets, willing himself not to fidget.

“Don't think I need to tell you to be careful,” Bobby says at last.

“No, sir,” Niall agrees, eyes on the sinking sun bleeding red over the horizon.

Bobby's hand lands on his shoulder, fingertips pressed to bone. “It's not just your life you risk with your actions.”

Biting his tongue against a sharp retort, Niall breathes in through his nose. Harry's scent isn't as strong here amongst the trees and the thick odor of pack, heightened by the full moon. A wolf's nose is sharp, though, and Niall knows that Bobby can smell Harry all the same.

“He leaves tomorrow,” Niall says.

“Pray he stays out of the woods tonight,” Bobby replies, not quite managing to make it sound like anything other than a threat.

-

Dusk settles quickly, bathing the trees in the pale embrace of soft moonlight, and the shift rips Niall apart. He rises on all fours, the pain ebbing as rapidly as it enveloped him. His senses tingle as he lifts his nose to scent the air, and then Louis is crashing into his shoulder, yipping with excitement.

There's nothing like running with the pack, and Niall loses himself in it; the hard ground beneath his paws, the wind in his fur, Louis' soft underbelly between his teeth as he snaps playfully at him.

By sunup, he's exhausted, the shift back to human leaving him sprawled naked on his back, breathing hard. He pulls on the clothes he stripped off the night before, waving away Louis' offer of a ride home.

It takes him a moment to find his balance on two legs again, and he stumbles home shakily, his fingers clumsy when he tries to slot the key into the lock. He manages after a few tries, shedding his shirt and his jeans as he makes his way to his bed.

Harry's curled in the middle of the mattress, Niall's blanket pulled up to his chin, mouth open in a snore. Niall looks down at him a moment, at the stray curl stuck to his cheek, the fragile skin beneath his eyes. As quietly as he can, he lifts the corner of the blanket and slides in next to Harry, pressing his front to Harry's back. He can't help burying his nose in the hair at Harry's nape and breathing in deep, or the way his mouth finds the soft skin of his neck, teeth gently scraping.

Harry sighs in his sleep and presses back against Niall before falling still again.

-

For the second day in a row, Niall wakes up to an empty bed with sheets that don't smell right. He rubs a hand over his face, cracking his eyes open reluctantly. It's well past noon, but it's not unusual for him to crash after a full moon.

Shoving back the covers, he scrounges around for a clean pair of boxers before stumbling into the living room. It's quiet. Empty.

The only thing out of place is the chipped coffee mug on the counter top. Niall shuffles closer, sees that it's pinning down a single piece of paper.

Found a ride to the bus station. Not sure when you'll be up. Hope the coffee's still warm for you.

- H

The coffee is cold. Niall drinks it anyway, wondering what strangers Harry will tell their story to. Where it will even rank, compared to the lapping ocean and the Caribbean sun, and a soft, fuzzy feeling Harry's never forgotten wearing a stranger's dress.

-

Life falls dully back into place in the wake of Harry's absence. Niall spends his days at the tow yard, or helping out at the bar when Bressie needs him. The next full moon is weeks away yet, but the itch comes back, pricking at his skin, driving him wild.

Niall's not mated like Louis is, doesn't have an arrangement like Jesy, because in this town, there are always strings attached. It feels like they're tying him down, stifling him, and his hand isn't enough to scratch whatever's gotten under his skin.

Bobby tells him off for fucking up an invoice, and Niall keeps his eyes on the sharpie smiley face Louis drew on the toe of his trainer the entire time. After Bobby dismisses him, he goes to the tow yard and kicks a busted bumper until his foot throbs, biting his curled fist to keep from shouting. Louis drags him to the Den and buys him shots of cheap whiskey until Brez cuts him off.

Jesy sneaks him one more drink, her lipsticked mouth pursed with concern, and Niall winds up on his knees in the bathroom, clinging to dirty porcelain as he heaves. It's not a pretty night, and a worse morning when Niall wakes up alone and hungover in his apartment, reeking of puke and stale whiskey.

Peeling himself off the sheets, he stumbles into the shower, stepping under the spray before the water's had time to warm up.

-

Seventeen days after Harry leaves, Niall gets a postcard in the mail. The front has a cliché beach picture with pine trees instead of palms, and cursive script that spells out *Wish You Were Here*. On the back is a short message in Harry's spiky handwriting.

N –

Think I'll buy a boat instead of a truck. Have you ever seen the ocean? I don't itch here at all.

– H

Niall throws it away, then digs it out of the garbage an hour later and sticks it to the fridge with a novelty paw print magnet. That's where Louis finds it a week or two later, still stained with coffee grounds from its brief stay in Niall's trash can.

"Didn't realize you two were on pen pal level," he says, fingers smudging the glossy surface.

"Lou," Niall says in warning.

Slipping the postcard free, Louis grins wide enough to show off his sharp canines. "If you were waiting for a sign, Niall," he says, holding it up. "This is it."

"What are you going on about?" Niall demands. "Put that back."

Louis dances out of reach, holding the card over his head as Niall makes a grab for it. "Is that how a future alpha would act?" he taunts, grunting when Niall elbows him in the ribs.

"I'm not a future alpha," Niall growls, digging his fingers into Louis' forearm to force his hand lower.

Suddenly cooperative, Louis offers up the card. Niall snatches it back before he can change his mind, or complete whatever trick he was trying to play.

"I know," Louis tells him, sounding more serious than Niall's ever heard him. "That's why Bobby's so hard on you, isn't it? Because he knows too."

Niall's breathing hard, adrenaline still racing through his veins. It's hard to process Louis' words, to make sense of them. "What?"

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying you aren't leadership material." Louis grins, all sharp teeth and flashing eyes. "But you aren't ready to chain yourself to this pack – this town – for the rest of your life, are you?"

"I – nobody said anything about *chains*, I don't –"

"No one had to," Louis interrupts. "Look, I don't know who you're trying to fool, but you've been miserable long before Harry showed up--" Niall tries and fails not to wince at the name, and Louis just digs in harder "--but now you're downright unbearable."

Niall's jaw drops open. "*Unbearable*? What do you even--"

"Okay, okay." Holding his hands up in a peace gesture, Louis says, "Obviously I still love you, or I wouldn't be here spelling this out for you, but bro, you've been walking around with a literal raincloud over your head."

"I don't think literal means what you think it means," Niall tells him snappily, crossing his arms over his chest.

"See? That attitude right there, that's what I mean!" Louis shakes his head. "You're my best friend, Nialler, and it kills me to say this, but I want you to be happy. If that means you have to leave, well..."

Niall's heart skips a beat, twisting painfully in his chest. "What?" he whispers.

Louis jabs his finger at the corner of the postcard, where Harry's address is written in cramped letters. His smile is crooked, and a little sad. "You don't let a lot of strangers into your bed, Niall. Now, maybe Harry's not mate material--"

Niall snorts, and Louis' eyes crinkle. It makes it hard to tell if they look wetter than normal. "But even if he's not, at least it gives you a reason to leave, to see what else is out there."

Tracing his fingers over the line between the ocean and the sky, Niall swallows thickly. "You really think I should go?" It's not until he says the words aloud that he realizes with the sudden lurch of an unexpected drop that he wants it fiercely. Desperately.

Louis' eyes are definitely wet when Niall flicks his gaze up, and he quickly looks back at the postcard. "I've got El," Louis says. "I'm good right here. I'm selfish in a lot of ways, but not enough to ask you to stay when I can see how much it's killing you."

Niall closes his eyes, breathing in deep. It takes him a moment to find his voice, to be sure it won't waver. "I can't just like, show up on his doorstep."

"Sure you can," Louis says. "He gave you his address, didn't he?"

"But what about --"

"Bobby will manage just fine without you," Louis says firmly, reading his mind. "And he won't be able to threaten to can me anymore without you around to make me look bad."

"Louis, I – my plants will die."

Louis shrugs. "Liam'll water them." He gives Niall a long, searching look. "But that's not what you're really worried about, is it?"

Lunging forward, Niall wraps his arms around Louis in a bone-crushing hug, fingers scrabbling to grip the thin material of Louis' t-shirt. "I don't know if I can take how much I'm going to miss you and everyone else," he confesses, pressing the words into Louis' neck. He breathes in the smell of pack, and it grounds him.

But the itch is still there, too deep to scratch no matter how hard Niall tries.

-

It takes a few weeks to wrap up the loose ends; to find someone to sublet his apartment, to talk himself into and out of the idea several times, to scrape together the money to travel without a steady income.

Louis drives him to the bus stop and Niall holds his backpack with a white-knuckled grip the whole way.

"You can always come back," Louis reminds him as Niall holds his newly purchased ticket with sweat slick hands. "The prodigal son, and all that."

“You really think Bobby will welcome me back?” Niall asks. His eyes were a flinty steel when Niall told him he was leaving, his weathered face impassible. *Does he know what you are?* Bobby had asked. Hadn't said a word when Niall shook his head, jaw tight.

“Don't underestimate how important you are to us,” Louis says, and Niall pulls him in for a hard, swift hug, tucking his face into Louis' neck one last time.

He boards the bus without looking back, half his heart left behind with Louis and the pack, but with a weight lifted off his shoulders.

-

Harry's place is a twenty minute drive from the shore, but it's better than a park bench. Niall hitches his backpack up more securely on his shoulder, takes a deep breath, and raps his knuckles three times on the door.

A dark-haired stranger answers, and for a panicked second Niall thinks he's made a horrible mistake. “Um,” he stammers, but then Harry's familiar scent catches his attention, and a moment later, he comes into view over the stranger's shoulder.

“Niall,” he says, clearly surprised.

“Friend of yours?” the stranger asks, addressing Harry.

“Yeah. Uh, would you give us a sec, Zayn?”

Shrugging, Zayn disappears back inside the apartment, leaving Niall and Harry alone on the cracked slab of concrete posing as Zayn's front porch. There's a row of trimmed hedges planted along the edge of the building, and the faint smell of smoke clings to the walls and carpet through the cracked front door.

Harry smells like cigarettes, too, and his scent's all mixed up with Zayn's. “I didn't think I'd see you again,” he says, eyes sweeping up and down Niall's skinny frame. It's only been a few weeks; there aren't a lot of changes for him to take in.

“Yeah.” Niall clears his throat. “You, uh, you know what? I probably should have called ahead. Or maybe not come at all. This was – sorry. I'm just going to--”

He turns on his heel, mind already racing to figure out how much of his limited budget he can afford to spend on a cheap motel and another bus ticket, when a hand on his arm stops him.

“Wait,” Harry says. His fingers tighten, biting into Niall's skin. “Niall, wait.”

Letting out a slow, deliberate breath, Niall turns around to face Harry again, steeling himself. “I got your postcard. I, um. Maybe read too much into it. I think maybe I just needed an excuse to leave.”

Harry holds his eye, mouth twitching at the corner. “You know I've been all over the place, but no one's sunk their claws into me quite like you have,” he says. Lips pulling into a crooked smile with just a flash of those even, white teeth, he continues, “My job here is

ending soon, but Zayn knows about a place a little south of here, through a friend of a friend. Off the beaten path, so to speak, and the work's only seasonal, but.”

He slides the circle of his fingers up Niall's wrist, until their hands are nearly clasped. “I heard it's close to the water, that if you leave your windows open at night, you can hear the waves.”

“I like off the beaten path,” Niall tells him, thinking of the full moon's choppy reflection in the ocean, his paws digging into wet sand.

“Yeah?” Grinning widely now, Harry tugs Niall closer. “Zayn's couch is even less comfortable than yours, but he'll let us stay a few days. He's a good friend.” Harry emphasizes the word friend, squeezing Niall's wrist, and Niall feels the tension release from his shoulders.

“Okay,” he says, twisting his hand to lace their fingers together. Harry doesn't seem to mind how clammy his palms are, and it gives Niall enough resolve to continue, “That's great. Um. I want to be clear, though, I'm not here to, like. I mean, I'm not here to be your friend. Just your friend, I mean,” he clarifies.

Eyes dipping briefly to Harry's mouth, Niall continues, “There's a lot you don't know about me, stuff I need to tell you someday, maybe, if we get that far. Right now though, I really, really just want to kiss you.”

“Yeah,” Harry breathes, ducking his head so that his lips are nearly pressed to Niall's. He pauses just long enough to whisper, “Been wanting to scratch this itch ever since I left,” before crushing their mouths together.

End Notes

it wasn't until i finished writing/editing this story that i realized i've actually just written a prequel to the real story, but i've got no intentions of continuing this verse (or any idea how that story ends) so it is what it is. comments/feedback welcome as always!

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