

Royal Pains

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Royal Pains

by [anonymousoorly](#)

Summary

The archbishop begins the wedding and Harry glances down the pew at his mother, whose head barely turns away from the betrothed couple, corner of her lips giving something like a smile but he knows what it means: She's daring the Prince, not her son, to defy his Queen.

[Harry graduates university and joins the navy. Louis and One Direction record and tour for their latest album. Things come to a clash during a royal wedding.]

Notes

(Simon is PM now k?k.)

- Inspired by [Royal Love](#) by [krellinad \(anonymousoorly\)](#)

Royal Rules

The archbishop begins the wedding ceremony after the choir silences, pews of the gothic church packed and the aroma of fragrance mixed with heat unescapable. “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the holy spirit, be with you.”

Harry sits beside his nephew, niece on his bouncing knee to keep them both awake. He doesn’t reply with everyone else, “And also with you,” staring blankly at the bride’s gown train that lays long and flat down the aisle.

“God is love, and those who live in love, live in God, and God lives in them. In the presence of God, father, son, and holy spirit, we have come together to witness the marriage of...”

He glances down the row at his mother and, in motherly instinct, her head barely turns away from the betrothed couple, corner of her lips giving something like a smile but he knows what it means.

“...to pray for God’s blessing on them, to share their joy, and to celebrate their love.”

She’s daring the Prince, not her son, to defy his Queen. He rolls his eyes, whispers to his niece a question that has her nodding excitedly, and stands up with her on his hip.

The archbishop continues, “Marriage is a gift of God’s creation in which man and wife...” but all eyes on are him including the royal groom and soon-to-be royal bride. His nephew grabs his hand and he grabs back to give his approval, stepping passed an unobstructed Gemma and her grinning husband until he’s walking to the back of the church. He debates exiting through the large grand doors but decides not to be *that* much of a dick – his point’s already been made – and heads toward the basement stairwell.

Harry accepting his diploma might be the most beautiful, most proud moment in Louis’ life. He feels absolute selflessness when Harry walks across the stage in his robe, one hand reaching for a handshake from the chancellor and the other for the small black portfolio containing his degree. Everything in his career was for his and the boys’ benefit but this now, green eyes sparkling and gorgeous face glowing, has nothing to do with him and all to do with the man he loves. It’s a joy he’s never felt before.

Whereas the royal family and select alumni sit on the higher loges overlooking the theatre hall, he’s seated with the crowd on the ground level...by himself, neither royal nor alum. Being the Prince’s beau didn’t permit him many privileges, he discovered, nor guarantee his inclusion at all. Louis, on multiple occasions, was unable to accompany him during royal activities, even if Harry requested and damn near insisted (read: informal intimidation). **Being included is a privilege**, he learned, and he’s adjusted by now to this divide.

He’s able to watch the ceremony in an uncomfortable wooden chair with a bad view, and it’s a privilege.

Harry returns among his peers and finds Louis in the mass of faces, grin widening and tipping the small leather book like a salute, a blush spreading across Louis' cheeks as if this is his first time being flattered by a prince.

Louis (along with many others) lowers his phone, screen showing a muted video call with Liam, Zayn, and Niall in the corner talking excitedly. Harry had been denied extra tickets for the boys, a common verdict when it came to "friends of the crown," yet Louis got them to see his ceremony in a way.

He holds up a peace sign at the rear camera, which is ignored as Niall shoves Zayn to put Liam in a headlock, and ends the call.

"You'll be enlisting in the navy now, surely," Prime Minister Simon Cowell presses during the celebration in Kensington Garden, pulling Harry aside, "following the footsteps of your father and grandfather."

"I've been strongly considering it, yes," he entertains, though not fond of said idea nor the PM.

Since their coming out, an event which became known worldwide as *the royal announcement* in a play-on-words from royal engagement, Simon's presence in the palace grew beyond Queen Anne's affairs to extend in the prince's, public and private. Louis' frequent exclusion had been at his suggestion, never failing to mention "he's a commoner" as a winning argument with the queen, and Harry didn't take well to the conservative's meddling.

Simon angles his head, unconvinced, remarking, "It is, after all, tradition."

"As were beheadings at one point." He becomes antsy, this party for his academic achievement and not wanting to talk about post-grad life. His niece and Louis are on the other side of the garden, a deck of cards between them, and he yearns to be playing with them, too.

The times Louis' allowed an invite, Harry's not by his side much so he's left to fend for himself. There's no opportunity for him to make a friend or even establish an ally, the guests in attendance always different – it's not the society pages where the same handful of cliques mingle at the same events – so once pleasantries and warm greetings run out, he finds company in Gemma's children as a chaperon figure. He likes the two rascals enough and keeps them out of trouble while Gemma socializes, his inner coat pocket eventually home to a trusty deck of cards.

Simon chuckles. "Execution methods are politically defined and, with all due respect, hardly a proper example for tradition." Harry can't stop himself from rolling his eyes, not taking well to Simon's condescension either. "How will it look if the face of our country, the heir apparent, chooses to not—?"

"I know how it'll look," he softly retorts, his exterior a brick wall, cold and solid, "and I haven't ruled out anything."

University exhausts his educational options and opens the reality to his future: inheriting a Counsellor of State from his uncle on his next birthday and signifying a start to his mandatory royal duties.

“You haven’t committed,” he counters, “you and I both know why.”

Among those duties were lengthy international visits and a marriage approved by the Church of England, not exactly a recipe ideal for a young, gay, publicized couple.

“I’m quite clear of your opinion on this matter, Mr. Cowell,” he iterates, warning, “and do not wish to discuss any further. You’re excused.”

Simon half-bows in departure, Harry glaring at his back while his mind spins in frustration. Tradition this, tradition that. Simon and his mother have formed a tag-team of sorts to pressure him because, as of late, *if it’s not one, it’s the other*.

He waits for Louis’ attention then nods at the side bar. Uninterested in the trays of wine and canapes, he scoops a tumbler in the ice box and chews on some crushed ice, the bartender shamelessly agape though Harry offers a smile. Louis notices while approaching and grabs his hand to move them away, giving the barback the most half-assed smile he could.

“What’d Scowl,” their nickname for the PM, “have to say?”

“The usual.” He keeps a calm face but tightly squeezes Louis’ fingers, left eyebrow lifted for a couple seconds and it’s all the indication he needs to give. **Visible reactions *not* behind closed doors**, Louis learned, **those don’t exist**. Louis’ learned a lot and squeezes back.

Harry glances down at their hands, chin tilted enough to speak without the risk of his lips being read. “What time do you leave in the morning?”

Louis’ heart sinks at the reminder and murmurs, “Ten, ten thirty,” due in Sweden for the next week to record.

Even worse than not being allowed to go along to many royal appearances is that his own career limited their already-little time together, and it shrunk by the day. One Direction had been skyrocketing but, as soon as he and Harry went public, they fucking *exploded* in a matter of weeks. The album was pushed up, the tour, too, plus added dates in three continents and all major cities, then promotions for both, before either were available to consumers, simultaneously...and the inevitable rumor mill published on magazine racks throughout the airport impossible to ignore.

How he’s using Harry to advance his career. How he’s isolating himself from the band. How his bandmates are isolating *him*.

He’s. He’s never cared about tabloid covers before – Harry and Alyssa were a frequent story once – but he’s just spent too much time in airports lately, he prefers the bus...and he misses him, just fucking *misses him*.

Harry sees the faraway gaze in Louis' eyes, knows better than to do what he's about to and giving zero fucks, and kisses the side of his neck. **Physical gestures are for offering support and to display compassion.** He doesn't pull back right away, nestled nose inhaling warm Louis and feeling the comfort he fell in love with. He knows what the papers have said about them, knows what his mum will say about *this* kiss, **There will be no mouth-to-mouth contact during official royal outings**, and knows Louis means more than all that. "Love you," he mouths against his jaw and Louis whispers the words back.

Louis diverts his eyes, sees Harry's deputy secretary Mr. Martin coming with a sad smile, and releases his hand. Harry sighs, "Dammit," and Louis steps to the side, familiar to the routine of getting blocked from his prince.

Harry grabs Martin's elbow, keeping him at arm's length. "You'll...tonight still, yeah?"

Louis smiles, nods, and hardly registers Harry's before Martin drags him off.

If there's one thing Louis can't complain about, it's his unrestricted access to Harry's bedroom and not for the obvious sexual reasons either. Harry granted him an open door policy so he could come and go as he wished; of course, the privilege was strict from the entrance gate and staircase to the long hall and door on the left. He's stopped by a few times when Harry wasn't in the city, just to curl up and send a selfie before sleep, and a few times Harry's left him notes in the top drawer of the dresser. It's something sacred they share.

Louis' settled in bed, phone quietly playing Banks as he and Liam text frantically about packing lists and notably toiletries, when Harry flops beside him a bit after midnight, long black gown unzipped and suit fully in tact. He tosses the phone on the nightstand and rolls over, lying across Harry and earning a whine. "Six. Been bloody up since before sunbreak."

Louis wrinkles his nose and unbuttons his stiff collar, working down the front hem.

"I'm- I'm...so tired, love. I don't think I'd be any—"

Louis presses a finger to Harry's lips, "And I'm so proud. So proud of you," then finishes the last couple buttons.

"Piss off," he scoffs in reply to the praise, "you know I barely did anything."

"I know nothing. What I *do* know," Louis kisses him slowly, tongue teasing Harry's and making him shiver, "is that you don't have to do anything tonight."

Harry whines again, protesting any decision Louis seems to have made because he *wants* and Louis will be gone tomorrow, until, "I'll do it for you," and he fucking *beams*.

Harry wakes up alone just before nine, Louis having left earlier to stop at his flat and grab his bags. It's easier to sneak out while the other slept, they've learned, than enduring the painful separation from watching the other walk away.

His schedule is light for the next few days, a blessing to disguise the long-dreaded meeting arranged by his mother and Simon which, no doubt, will be unpleasant in context.

They're both seated when he walks in the parlor, clock bells ringing thrice and the look on Simon's face causing him to repress his anger. He's gotten familiar with that look...

"Hello darling," Anne greets, standing to kiss Harry's cheek, and Harry keeps his glare on the PM. "How's it feel being a graduate?"

"Suffocating." He grins mockingly as Anne pulls back. "I have a feeling it's about to get worse, will it not?"

She smiles, tight lipped, and gestures to the empty cushioned chair. "Only as much as you let it."

His ass barely touches the seat and the tag-team start lecturing him in a sync similar to ballet. How the word *future* from his mum is said with this downward inflection and Simon's sounds like it's two words, how she whispers *crown* as if taboo and declared proudly by Simon whom it doesn't belong. Throne, legacy, tradition, expectations, but his focus is elsewhere. Louis returns the following week, which their anniversary also happens to fall, and they've yet to fully set plans because the band's schedule changes daily it seems. He needs to call him later, get an update on the boys' plans.

"Your highness." He blinks away from a painting and at Simon. "We must discuss what you plan to do now."

"Must we now?" he dryly replies and Simon narrows his eyes.

Anne warns, "Mind your tone, Harold," and he curls his fingers around the armrests when Simon subtly smirks. Unfamiliar with her son's reaction to her commands and his uncharacteristic behavior as of late, she shakes her head. "What *has* gotten into you?"

"Mr. Cowell's elitism," he answers swiftly enough, "and the misconception that he's granted any involvement regarding our family."

Simon clicks his tongue. "The government and monarchy have long been cooperative in matters of the state and for the bettermen—"

"I've seen you in this palace more since my announcement," he tilts his head, "than any time prior. Coincidence?"

There's a silence, heavy with the unspoken accusation. Coward. Cowell the Coward. He needed to tell Louis about this new nickname.

Anne softly speaks, "Harry, my acceptance was unfortunately premature and without..."

Acceptance. He's not naive, as soon as he hears that word, he knows exactly what's going on. Simon's forcing his mum to pull her monarch strings on her puppet prince son. The tag-team is about to finally lay down the hammer and he's going to hate it.

“...you, and for that, I am truly regretful and deeply apologetic. I’ve been advised to discourage your relationship with Mr. Tomlinson,” his chest tightens despite the lack of surprise, “in favor of enrollment at Dartmouth.”

He pointedly glares at Simon. “Of course you’ve been.”

“Harry—”

“Honestly, mum, the ink on my certificate is not yet dry.”

“Harold, you will attend the academy at week’s end.”

He foolishly challenges, “Or what?” and she threatens, tone low, “You know exactly what.”

Composure is in the forefront, a refusal to Simon seeing him otherwise, but he’s absolutely torn because there’s nothing he can do and that helplessness adds to his devastation. He has no interest in the military, never cared to explore weaponry or undergo combat training. The call to serve, to fight for country, the honor, the pride, the sacrifice, the selflessness... His participation, though temporary and simply symbolic, feels like a devised strategy to sabotage him and Louis, his darkest fear. **Sovereigns historically destroyed romances** and his love for Louis looks to be next.

He addresses Simon, “What are your intentions for shipping me out?” who straightens up. “Hm? What do you plan on making her do,” he nods at his mum, “after I leave? Retract her approval of Mr. Tomlinson as a suitable partner for His Royal Highness Prince Harold?”

“That’s enough, Harry,” she hisses quietly, summoning goosebumps and embarrassment across his body. “I forbid you from communicating with Mr. Tomlinson whilst you’re there. Have I made myself understood?”

“She...forbide— forbidden? Forbade? What’s that even mean? I mean, I *know* what it *means*...”

“It.” He closes his eyes, biting his lips and grinding his teeth, tries to neutralize his emotions for this call, for Louis. “Ultimately, it... She could disqualify my eligibility for heir, she could force an abdication and could relinquish my duties, remove my patronage, anything she damn pleases.”

Louis whispers, “Haz,” a pet name that slipped out during one of Harry’s rambling spirals. “What happens now?”

Harry really, really doesn’t want to answer but he needs to, owes Louis the truth without delay. “We. For a little while, anyway...” He sighs, because Louis deserves to hear it face to face...he deserves so much better than what’s about to happen. “I’ve put you through a lot and I know its not been easy for yourself or our relationship...”

He’s not sure he gets the words out until he hears the soft whimper, mind foggy and feeling numb, feeling absolutely shit, *I’ll be gone...a year...we can’t see each other but I’ll write.*

Sniffles and sobs fill the next ten minutes, it's still Louis so Harry will take what he can get while he can, even if it demolishes his heart. Then Louis says, "I...need to think, I," and he drops the phone because there it is, his heart crumbling into nothing.

He can't blame Louis, he made promises he (and his mother) couldn't keep: things didn't get easier, they didn't have more time together, it seemed more obstacles stood in their way than before. The only thing harder than not being together is not being together while in a relationship. Louis deserves so much better than what he can do...deserves better than a prince, than him.

He arrives at the academy the day after general orientation, given a private walkthrough and overview of what to expect in the upcoming weeks, months, year.

"What's it like sucking dick?"

It's the first question he's asked after being introduced to his house's fellow ratings, surrounded by curiosity and fascination.

"Wh... Pardon?"

"I mean, I've never done it, can't suck myself off and have no desire for anyone else's."

He's unsure if the guy, Grimmy, is serious but the rest of the cabin watching intently gives a security that, serious or not, *they* wanted to know which, yes, is unusual. "It...It's like eating pussy," he prays his face isn't as red as it feels hot, "salty, liquidy...except you're choking."

There's a whisper, "What in the fuuuuck," "He ate puss, too?!" then an exclaimed, "That's badass, innit?"

Harry shrugs, this whole thing bizarre. "No, not... It's just...blowjobs. I mean, you've received one before, yeah?"

"But that's what gals do, you know, suck dick."

Harry grimaces as a handful of "Naw, mate, ya got it twisted" variations ring out, Grimmy pleading he didn't mean it like that while getting playfully roughed up. It's oddly reassuring, how a somewhat crude conversation manages a line of dignity, albeit a shaky line but at least there is one. He expected a lot worse.

Once everyone calms down, they spread out and Harry's one of the few who retreat to their bunk. He takes a notebook from his "leisure" knapsack and starts writing to Louis about the boring orientation and how he's sharing quarters with 14 other guys, until realizing halfway down the page...that he might not want a letter. Pen frozen mid-word, he's at a crossroad on whether to continue because the thought of Louis not wanting to hear from him really messes with his clarity, as does the thought of writing something he'll never read. Either way is torture and he takes a deep breath, sighs, then keeps going for two additional pages front and back.

The next day, a barber cuts his long shaggy hair, surrounded by his bunkmates whooping and hollering. They're loud, borderline obnoxious, yet he finds himself blushing at their enthusiasm, their openness, to him, a homosexual, a royal.

Then, the training starts...at 0500 hours every single morning, the leading hand shouting and shaking their bunks as he passes by. Some of the guys snore right through the commotion without a stir, others groan groggily and mutter obscenities, then there's Harry, who's a little slow while waking up but progresses easier than the rest. He feels legitimate guilt that he's dressed first, unfair advantage of the early royal riser so evident as everyone but him struggles, and shakes each sleepyhead before heading to breakfast, pulling their blankets off and yanking their pillows from behind their head.

It takes a few weeks for his presence to normalize, where he can walk in a room without all faces snapping up to look at him and when he can sit without the unsubtle glances and whispers, just like all his other school experiences. He thinks about Louis during showers and sometimes late at night, otherwise forcing any thoughts away to avoid becoming a crying mess. Fuck, he misses him.

While everyone else receives mail from their parents in the form of baked goods and photos, Harry gets pretyped documents with his letterhead requiring his signature. Wishing some parliament member a speedy recovery, regrets on being unable to attend whatever event, accepting an appearance request from a children's hospital, committing to some fundraising campaign whatever, he stops reading them.

The exhaustion hits him and his bunkmates a month in. The physicality of weight lifting and endurance fitness, maneuvering the campus grounds and always having to hurry somewhere. The mentality of intaking mass amounts of new information constantly, from coursework texts and instructors to hands-on exercises. It's oddly nice knowing he isn't the only one completely drained and somewhat suffering.

One weekend about halfway through training, he's studying in the common room with a few others for a history exam on Monday when his leading hand (who oversees their group) pulls him aside, looking unsettled.

"I could get in trouble for this," Ed murmurs. "We are under order to restrict the correspondence you receive to those of official matters only."

Shocking, he thought.

"Granted, we've never donated so many...brassieres and undergarments," Harry chuckles, the joys of fan mail, "but..."

Ed reaches inside his coat pocket and holds out a small envelope with handwriting that nearly makes Harry sob, hand trembling as he takes it.

Uncertain with displays of emotion, Ed clears his throat. "So, uh, I don't know anything about...and I don't *need* to know, it's not my business, but the mail girl insisted, well, she threatened to do it herself if I didn't."

Harry stays silent, stunned.

“So, uh, should we keep with the royal restrictions or should we put...” he glances at the return address for the sender’s name, “smiley face with X eyes?...on the exempt list?”

“No,” he finally breaks from staring at the piece of mail, “mum checks that list, no doubt.”

Ed lifts his shoulders. “I mean, as of right now, there is no list, therefore there’s no list that she knows about, no list for her to check.”

Harry wants to hug him. In keeping his reaction tame, he thanks Ed and returns to his seat, sticking the envelope in the back of the book like a bookmark. He can’t lose focus now, matching battleships to years and commanders to wars already hard enough. What’s waiting another two days more?

Following the exam, they immediately have combat drills to wrap up the day, so they head to a nearby tavern afterwards because they’ve earned it.

“Wasn’t it battle of Pinkie?”

“No, Anglo...someone.”

“Anglo something, well, that narrows it down, now, dunnit?”

“Harry, *shuddup*.”

“Dutch?”

“Or French or Spanish or Italian.”

“Who the fuck cares, lads, raise ‘em up and chug ‘em down.”

Harry watches them all start chugging their steins as fast as possible, spilling down their chins and shirts but not letting up. He takes his first sip after someone declares victory, meekly resisting the pressure to, as one of them so eloquently stated, “slam that bitch down.” He *does* take the shot, though, to not be a pisser and that seems to satisfy everyone enough.

“You went with Alyssa, yeah, that heiress?” An hour later shifts the talk to, what else, women and he hesitantly nods. “D’ya bang her?”

His cheeks blush and he drinks in hopes that the glass can shield it. Plus, he doesn’t really want to answer.

Josh whacks the back of Grimmy’s head, “Bloody brash, you are,” and they bicker like the friends they’ve become. “He’s the prince, be respectful.”

“Oh, whatever—”

Harry cuts in, “No, no, no, that’s quite alright,” but it falls on deaf ears.

“—everyone else is talking about it, I’m fucking including him—”

“He’s *not* ‘everyone else,’ *Nick*—”

“Bullocks, he pounds the cunt and ass like everyone else.”

A voice from the counter behind them snarls, “Except ‘e’s a fuckin’ twinkie,” and Grimmy’s on his feet before it clicks for Harry what was said, throwing the man off his chair and to the ground. They scuffle, limbs flying at each other, as arms and yells try pulling them apart. Ed guides Harry away from the commotion but Harry shakes his head and continues to the door, an early departure for the night.

He’s upset but not for the obvious reasons. There’s people who disapprove of the monarchy’s existence and there’s people who disapprove of homosexuality, so he encompasses double the criticized traits than is typical. One of these traits are widespread, more common in the world to identify with.

The man could disapprove of both or just his homosexuality, it doesn’t matter, but what matters is there’s others like Harry that encounter disapproval like the man and sometimes, they encounter even worse.

The history textbook lays open on his bunk, yellow envelope sticking out tauntingly, and he grabs the book before flopping down, tossing it on the floor after tugging the envelope out. It can contain good news or bad news and the uncertainty makes him wonder if he can handle bad news right now, stressed from the day and disgusted from the night. He stares at the smiley face in the corner, trying to decode its inked eyes as if there’s a possibility. The whole situation blows and Louis doesn’t have to put up with it even though Harry does, so the fact he’s holding a letter has to mean something.

After a while, he concludes it can’t be the *worst case scenario*, could still be *bad news*, with no guarantee it’ll be *good news*.

Heart fluttering, his thumb rips the seal open and slides out the enclosed notecard which reads a short message. *Like it or not, love, I’m not going anywhere.*

Next morning, he goes to the mailroom with a stack of paper containing letters to Louis. The mail girl, Leigh-Anne, poorly hides her excitement as she bows awkwardly from behind the desk, disappearing momentarily from view and nearly hitting her head on the way up, and sputters a run-on sentence he’s too familiar with: how it’s such an honor to be graced by his presence (it isn’t), such a blessing to finally meet him (it’s not), and how today is the best day of her life (it won’t be).

“Are you the one who gave Ed that letter?” he interrupts, because he still needs to get breakfast.

Frowning, she lowers her head and nods. “I’m sorry, your royal highness,” his eye twitches, “I had no ill will and only positive intentions—”

“I’d like to thank you,” he cuts in again and her face snaps up to look at him, “and express my appreciation of your willingness to pass along something that didn’t qualify as official correspondence.”

“Ab-Absolutely, your royal highness—”

He sets his letters down and pats them. “I need to send these.”

She nods and has him place them on the scale, grabbing an envelope from under the desk. “It’s slightly over the standard weight, do you want the cost difference charged to your Cadet Credit?”

Eyes casting down to his letters sadly, he shakes his head. His mum would see the purchase on his monthly receipt and immediately question him; she already has for some transactions like transportation (taxis to the country club and car rentals for a camping weekend). “No thank you.” Smile shaky, he takes back the papers. “You’ve been most helpful.”

He makes to leave but, “Wait,” she stops him, “it’s okay, just...mail it.”

He creases his eyebrows. “What? No, you shouldn’t have to—”

“Don’t worry about it.” She holds the envelope out, waving it insistently. “You’re an inspiration to me and my girlfriend, it’s the least I can do.”

He grins at the unexpected sentiment but also at the proof that there are others like him out there, and they can be closer than he thinks.

Family Weekend finds Harry with his mum, Gemma, and the royal photographer for a Saturday morning of pictures as he conducts a tour for them in the whole naval outfit. He’s half surprised Alyssa isn’t with them. Gemma squeezes his bigger biceps and his mum unspontaneously chuckles. He points at absolutely nothing and they look on with interest. He takes their hands when going down steps as if they weren’t cobblestone but ice. They eat among the masses but sit with the school’s male commander and a female lieutenant who’s one of his instructors. **Smile for the camera.**

“Has he written?” he softly asks Gemma and her frown answers him. **Keep smiling.**

They’re gone by midafternoon. He arrives at lunch early so he can take food to go and avoid sitting alone. Not in the mood to meet his bunkmates’ families or put on a friendly face, he hides in the library, hardly a focal point when there’s ships to see.

Some enrollees leave for a night out with their parents, some leave to sleepover at their hotel or nearby home, while others will see them in the morning. He returns to his cabin and Louis’ notecard is on his pillow, not tucked in his backpack’s front zipper where he had it. His immediate (and only) thought is that his mum came back, couldn’t find him, went through his stuff and found it. He’s fucking terrified, because she must’ve found the new letters he hasn’t sent yet too. This, this is all bad, no good, just all bad.

Kneeling, he goes through his bag and finds his letters still there, a huge relief...and huge confusion. He grabs the notecard, looks the same, what the fuck... Did, shit, did one of the other parents snoop through his shit? Did his mum have someone snoop through his shit? He might trust his bunkmates more than his mother, quite honestly, at least regarding personal belongings.

He releases the card, lets it float to the floor, and checks the rest of his luggage. Money, laptop, documents, DVDs, mp3 player, designer clothes, nothing missing, what the actual fuck.

He sits back, glares at his stuff, bewildered, then glances at the notecard...and the scribbled message is shorter, words different from what it should be but handwriting the same. It reads *the courts* and he sprints.

The grounds are deserted like any other night so the lone figure by the fence is his target and as he nears, the figure's height and curves become familiar, then does the hair outline and face shape, then it all distorts behind his tears and he collapses but it's okay because Louis catches him...Louis *is fucking there*.

He cries and cries for some time, uninterrupted and engulfed by *those arms*, into *that chest*, can feel *that heartbeat*, *that breathing*... When he looks up, sees *that face*, his emotions hit the restart button and he sobs hard all over again.

Bugs chased Louis inside the courts almost immediately, taking them through the gate and sitting against the closest net while Harry broke down on his lap, unaware that they even moved. He's crying but not as much, too consumed by Harry, his shaking body, his wet cheeks, just Harry, his Harry. He remembers how he felt returning from tour, how he could've broke down if not for the party around them, how Harry held him together. He knows how Harry's feeling, lets him let it out, patient.

The first time their eyes meet, it's not for long before Harry's hiding in his shirt. The second time, Harry forces himself to not look away despite how much he must be ugly crying but he *wants* to see Louis, *wants* to get under control so he *can* see Louis. Louis cradles his face, whispers it's okay, and he closes his eyes just for a moment then nods, locks in *those blue eyes*.

Louis knows anything he says might press the "emotion reset" so he tries for the least emotional thing he can think of, gently scratching the back of Harry's neck. "I like your haircut."

Harry laughs, wide grin not falling when he sniffs, and Louis feels like he falls in love all over again, the cuff of his sleeve wrapping around the tip of Harry's drippy nose as an impromptu tissue. Harry's eyes well up at the (gross) gesture, so he tries another, "Snot a big deal."

"Christ almighty, Lou." Louis chuckles, still cradles his face, strokes his cheekbones, takes in his beautiful prince whom he missed so fucking much, wills himself to keep it together because it'll keep Harry together. "I." Harry exhales then slowly inhales deep, forehead

wrinkling and smoothing a couple times, all in thought. “I... Thank you and I’m sorry, so so fucking sorry—”

“Yeah yeah,” Louis dismisses, carefully bringing their lips together because he put the question mark on *them*, put the question mark in Harry’s mind when he didn’t deserve it. He fucking knows Harry doesn’t have a say in his life, this isn’t fucking news, and it shouldn’t have taken him any time to remember but alas it did. The fact they’re right here right now... gives him hope and he prays it gives Harry hope too. He whispers firmly, “You don’t be sorry. Hear me?” Harry whimpers, uncertain. “You can’t do anything, I get it...but I can. And you’ll have me and you’ll have love and you’ll have everything of me—”

Harry flings forward, kisses him hard, and they easily lose themselves in each other.

“I hate it here.”

“Don’t blame you,” Louis jokes, combing Harry’s hair, “it’s hardly a palace.”

“Piss off.” They’re lying on the court, Louis’ jacket behind his head and Harry curled around him. “It. It’s not for me, you know, this-this...this physical torture, this... I’m not a fighter, to fight, combat, I’m not straight, I’m not a fighter. And the lads are *so messy* and vulgar.”

“A couple more months, yeah, then you’re free?”

“I dunno.” He grips Louis’ shirt, grinding his teeth. “She’ll likely send me on a non-hostile deployment.” He sighs and rolls on top of Louis, chin on his chest, doesn’t want to talk about himself anymore. “What about you? Album’s about done yeah?”

“It released two, three months ago.” Harry whines, missing out on these milestones and achievements, unaware of what’s happening in Louis’ life, all a punch to the gut. Louis reads his face, quickly adds, “Got okay reviews. Toooons of speculation on which songs are about you.”

“Really?”

“Mhm.” Louis slides his hands below Harry’s white pants, squeezes twice. “Just wrapped the shows up here. Head for rest of Europe next week.”

“Busy?”

“So, so busy.” He laughs, “I’ve gotten Liam so irritated at me, he’s stressed the hell out.”

“He won’t make it out alive with you,” Harry agrees. Louis gasps, “That’s what I told him! He’ll loosen out eventually, always does.”

Then, something clicks in Harry’s mind. “How are you here? Like, how did you get in? How did you get *here*? Don’t you have—”

“Magic.” Harry slowly shakes his head, Louis squeezing his ass again but not letting go, **Hands are to remain above the waist and below the shoulders**, and bites his bottom lip. “You in this getup, with the scarf, it’s quite hot. Giving me some thoughts.”

Harry smirks, presses his hips down. **Public displays of affection will be modest and contained.** “What kind?”

“Tying your wrists. Gagging your mouth.” He kneads his fingers, nails digging in Harry’s briefs. “Tightening it around your neck, choking you juuust a bit.”

Vision glazed over, Harry straddles him and scoots up so they’re face to face, nose to nose, movement rubbing their crotches together. Louis whispers, “Have you let anyone else touch you?” and Harry shakes his head. “Me neither.”

Harry pushes his tongue in Louis’ mouth, **There will be no open mouth-to-mouth contact outside of the holdings in the royal trust**, heart lightened that they stayed true to their feelings, faithful to their love, despite the uncertainty on both sides. It’s not just the physical loyalty that makes him elated but how their emotional loyalty hadn’t strayed and carried them, controlled them. That said, neither have been touched since their last time too, too long ago and here they are now, deprived and anxious.

Louis’ palms help Harry roll their hips with more pressure, gliding under his briefs to feel his warmwarm smooth skin and making him hum happily. They’re both hard in no time, lips locked and bodies abuzz, arousal quickly building in the pits of their stomachs and blurring their heads. **Sexual activities are to take place in royal residences only.** Louis runs a hand further down Harry’s ass, pulling him closer, then traces Harry’s entrance with a teasing fingertip that makes him nearly lose his mind, grinding erratically and whining desperately.

Louis smiles in the kiss, soft circles pushing his finger deeper, and Harry lets out a long moan against his lips, eyelids heavy and body freezing so he can take it all, feel the smooth probe. He doesn’t start truly stretching until the second finger disappears inside of him, engulfed in tightness and igniting a heat throughout his loins. Every small movement, pulling out and curling in, twisting and crossing, is better than the last and Louis stares amazed as he works, deliberate and slow.

“Fuck, you feel good,” Harry breathes out, “do me so good, fuck I’ve missed you, Louis, so so much.”

“I know, love.” He angles his fingers, brushing his prostate, then rocks his hips up so there’s double the friction. Harry shrieks but bites Louis’ shoulder to muffle himself, loosely tugs on his hair. “I’m here now.”

He adds a third finger and Harry almost screams, shifts until he’s mounted atop one of Louis’ legs, inner knee directly in front of his crotch so that he rubs it when grinding down. Louis slightly bends his leg to give Harry better leverage for rolling forward, for humping with all his weight, and gasps at how fucking much of a difference it makes, trembles each time Harry thrusts on his hard dick. He demands quietly, “Kiss me,” and moans around Harry’s tongue, although Harry’s mouth is open as he heavily pants.

“Plea-Please, Lou.” He unzips and wiggles a hand in the front of Louis’ jeans, grip shaky as he squeezes in tight strokes and Louis has never felt anything more incredible. “Love, please.”

Louis roughly grabs Harry’s hair and keeps their lips forcibly together, full of tongues and dripping drool. Harry’s bassy moans vibrate off his tongue and down his throat, rousing straight to his cock that Harry’s touching sosomagicallysoperfect and he whimpers into a building orgasm. Entirely consumed by Harry and his body, being there, under him, with him, how he can send shivers down Harry’s spine with a flick of the wrist, how Harry enthusiastically ruts against him, makes the sweetest noises...

Too consumed to realize he’s a shaking mess, stammering a blend of ohharryshitloveohgodfuckah that morphs into a loud sob, crying out in near hysterics because ohharryshitloveohgodfuckah. Harry immediately comes from how godly, how fucking precious this creature is, he’s royalty but Louis’ godly to him. Christ almighty.

Underwear filled with semen and lined with sweat, Louis shamelessly strips them off, shakes out his pants from the lingering white residue before putting them back on, and Harry still sees perfection.

“Come on, I’ll cover you.” Louis flaps his jacket, briefs tossed over the net. “It’s the middle of the night, any dream of public nudity should be fulfilled right now.”

Harry wrinkles his nose, sitting crossed legged. **Skin exposure will be limited to activities involving direct contact with water for ladies and in the proximity of water for gentlemen.** “I do not have such a dream.”

“Really?” Harry nods and Louis tilts his head in thought. “Huh. I always figured, like, okay, I have a theory about public figures, right, me and Niall do, about public figures and exhibiti—”

“Come back down here.” Harry holds his arms out. “Please.”

“Only if I can have your cute little scarf.”

“Is there some way, some address I can use to get my letters to you?” Harry’s fingers fidget the front of Louis’ shirt. “Not just for you, but it’s for me, too, it makes me think I’m talking to—”

“Shh.” Louis gently kisses him. “I...” He sighs. “I, not really but, I can get you a list of hotel nights so you can send them before we check-in, and overnights, too, since I’ll be in one place.”

“Overnights?”

Louis hums. “Staying somewhere for more than a night, multiple shows, maybe a gap day,” he chuckles, “if we’re so blessed.”

“I’d like that,” Harry clears his throat, “if it’s not a problem—”

“You shush.” Louis tousles Harry’s hair, brings him close, under his arm. “I’m sorry I put doubt in your mind.” He holds a hand in Harry’s face when he attempts to speak, then slowly turns his wrist to show the ring on his finger. “See this? You... You trusted me, believed in me, this-this ring, the gesture, it’s everything to me, Harry, everything.” He pulls the necklace out from under his collar, the same one Harry gave him, and over his head, a ring dangling from it. “I trust you and believe in you, our love, us. You have me, no matter what, for as long as you want. I promise. Happy belated anniversary.”

That night, Harry listens to the album on YouTube. Every night after, he falls asleep holding the ring close to his heart.

Louis writes him more, sometimes with postcards from the other three or silly photos, like Liam holding the Eiffel Tower in his palm or Zayn leaning against the Tower of Pisa. Harry sends multiple letters in one package three days before the band’s set to check into a hotel or arrive at a venue for overnights. Leigh-Anne gives him free special delivery postage, requiring an addressee signature and Louis’ recipient signature, and shows him tracking updates each morning until the two signatures are scanned.

She smiles, “You really love him, huh?”

He nods. “He really...truly loves me.”

Alyssa attends the graduation parade with his entire family and Gemma does her best to keep the girl behind her shoulder, going so far as to hold her son on her hip at one point.

He sort of welcomes Aly’s presence when everyone mingles following the ceremony, it keeps his mother away and cuts the introductions of his bunkmates’ families short. He missed her, always liked her but not the role she played in his orchestrated life, and they hadn’t talked much since his announcement, so they mostly catchup.

After she talks about interning at Christie’s, he asks, “What has mum told you?”

“Nothing you don’t already know.” She looks down at her Burberry heels. “You *do* know I’ve only wanted to make things easier for you. That you’ve given me plenty reason to not be at her beckon call because I have that choice, Harry, there’s a line of perfectly suitable women ready to step in. If you want them to, I can understand.”

“Aly.” He takes her hands, waits for her to look up at him. “You’ve been an angel for me, second only to Louis. I-I would rather have you by my side than some other waiting-in-line girl, because I’ve known you since you vomited on my lap first year.”

She laughs, hiding her face in her shoulder. Two months into their first semester, she had gotten absolutely smashed during a party in the basement of one of the dorms. She fell to the floor next to where Harry sat, dizzy from her spinning head and throat bubbling in *that sour* taste. She crept onto her knees, leaned against the armrest to brace herself for the anticipated

vomit, and let it out...all onto Harry's white shirt. He had played it off so cool, dragging her to the men's bathroom with him to spare her embarrassment from the others, that rumors of their sudden disappearance didn't include any mention of it; no one seemed to notice what happened. It's one secret shared moment they have for themselves.

"It sucks, and I know it sucks. And it's not fair what this family is asking of you, I acknowledge that." He puts a hand on her cheek, thumb rubbing her jaw. "I promise you, you'll have answers soon. I won't let you live life loveless, Aly, I won't."

She tears up, whispers, "I-I know," and he embraces her because honestly, it's not just him and Louis that his mum is fucking with; Aly is put through the emotional grinder just as much and that isn't lost on Harry, not at all. She's declined prospects, been by his side and on his side even after the announcement. Her pure, selfless heart commits to his happiness and that's something he neither takes for granted nor forget.

Photos of the parade and reception are published, Aly and Harry front page in each other's arms.

Liam, Niall, and Zayn are nervous about Louis' reaction...except that he seems relieved. "You lads realize, when she's in the picture, *literally*, he and I are at our happiest."

"How-How can you...be so certain?"

Louis rolls his eyes. "We got off by dry humping each other on a tennis court."

That, they realize, makes some (strange) sense.

As expected, Harry is commissioned to a six-month deployment in the Celtic.

Unexpectedly, Louis is assigned a girlfriend by his management. Niall and Cassandra had broken up, Liam had an on-and-off girl back home, and Zayn somehow slipped into a bad boy bachelor persona. The girl, Perrie, is part of a girl-trio who also appeared on a season of X-Factor and their debut album was about to be released, so they opened for One Direction during the North American leg of the tour and it was a convenient match.

Perrie is nice, a bit naive still but overall level-headed. She asks about his relationship with Harry and for advice about life on the road, living on top of your bandmates, handling the exhaustion that creeps up after a couple demanding weeks.

Louis tells Harry about Perrie on a phone call. Harry's quiet for a few moments, thinks how his mum is going to have a field day with this, then remarks, "She understands, though, right?"

"Yeah, she's cool with it."

It makes Harry nervous. It shouldn't, all things considered, but Perrie's placement is new and they're traveling together, are around each other non-stop... His palm covers the ring outline below his neck, a reminder of how and why they've gotten this far. He doesn't need to worry.

The tour ends about a month and a half before the end of Harry's deployment. The boys spend the first week sleeping, talking only to food deliverers, and leaving bed only to answer the door or go to the bathroom. Harry knows Louis' wiped and doesn't bother calling until the second week.

"It's like you don't know how much sleep you lacked until you start sleeping."

Harry laughs. "Such wisdom. Are you feeling a bit better then?"

"Yeah, yeah, a bit." Louis rubs his face then yawns, Harry giggling at the sound. "Can't you tell?"

"I can." Harry licks his lips and sighs sadly. "I can't wait to see your face again. To hold you again."

"The second week of July?"

"Second Monday, yeah."

"Can... Can I be there when...?"

Harry's soft exhale is his answer and Louis' heart drops. "I can come over Thursday. I have the welcoming hoopla and knighting, then a quick visitation to—"

"Knighting?" Louis backtracks, heart dropping even more, dropping to his damn feet.

Harry huffs jokingly. "It's nothing, just initials that get added to my name on invitations and announcements," which doesn't comfort Louis as he had hoped and he repeats, "Thursday?"

Aly and his mum greet him at the harbor, his shipmates lined up on the pier to receive handshakes from the queen and prince, Aly one step behind and giving each a nod and smile. She retreats back to the car during the photographs with the task force.

Harry sleeps all afternoon until the homecoming gala, where Aly informs him that Anne has her staying in the palace until the week's end. She attends the knighting service and reception on Tuesday, and accompanies him to visit injured military personnel and the hosted luncheon afterwards on Wednesday. He lets her know on Thursday he's leaving and may not see her before she's gone, but expresses his gratitude and appreciation for her company since coming back.

"Your mother would like to speak with you."

Well. Fuck.

He finds her in her office, phone to her ear and pen writing hastily, and sits as she carries on in French, which he's not fluent in but thinks he hears words for international and embassy.

"Glad I was able to catch you on your way out," she mocks after hanging up, hands folded on the desk. Of course she knew; her palace has her ears. "How's being home so far?"

"I was about to go and make it perfect, actually."

"You are not going anywhere. I forbid you from any contact with Mr. Tomlinson going forward."

He creases his eyebrows and she opens a desk drawer. "You said that was for during training."

She reveals a stack of papers and his stomach churns as she pounds them on her desk. He should've put Louis' letters in his vault the first day he got back but forgot amidst the busy schedule. She interrogates, "You disobeyed me, disrespected my wishes, compromised my trust and your future." He slouches in shame and foolishness, and she lifts the top page to read, "Lovely Louis, it's official: I'm a Second Lieutenant. It doesn't mean much except that I'm very nearly complete and will soon enough be coming home. I know you won't be home when I get back but I'll be there waiting for when you do."

She shakes her head, shuffles a few pages, and reads a different one. "Lovely Louis, I listened to the album again last night and hearing your voice breaks through the chaos of my mind. I've had so much chaos lately, love, and I wish you were here to break through it."

Head shake, shuffles, reads, "Lovely Louis..."

He's sensing a pattern, the letters written and unsent by him, none written or sent by Louis. He kept them all in the same place, the same pocket of his bag, and looking at the size of the pile on her desk, those weren't all of them, couldn't be. Puzzled, he *knows* he didn't unpack them, so where the hell...?

"I safely assume you managed to mail others successfully. Regardless, my intention was for you to focus and you did not."

"Mum—"

"You are not allowed to leave the palace except for your royal duties or with accompaniment by Alyssa." He swallows hard, grinding his teeth. "I don't give a damn if the bloody place is on fire outside your bedroom door, Harold."

He dully counters, "Isn't that reckless endangerment?"

She leans forward, gripping the papers tight in her fingers. "Isn't this?" She bares her teeth. "Isn't what you do behind my back, God knows what? Isn't how you flew a redeye to America reckless endangerment? Isn't how you fucked a man on a hotel balcony reckless

endangerment? Isn't everything you've done since you met that boy, reckless endangerment?"

He turns off his phone and sobs to sleep. It's been a while but the queen finally got under his skin.

Mr. Martin wakes him two days later for some event he apparently agreed to, breakfast tray with a large latte and assorted food at the foot of his bed. He murmurs a thanks once he's sitting up and doesn't move to take anything, so Mr. Martin puts the coffee mug in his hands.

"Can I bail out?" Harry asks. "What was it for again?"

"Disabled children of parent addicts, sir." Harry groans, because fuck he can't *not* go to something like that. "The soiree won't be more than three mandatory hours, seeing as the children have a strict bedtime to reinforce a structured way of life."

"Right."

Mr. Martin watches Harry chug half his latte before, "If I may..." and Harry nods, waves his hand. Mr. Martin reaches inside his suit jacket and holds out a thick folded stack of, "Mr. Tomlinson's correspondence, sir."

Harry gags on his coffee but who the fuck cares. "Marty—"

He smirks, sets the bundle down on his bedside table, declares, "Your life is dedicated to the throne. Mine is dedicated to its heir."

During the family Sunday dinner, Anne reminds everyone of the "weekly family appearances" and this week included his and Gemma's cousin's wedding. Aly would sit in the back, Harry would be Gemma's date, and her husband would see to the children. At such news, he and Gemma exchanged a mutual look that needed no clarification.

Simon had been interfering with her life more once Harry left, a push of "you are royalty" and a pull of "you are woman." Gemma disliked the sudden nosiness and its potential influence on her children, as did her husband.

This wedding would be a statement for them both, a long overdue statement.

Harry and Gemma's family ride in the same carriage up to the chapel. Her husband exits first (normal), helps his wife down the steps (normal), they make sure Harry doesn't fall out (standard) before walking up to the church (not normal), leaving Harry in sole supervision of their children (not normal). Of course their son would trip and fall instead (not normal) and

Harry laughs because he looks exactly like him when he was that age. The child gazes up at his uncle, preparing to cry as kids do, and Harry takes his hand, “On three, jump super high,” and his niece decides that includes her, too, and he barely catches her tiny flying body while yanking her brother to his feet.

Harry thinks he got the short end of the stick on this one.

He waves at the crowd, tells the kids to do the same, then leads them up to the entrance where the archbishop and dean greet them and direct an usher for them.

“You gonna do it?” Gemma whispers when their mother arrives, everyone standing as she slowly walks down the aisle to their pew.

He catches Aly’s attention, nods toward the exit, and she quietly excuses herself while tiptoeing through.

“What is your grand plan?” she asks once they’re outside, lifting his nephew to hurry up the pace.

Harry takes them through the courtyard and stables to a handful of waiting cars, Mr. Martin standing next to one. “My plan is for you to meet Louis.”

Right before Harry knocks on Louis’ door, he sees the nervousness all over Aly’s face and pulls her close under his arm. “I promised. Okay?” She bites her bottom lip. “We’re all on the same side, love, okay?”

She inhales slowly, nods, smiles shakily.

He, too, inhales slowly. He *is the one* who stood up Louis after all and Aly reads his face, too, squeezes and holds his hand. Then he knocks and they wait.

The lock clicks, knob turns, hinges squeak, door opens, and there’s...Perrie.

Royal Prerogative

Chapter Summary

It strikes Harry that the word most prominent to him isn't king but happy. How Louis has only ever been about his happiness, has always brought it up, paid more attention to it than he himself ever had. He wonders, had he experienced happiness at all before Louis? Knowing now what happiness truly is? Is the reason why he's dedicated to their relationship because...it makes him happy? Because Louis...makes him happy?

Is something to be said that the word "happy" means more to him than "king?" That anything takes precedence over the crown?

The first thing Harry observes is Louis' jumper, soft crimson cotton hugging her shoulders and down her arms. The second is how gorgeous she is.

"Ha-Harry. N-No, your royal highness," she curtsies the bottom of Louis' sweater with bitten nails peeling magenta paint. "Please forgive me, your royal highness, I-I meant your royal highne—"

"Pop me the *fuck up*, Payno," Louis hollers behind her, "why the fuck are you charging them!?"

"God *dammit*," Niall chastises, "Lottie's played once and is better than your arse."

"Two potatoes," Liam's voice comes distantly, out from a speaker, "calm down lads."

Blushing, Perrie clears her throat, "Please, please come in," and steps aside.

Harry looks at his niece, nephew, then Aly, who squeezes his hand and repeats softly, "Same side, yea?"

Before anyone realizes, his nephew bolts inside yelling, "Uncle Louis, Uncle Louis!" having recognized his voice and his niece wiggles as a request for Harry to put her down so she can chase-waddle after her brother.

Harry walks in just as, "What the—" his nephew jumps on Louis' lap, he and Niall gaming and wearing headsets in front of a large screen TV. They both push an earpiece to the side to still hear the game but not be as immersed. Louis glances from his nephew, to Harry, to Aly, Perrie, Harry, then back to the TV, situating his arms around the nephew. "Heyo, sir princette, how've you been?"

Niall murmurs to Liam, "So, Harry and everyone's just showed up."

“Heh, awkward.” Then it clicks – *reclicks*, away from the banter and the game – the wedding, the reason Niall and Perrie are even there. “Wa-Wait, what–?”

Eyes focused on the screen, Louis acknowledges the tiny girl hugging his leg, “Hey, little Lexi princess, missed ya too.” He nods at Niall. “There’s your future husband, princess, just like I promised.”

The center table is covered with beer cans and...cigarette packs? Harry hasn’t been to the flat in...long, but the only other changes aside from the TV and cigarettes are the console and a newer armchair. Everything else is familiar though not as comforting as it once was. And it hurts, it really...fucking hurts.

“Would you or your guest care for a beverage, your royal highness? Perhaps a–”

“Allow me to properly introduce ourselves,” Harry interjects Perrie formally, Louis and Niall somewhat listening but not really able to as Liam (idiotically) engages with another squad.

Make acquaintance with everyone when entering a commoner’s home. He takes her hand. “I’m Harry and this is my friend Alyssa,” who smiles and lowers her chin in a nod-bow. “We apologize for showing up unannoun–”

“DAMMIT LEE!” Niall outbursts and Louis can’t help but laugh at the stupidity of it all as he takes off his headset.

Liam fires back, “I *told you* there was one upstairs and another behind the rock–”

While Liam and Niall bicker, Louis takes the nephew’s hand so they can walk slowly over. His heart beats louder the closer they get, trying to keep Harry’s eyes but unable, emotions rattling like a dryer tumble. About a year has passed since they last saw each other, so seeing him brought an uncontrollable instant elation. But Harry stood him up, then he cut him out, so seeing him transitioned into rejection. Overwhelmed and conflicted didn’t begin to describe how his insides felt.

They all stand there – Harry, Aly, Perrie, and Louis – in silence for a bit when Louis dares to look at Harry, he’s gonna have to eventually, and isn’t surprised he’s already staring. “Um. You, uh, ya met...met Perrie, yeah?”

Harry doesn’t budge, just stares, and Aly – sweet good Aly – grins. “Indeed we have.” She extends her hand to him. “I’m Aly. It’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Tomlinson.”

“Louis,” he corrects as they shake hands, Harry’s cadet neckerchief tied as a bracelet around his wrist and Harry gets lightheaded.

“Mr. Tomlinson!?” Niall gasps like it’s a scandal, having started a new game with Liam.

Louis rolls his eyes, Liam adding, “Toootally calling you that, Mr. Tomlinson, when you get on my nerves.”

Perrie mumbles, “No he won’t,” and Louis agrees, “Damn right he won’t,” because over his dead body will he allow Liam to do so, and chemistry, Harry thinks, they have chemistry and

he feels himself panic, but Louis is right there to read him like a damn novel and suggests, "So, uh. There's less of *us* than there are you, so we'll go in the bedroom," he raises his hand, "don't even, Nialler, there's kids here."

Niall scoffs mockingly.

The weird silence follows them, not uncomfortable just strange, at least it does for Louis. Harry simply keeps staring and Louis finds it difficult to look back, to look *at him*, and sort of circles around glancing from his dresser and feet to Harry's then up to his hands.

Harry exhales, asks because it's really bugging him, "She's wearing your jumper."

"Zayn's." Louis chuckles, finally sets his sight on Harry. "I took it from him, wow, years ago." He bites his bottom lip, realizes it doesn't answer the underlying question. "They came over this morning, knew I was bummed about...well, many things, one being the wedding. It got muggy, ya know, put on the air--"

"And the cigarettes?"

Louis lifts his shoulders. "I...drink less, and I can't be a drunken idiot with a prince as my..." Harry turns red and Louis shakes his head, looks down. He has no more to say. What *is* the prince to him?

Harry again exhales. "No more smoking. Please. Please. If you want to get piss drunk, then get piss drunk. But, please. Please don't--"

"You didn't show up." His voice cracks, tears building an army before attacking his face. Harry's world shatters all over again, Louis shatters all over again in front of him. "You didn't show up. Then you ghosted me."

Harry takes Louis' right hand, ring still there and comforting him in an unfair way, he doesn't deserve comfort. What Louis said is true and he honestly doesn't know what to say, hadn't planned anything extravagant in the last two weeks, doesn't want to use the same ole, "My mum is queen, let's blame her." He left Louis high and dry like a proper ass.

Harry dares one step closer, Louis squeezing his hand, then another. "I've missed you," he finally blurts, "so fucking much. Every single day and every single night. I've."

Louis whimpers, wipes his cheeks with the back of his free hand. As reassuring as it is, it isn't an explanation.

"I...hate hurting you." He bites his bottom lip, their hands shaking but he doesn't know whose, maybe both. "I hate missing you. I love loving you, being *with* you, but I *hate* hurting you. And I do, I do hurt you."

"We knew that you would, though," Louis whispers, head low and face half hidden, laments, "I agreed to those terms."

Harry shakes his head, nauseous, because no. Well, *yes* but what the fuck, he hasn't any right to hurt him, to keep hurting him, has no right to do *anything* except love him.

He dares touching Louis' cheek, who leans into it, then angles his chin up, forces himself to look into those beautiful blues full of sadness that he put there. He dares nudging their noses, Louis tilting his head expectantly, then softly kisses him.

Insides sorted out, Louis feels solace, bittersweet slightly heavy on the bitter. There's no doubt about Harry – his feelings, intentions, commitment to the relationship, to him – even through the bad times. His security with what they have, his confidence in what they *are*, he's in a position that leaves him extremely vulnerable. This time around, that vulnerability stung.

"I'm sorry." He keeps their faces close. "You don't deserve anything that I make you deal–"

"You don't make me do anything," Louis clarifies and fuck, Harry just fucking loves him, wraps his arms to hold him, get him close, feel his body. Louis grasps him tighter.

"I can't hurt you, Lou," he mumbles, "I *can't*."

Louis flashes back to when Harry said the same about the crown – "*No matter how much I would bloody give up my entire life for you, I can't.*" – and grows terrified where he might be going with this.

Harry knows he's shaking now, shaking from what he's about to say quietly against Louis' shoulder. "Would...you have me give it up...for you?"

It's a hypothetical question, seeing as Harry told him already that he can't, and Louis sobadlysobadly wishes to say yes, wishes to say that in a perfect world neither of them would need to give anything up...but it's not in a perfect world that he's being asked this question. It's a very imperfect world yet neither of them should need to give anything up.

Saying yes is too selfish, even if the question were reversed. "No." He clears his throat so he can more firmly state, "No. I wouldn't."

To deprive or hinder the next in succession to the imperial crown of this realm from succeeding is treason.

The pounding of Harry's heart vibrates up to his neck and down to his stomach. "I can't keep hurting you," he declares, "because I *will* lose you if I do, and I... I can't lose you, I *can't*–"

"You won't lose me," he calmly assures, kissing the side of Harry's head.

Harry swallows hard. "I need you," he confesses softly, "at any and all costs." Louis' heart flutters and Harry again locks their eyes. "Please, please forgive me, please, because I can't lose you, I *can't*."

"Of course, Haz. Always." He smiles. "It'll take more than one stand-up for me to give up on us and, really, it's not worth losing your yacht either."

Harry lets out a laugh, grabbing Louis' hand and thumb on his old neckerchief. "That's when you told me you liked me," Louis grins, "on the yacht. Remember?"

Louis nods. "Course I do, yeah."

“There’s a ninety-three point nine percent chance I might’ve known I loved you even before that.”

“I know, because I definitely one-hundred percent did.”

In the living room, Perrie has Louis’ controller and Aly has Niall’s, playing with Liam as Niall sits with the kids, a sour look on his face, and an empty beer can. He addresses Louis once the two emerge, somewhat disgruntled. “How is it that Payno can wipe a whole squad when it’s not with us?”

“Might be holding back on us, mate,” then looks between the girls, “we might not be worth his talents.”

“Could you get us more beer, please, Niall?”

Official statement from the palace explained His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales’ abrupt and early departure from the wedding ceremony of His Royal Highness The Duke of Clarence being due to Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal’s children recovering from a viral infection.

(Harry left his cousin’s wedding because of his niece and nephew’s fake cold symptoms. Niall makes a drinking game for every time the word “royal” appears in the release.)

“Both of your behaviors are inexcusable. Have been for quite some time.” Anne looks from Harry to Louis to their laced fingers and back around again. “I’m extremely displeased.” She’s fuming and Harry doesn’t know which one will get her wrath first. “You’re dismissed, Harold.”

Damn. He was hoping he’d get the heat first. “Mum—”

Louis squeezes tight, doesn’t break away from the queen’s gaze, whispers, “It’s fine, love.” Anne noisily inhales and Harry looks between them, skeptical and red flags raised high in the sky. Louis, more quietly but still audible to her, adds, “Trust me, Haz.”

Harry remains silent, knows that he shouldn’t, he won’t, he *fucking can’t*, yet his feet lift him and he’s leaning to kiss Louis softly and tenderly...in departure because he does, he does trust Louis and will trust Louis...against his mother though?? It. It’s not right, any of it: his mum dismissing him, leaving her and Louis alone, *him leaving* them alone, it’s so fucked up and he truly doesn’t trust her but...but he trusts Louis...and will listen to him. He loves him.

He hopes there’s intensity in his eyes that Louis can detect and he knows, knows Louis does. Fuck, though, him and his *mother*, alone.

Louis is petrified. It’s not just “the queen” he has to face, it’s the parent of the man he loves and the one-two punch every time he sees her, hears her, *thinks about* her...that’s something he may never get over.

Anne grins and if he didn't know any better, it would seem warm and friendly but unfortunately, all he feels is a fighter plane opening the drop door to release torpedos. He's fucked, yup, definitely.

"Mr. Tomlinson." She softly chuckles. "*Louis Tomlinson.*" A shock bolts down his spine. "I believed you, Mr. Tomlinson. Believed in the words you told me, believed when you told me you loved my son and *your prince.*"

He replies gently, "And I do. I've done nothing but love him and respect his wishes, your majesty."

She hums and shuffles through a folder sitting on the side of the desk, rosé-painted nails flipping swiftly between the leafs. "Remember the day after you told me you were good for my son, you got pissed in a pub." He doesn't answer and she slides a photo in front of him, "You failed to mention snogging Mr. Horan that night."

Oh. So it's gonna be like that, then.

She shuffles, slides another grainy picture from a surveillance video of him kissing someone not Harry. "You failed to mention bedding some groupie two years ago on tour in Canada."

Yup, definitely fucked.

She shuffles, slides, and criticizes more photos of his inappropriate behavior since the variety show, the night he and Harry met. Most are from the first tour, drinking too much and partying too late, dancing with Niall and smoking with Zayn, he actually doesn't remember a few.

The last two feel like the final nail in his coffin. "Then you engaged in sexual activities with my son after you were given clear direction to stay away from him.

"I have been protecting you, Mr. Tomlinson," his face burns, "in order to protect *our* prince."

Harry's waiting for him at the end of the hall, chewing on his thumb, and pacing in front of a large tapestry that depicts some medieval battle and the coincidence isn't lost on him.

He takes Louis' hands steadily, though smile quivering. "S-So?" He examines Louis' face, water glistening in his diverting eyes, curled lips hidden around his teeth, tip of his nose and cheeks flushing as the rest of his skin pales, jaw tensing and releasing. Slowly shaking his head, Harry breathes, "What...?"

Louis brings their foreheads together and sighs, kissing him lightly after some seconds then murmurs, "I love you."

"*You can't do anything, I get it...but I can.*"

Like hell, Harry thinks. He's not powerless, he's a prince for fuck's sake, he needs to be in this fight with Louis, fight *for* Louis. He marches back to Anne's office and storms in, where she's pouring herself a scotch from the decanter she stashes in her desk. "What did you tell him?"

She replaces the stopper and puts it back in the bottom drawer, glancing at the clock on the wall. "I have a video conference in about ten minutes, if you could—"

"What did you tell him?" he repeats, noticing the pictures as he approaches and thumbing through them. She offers the manila folder, slides it forward, but he shakes his head. Louis had told him about Niall, the girl, and probably everything else in that folder. "What did you say?"

She takes a firm gulp of scotch. "The hard truth that you never did."

"Which would be?"

She leans back in her chair. "Being married to royalty is a non-negotiable full-time job that Mr. Tomlinson is incapable of fulfilling. You and he have no future together."

"Oh?" Harry huffs. "I respectfully beg to differ."

"The time has come for you to deprioritize yourself and to put the crown first. You have cared only about yourself and not given one single thought about this family, *your family*, nor this monarchy." She takes another full drink. "You left a wedding and went to his home, Harold, a thoughtless and selfish move."

His eyebrows skyrocket. "*Selfish*? What I want has never mattered, it's always what you want—"

"Royalty doesn't have the luxury of wants." He rolls his eyes, has heard this all before. "What we have is the luxury of absolute obligation to the people. A luxury of which you have shown no gratitude, appreciation, honor."

"Untrue. I have done everything you've asked of me," he lifts a finger, silencing her anticipated comeback, "that didn't involve him, and he's not the problem – you are. You gave him the exact same approval as Aly and not once have you treated them equally."

Not only does Louis hardly see him at the few outings he attends but Aly's never needed permission, never been dismissed like Louis and stays right by his side. Louis watched him graduate from a back row by himself and Aly watched the parade by his family. Louis barely received allowance for the graduation party and there was no doubt Aly would be at the military reception. Louis didn't attend his knighting – his *first knighting* – and Aly sat second row. The Queen doesn't invite Louis as a surprise guest as she does Aly.

He knows in his heart the Queen would've allowed her prince a grace month before training, a holiday at Birkhall, and to continue communications and the relationship during, if it had been Aly.

"One of them has Sovereign approval to marry the heir apparent."

He declares, once and for all, "I'm not marrying her."

Her eyes narrow as she stands, lips pressed, then cautions, "Think about what and to whom you're speaking, son."

“Oh I have. Since the day you ordered me to Dartmouth without letting me tell him goodbye,” he remembers that phone call, the gut wrenching *I...need to think, I*, “I have. You... As my queen, you betrayed me. As my mum, you devastated me.”

Harry's sitting behind his mum's desk, head in his hands. He looks tiny in the grandiose regal office, painted portraits of royal bloods past hanging from mint floral wallpaper, chandeliers dripping from the high ceiling. “Bloody asinine,” he grumbles, “this whole thing is.”

Louis absolutely loathes Harry's demeanor in this palace (sans the bedroom obviously), how the screws tighten and everything about himself changes, but he's helpless because it's part of who Harry is: prince mode, a *working* prince. That part of Harry is how they met, how he is the way he is...it's also the part *Louis* ' not a part of and might never be.

Harry runs his hands down his face. “I refused to marry her,” he sighs out, folding them in front of him, “mum's...displeased. Then again, when hasn't she been displeased with me lately.”

Louis can't deal with Harry putting himself down from the queen's words and without regard to the reality that he's obeyed her words unquestionably. “She has no reason to be,” he argues. “You've been nothing but obedient.”

He exhales through his nose, jaw tense. “It's impossible to please a hypocritical monarch,” he recites flatly, a classic line from a tale about unattainable glory despite exuberant effort, “but that's my role, innit. An unwinning, unrewarding one.”

Louis' heart breaks for him. Harry needs to be *his Harry* right now, not *Prince Harry*, for both their sakes – if he's bloody sick of his queen mother, Harry must be too – because, although he's not royal, he's a part of them, has a say in *them*, “You're brilliant. You.” He walks over and sits on Harry's lap, grabs his cheeks to talk him out of prince mode. “She's tested us, multiple times, and we've endured. Yeah?”

His face softens, rigid spine relaxing. “I. I mean, I guess–”

“No, you *know*, we both know.” He pets Harry's face gently, brings the growing smile closer to his. He's gotten pretty good at shutting down prince mode. “Only we can stand in our way, okay? No one but us.”

Harry echoes, mind shifted, “No one but us.”

Louis nods once, “That's my Haz,” and Harry traps him against his chest when their mouths finally collide hard. He can be prince in the morning and for the rest of his life but with Louis, he doesn't have to be, can always be himself. He's learned, he can't lose Louis or he'll lose himself, too.

Louis twists Harry's short hair then squeezes his solid biceps, all these physical changes still so new under his touch. “Christ you're fit,” he breathes, navigating below his shirt and over

the shapely abs that replace his once-round belly. “I could write a damn ballad about just your pecks.”

Smiling, Harry licks over his neck eagerly. “Dare you.”

It happens quick, Louis yanking Harry up from the chair and slamming his back to the desk, computer monitor pushed crashing to the floor, pants shoved from their ankles, phone system hanging off the edge by two wires, fucking him on his mum’s – the queen’s – desk, that cadence of ohharryshitloveohgodfuckah bouncing off the walls with Harry’s throaty gasps and pleas. It’s so obscene and inappropriate, there’s not even a royal rule advising against it, that Harry’s turned on a little bit more. A year apart can make decisions careless.

On the other side of the office door, Mr. Martin waves housekeeping by and tells them to return after they’ve finished the rest of the wing, blushing when moaned words leak through the cracks, “ohgodfuck,” “yeahlouthatssit,” and the women smirk knowingly at him. One offers him a flask and towel, and he should really be more concerned that she’s drinking on the job, but he takes both as the women move on giggling. Hearing the prince-slash-future-king get fucked isn’t the highlight of his duties, but his duty is nonetheless to protect him.

The office quiets and he’s finished the half-filled flask, checking his watch to give them exactly seven minutes to recuperate. Then he knocks, waits for the okay, and peeks in to see Louis wiping the desk with an abundance of facial tissues and Harry setting up the computer.

“Mr. Tomlinson,” he calls and tosses the towel as he crosses the room, Harry chuckling at the smart resourcefulness of his secretary as he logs in with his mum’s username.

Louis blinks at him, then the towel, then back again. “How.”

“You and his royal highness are not the most, shall I say, discreet in your...extracurricular activities.”

Slightly embarrassed, Louis clears his throat and mumbles gratitude, Harry again chuckles, before resuming with the towel.

Mr. Martin walks behind the desk and retrieves the scotch, expertly aligning the spout to the flask’s small mouth. As he slowly refills, Harry lifts an eyebrow while reconfiguring the Ethernet port’s connection. “Something you want to talk about, Marty? Bad day?”

“No, sir.” He licks the final drop off the decanter rim before it drips too far, then retops it and the flask. “I’ve already informed security to tape over the recordings with stock empty footage and housekeeping will be here shortly.”

“You have holiday coming up, yeah?”

“In 16 days, sir.”

“Extend it.” He checks the internet and local network are both connected. “I don’t want to see you for four weeks.”

“Sir—”

“Fine, six.” He shuts down the computer and stands up. “I may hate that bastard replacement of yours Joseph, but I hate you not reaping the rewards of your loyalty even more.”

“H-Harry—”

“Seven. Seven weeks. I swear, Marty, I swear I’ll banish you until next year.”

Though overjoyed and humbled, Mr. Martin composes himself and sternly explains, “You are in the midst of transitioning in this monarchy—”

“I won’t be—”

“What in good heavens is going on?” Anne demands in the doorway, and Louis’ first thought is *the semen* and leans down, pretending to scratch his leg but dropping the soiled towel in the garbage bin and pulling the bag out behind his back. The desk still...is streaky a bit but it’s passable...he thinks...he hopes. Shit.

Harry stammers, “Well. Mr. Martin was refilling my flask, I favor your brandy on occasi—”

“Scotch,” she dully corrects, arms crossed.

“Or scotch.”

Louis darts his eyes anywhere except on the queen, plastic bag burning his hands.

Mr. Martin adds, “And it gave me a chance to check if you required a refill yourself, your majesty.”

“Thanks, Marty, but I have Tammy for that.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Harry continues, “I wanted to accompany him in case something like this happ—”

“Pardon, your majesty.”

Four housekeepers pushing cleaning carts roll passed her and she gapes at them, then her son, who shrugs.

She darkly inquires, “Why hasn’t my office been tidied yet?”

The lead maid blinks momentarily, pointedly keeping her eyes on the queen. “An emergency, your majesty. There was an emergency. In the ballroom.”

“What kind of emergency?” The maid rambles on in her native tongue, some form of Hindi, and the queen grunts irritably; it’s one of the languages she isn’t familiar. “Enough.”

She glares at Louis as though the fault is all his. This type of fiasco hasn’t happened since her children were much younger. “I am going to Robin’s,” she picks up the decanter, “I am taking

this with me,” she points, “you three will scam,” then angles her thumb, “and let Brina do her job.”

“Yes ma’am,” they all grumble.

As they exit behind Anne, Louis discards the bag in the rolling dumpster and Mr. Martin hands the flask back to Brina’s employee. Harry looks at all four of the maids. “You’ll have something at the end of the week, for your discretion,” he guarantees, loyal behavior worthy of rewards.

As they walk down the hall, Louis asks, though assumes the answer, “So, have you... ever...?”

Harry’s face turns dark red. “Absolutely not.” He looks to Mr. Martin for backup, who shakes his head. “You in my bedroom was my first time in this place.”

Louis thinks aloud, “It sounds scandalous and sexy, dunnit? Shagging on the Queen’s office desk.”

“You are to never utter those words...ever—”

Louis sings, “It’s between me and you, our little secret. And Mr. Martin.”

“And housekeeping,” Mr. Martin reminds.

Fucking hell.

Louis’ in trouble with his boss, too, as being Harry’s mid-wedding destination destroys the romantic narrative planned for he and Perrie.

With Harry away at training and no new content of him with Louis, the media confirmed the hiatus of their relationship with the palace and easily shifted from prince’s-beau-Louis to popstar-couple-Louis. Harry’s reemergence with Aly aligned with the palace’s affirmation, yet his arrival at Louis’ contradicted it all.

He gets reprimanded pretty vocally by their manager, PR lead, and security head, sitting there and taking it as he does the queen. The discipline lecture morphs into what the next steps should be and, after it sounds like they want to push the Perrie thing further, he interjects, “Why can’t I just be with him?”

The PR lead huffs a laugh as she grabs one of her three phones. “Because, Tommo, Anne says so.” She starts typing. “Are you aware of the costs – financially, publicly, reputation – if something were to happen to the prince under our supervision?”

“That was one time,” he explains, referring to the Kansas City redeye years ago, “and nothing bad happened.”

“Thankfully.” She sets her phone back in the row. “The response to you and Perrie has been positive, you’ll make your first public appearance together at the Brits.”

He creases his eyebrows. It was agreed that their work would be kept separate and an award show fell under the category as work.

“Little Mix will be sitting at your table.”

Fan-fucking-tastic.

“You can’t just let her push you around,” Gemma asserts. “She’s a birthright, not a dictator.”

“It’s different, Gem.” He hates talking about how his royalty is greater than hers, because she certainly reigns supreme in probably everything else and would by all accounts be a better monarch. She lived her life as normal as anyone in her position could and obtained a practical, rounded wisdom he never got to experience. She doesn’t take offense with him, though, because he’s had to live a life she never got to experience either. “My mind is made up.”

“Then tell her.”

“I have.”

“Then show her. Prove it to her. Hey.” She squeezes his hand. “The crown isn’t yet yours, and neither are the problems that come with it. Be happy while you can, before you turn into a bloody miserable sod of a king.”

It strikes Harry that the word most prominent to him isn’t king but happy. How Louis has only ever been about *his happiness*, has always brought it up, paid more attention to it than he himself ever had. He wonders, had he experienced happiness at all before Louis? Knowing now what happiness truly is? Is the reason why he’s dedicated to their relationship because... it makes him happy? Because Louis...makes him happy?

Is something to be said that the word “happy” means more to him than “king?” That anything takes precedence over the crown?

“I... What if... I may not be fit to be king—”

“Oh good Saint Wenceslaus, Harry,” she exasperates dismissively. “Close your yapper, stop being a golden child, and go on a date with your boyfriend. I have imps to tend.”

Anne relieves Aly of her obligatory duties. She couldn’t get Harry to settle down so someone else would get a chance.

It’s Harry’s turn to be displeased.

Louis tells him the group's going to a Brit's after-party and to meet him there. He hints Niall might fancy Aly and Harry hints she'll be receptive to it.

Harry and Aly arrive at the service entrance with royal security, who already contacted the hotel en route, escorted in a rush through the lively ballroom straight to One Direction's booth. Louis' hovered over his phone, staring at Harry's message thread so he doesn't miss a text or call or anything, and Zayn nudges him a bit hard, mumbling about how they need a no-phone rule when they attend these things, honestly.

Louis leaps up, phone dropping safely somehow between full glasses and knocking a couple open bottles on the table, and he's ecstatic...which quickly morphs into uncertainty because he doesn't know how to greet him with Aly there. This is the second time they've seen each other, their first in public, and it's one rule Louis hadn't learned. He's happy she's there, likes her all things considered, but sticking his tongue down the throat of a man in front of who much of the room believes is his girlfriend and also his own perceived-girlfriend doesn't seem smart.

Aly – good sweet Aly – steps toward him, signature smile and arm extended for a hug. “Hello, darling.” He's pleasantly warmed by her tight squeeze, genuine embrace. “Quite a sight for sore eyes, you are.”

He blushes, fucking blushes, because he's a bit drunk and she's truly so friendly, he feels awful for thinking anything bad about her. He can see, though, how she made a good match for Harry: extroverted, approachable, polite, *picture perfect of what mum expects for me*.

“You look lovely as ever.” He pulls back, means every word, “Thank you for coming out.”

She winks and moves on to Liam, and there's Harry in his face, or rather *on* his face, mouths and noses smushed, if only for a moment but their bodies stay pressed. “I don't think word's spread yet that I'm here,” Harry justifies and Louis glows, “even so, you look too handsome, no one could blame me.”

Louis laughs. “I feel a wreck.”

The band had early rehearsal for their performance during the show and been drinking since, so he's slouching against Harry pretty heavily. Public intoxication be damned or blessed, he's not on the queen's good side now and may never be again, what did it matter anyway then.

“Mmm,” Harry loosens Louis' tie knot and undoes the top two buttons of his shirt, “wreck looks good on ya.”

Aly sits between Zayn and Niall, who keeps her attention by rambling nervously about her video game skills and that they should play together again because he had fun and hopes she had fun, too. He offers her a drink, tipsy himself and hand waving over the table like a game show prize, and she accepts, scanning until she finds champagne and taps the unopened

bottle. He struggles a little with the wrapping, the dim lighting and sweat not doing him any favors, and it only gets worse when he tries using the corkscrew. Eventually, she takes it from him wordlessly with a gentle, unjudging smile, and uncorks it herself.

The reason he stays on his feet, Louis' sure, is Harry and his toned arms. It's still unfamiliar, how defined and muscular he's become, so he walks his fingers up Harry's back because he's not thinking clearly and can't keep his hands off him, palms over his firm shoulders. He slurs, "This place is swarming with paps, y'know," because it's the prince's, his boyfriend's, responsibility.

He shrugs, tugging on Louis' collar. "I'm sure mum will take care of anything she sees unfit."

Louis smirks, "In that case," and they again kiss.

"What do I do, Robin?"

On her bedside table, a pile of tabloids to be released in the morning, Anne lifts the top one: a photo of the group with their award takes up half the cover headlined One Direction win big, TWICE, and insets of Louis and Perrie sitting together at the show, Louis and Harry kissing, Harry and Aly sneaking in the hotel, and Aly and Niall dancing. The next magazine implies similarly with the exact same pictures, the next has different pictures with a much smaller headline, nonetheless every cover has *the story*.

"Well, you publicly declared support for your son's homosexual romantic involvement with a commoner, a positive stance on social principle and negative stance on religious principle. Now, two years later, you're steering him down a traditional path, a path opposing what you publicly supported."

She rolls her eyes as she slides under the luscious bedding, vanilla silk and Egyptian cotton. Robin didn't view their children or family the same as Anne, not as a monarch but a parent, and that difference caused many rifts and spats in the marriage, an imbalance of power and parental struggle. He never changed, though, resilient as the day they met, a voice to counter hers and those around her.

She's a queen before mother. He's only a father as far as he's concerned.

She puts on her reading glasses and flips open the first publication. "You haven't answered my question."

"Or have I?" He wiggles his eyebrows and she rolls her eyes again, though this time behind half-mooned frames and the smallest of smiles. "Decide on a position, Annie. Will the church of England – will *you* – allow a privilege for homosexuality?" She frowns noticeably, because he's right – this talk is bigger than Harry – and he continues. "Every reign has their moment in history. This could very well be yours, not saying it is, but it could, and if it turns out to be, which side do you want to be on?"

His question, in fact, gives her answer.

Falling asleep is the happiest Harry's felt in a long time and waking up feels just as blissful. Louis curled around him, soft snores after partying late into the night, drooling on his chest, familiar gray sheet with a bleach stain in one corner wrapped over the mattress, plaid comforter warming everything except their exposed feet.

This is what he wants for forever, even if not every night.

He kisses the top of his head, let's him sleep, and lies there contently like he used to do. He had an itinerary for the day but he never cancels, so one time won't hurt.

Louis rouses hours later, breaking Harry from his in-between-slumber-and-consciousness, and squeezes Harry as if checking he was really there. "Good," he tells himself and snuggles closer, which ends up rolling him atop Harry. "Never letting go."

"I'm fine with that."

"Good. Cuz I'm not. Letting you go, I mean."

Harry carefully detangles his stiff hair, crunchy batches and sticky ends from day-old hair gel, sympathizes, "Can see why you started drinking so early." Louis hates anything beauty; the cosmetics, fashion, preparation, time, all of it. "How long'd it take?"

"Too long." Harry swallows a laugh. "Niall's the only fast one, fuckin' fuckhead."

Louis' comfortable and Harry's hands on his scalp give him a chub in no time, especially since he had been too drunk and tired the night before, a classic case of whiskey dick which seemingly has passed. He scoots up until he can kiss Harry, who pushes his head down so their lips seal a cave for their tongues because he doesn't get enough Louis to begin with and he needs more of him.

Louis has no objections.

"Lou?" Harry rasps while they undress, side by side on the bed. "Can... You mentioned... The sc-scarf...as, eh, um... as a gag..."

He thinks he blackouts for a second. He has no objections.

He tells Louis he'd give it up to be with him, not *for him* but for his happiness. If putting the crown first, then truth is he values his happiness with Louis more than he values the throne and the people of the Sovereign are owed better: they are owed absolute dedication. It flatters and terrifies Louis, the natural thought of, "oh God, I made him quit the monarchy," guiltling him, then, "I make him happy, happy enough to a point of such a sacrifice," forgiving him.

Stunned, he squeaks out, "I. I love you...and you can't, Harry, I can't let you do—"

“I need you.” He licks his lips. “I have you and I won’t lose you, can’t lose you.”

It becomes extremely real for Louis then. Harry giving up everything he’s ever known, giving up his guaranteed future, his secured life...to be with him, so they can be together and Louis can continue doing what he loves. There’s a pressure there, a responsibility to not let Harry regret this decision.

“I can’t hurt you. And I’m scared I might. There’s, there’s pictures that I can hurt you, past shit I don’t rememb—”

“Would you love me if not a prince?” Louis’ stomach drops. “Would you love me as...as me...Harry, some chap?”

“Ninety-six point eight percent.”

“The yacht?”

“I really like that yacht.”

Worst case scenario, Harry’ll be stripped of everything and prevented from future acquisitions, inheritance, fancy words for fancy shit he’s forfeiting. A couple properties are in his name, not the monarch’s, so he’s not without assets, and he figures he can still pioneer for charity if anyone would want him. Worst case scenario, he’ll be hired as a color commentator by some television studio for royal weddings and special coverage engagements. In his off time, he’ll be a housewife, perhaps, keeping the flat spick and span and at Louis’ constant disposal to fly six time zones if he needs inspiration or sex—

“None of that,” Louis cuts in, “sounds like it’d make you happy in the slightest.”

Harry lifts a shoulder. “You do though. Don’t you understand?”

“I, no, I do—”

“Would you give up your life for me?” he counters. “I stay prince and you become consort and we live a life we both dislike—”

“You love it Haz,” Louis quietly reminds. “You live for others, you’re the most selfless person I’ve ever known by far.” He inhales quickly. “In a heartbeat, I’d drop my life for yours. But if you drop yours for mine, I swear to God, I’m sponsoring your arse onto... boards? Charities have boards right? Whatever, name a collegiate hall or hospital wing after us, because you aren’t becoming a housewife or groupie, I’m afraid.”

“Damn.”

Louis exhales, examines Harry thoroughly for a minute to wrap his brain around this bombshell. “You’re sure this is what you want?”

“Royalty doesn’t have the luxury of wants. I want that luxury. I want you.”

“My reign will not be marred by the abdication and banishment of the heir apparent, my child.”

“He requires a spouse, Anne,” Simon declares factually, “one who’s as dedicated to the throne as he is, and Mr. Tomlinson is not.”

She continues her writing, shoulders back and composed. “Well, the spousal requirements must be changed, then, won’t they?”

Stunned, Simon gapes at her cursive-stroking hand. “You absolutely cannot—”

“I’m Queen, Cowell,” her eyes dart up from the paper to see if she has his full attention, “I most certainly can.”

Simon groans, shaking his head. “You’re...essentially condoning the engagement of homosexual acts, an institution that *will* destroy the traditional standards set forth by the—”

“Your homophobia is showing, dear.”

He throws his hands up. “How will the Saudis and Russians receive him? Have you considered the global impact?”

Unphased, she shrugs. “I’m Queen,” she repeats. “This throne is a global power and it’s mine to use for the best of my people.”

“And you think letting Harry have a little boy-toy is best for your people?” he sarcastically mocks.

“That boy-toy has a name of Mr. Tomlinson which you shall address him as.”

“You’re unbelievable, Anne.” He starts pacing. “I could make a case that you’re unfit, abusing your power for personal gain perhaps financially from some queer club—”

“Come off it,” she warns lowly, “and watch your words before they bite you in the ass. Christ, I never had issue with Theresa or bloody Tony.”

“It’ll be a financial nightmare, a consort with an income yet benefiting from funds, assets, as if he’s a public servant.”

She rubs her lips together, pen freezing because that argument is the one she hasn’t yet resolved. She can address the religious acceptance of homosexuality and the monarchy’s standard marriage qualifications, but finances from the government is a legal matter she has no control over.

“Well, we might need to charge him room and board, then, won’t we?”

Harry returns to his reality and dedicates himself to overworking because Louis’ busy finishing the third album and promoting their pending world tour, and he doesn’t quite know

when his mum will drop her axe: he's already told her his position, his ultimatum as it were, and maybe he doublebooks partially to avoid that conversation but he also wants to do all he possibly can *while* he still can.

He moves into Clarence, way before his birthday, because his mum hasn't spoken to him "about it" still and he feels suffocated, feels it's the right time. False stories about his and Anne's "screaming matches" are credited for this sudden move, his need for a bachelor pad and his need for a place to shag Louis among other faux explanations. His official statement is short, essentially saying that the relocation was inevitable regardless if now or his birthday, what did it matter.

The band comes to town for a couple days filled with meetings at the corporate office, some night show and radio appearances, and the last batch of rerecording. Louis' cranky, a straight up bitch as Niall loudly professes from the background, and wants to spend his little free time with his sisters. Harry understands, or acts like he does, his understanding's irrelevant with how quickly Louis hangs up, but he's had Louis' complete attention for so long that it's rightly fair his siblings get some too.

Harry's family seemed to dominate in their relationship, so he couldn't argue with Louis taking time for his own.

Turns out, his sisters party as hard as their brother except they look better doing it, flawless makeup unsmudged and done-up hair in tact. Niall and Aly show up later in the night, Aly texting him and asking why he wasn't there but Harry's asleep by that time and sees the pictures in the morning. He feels left out and wonders if this is how Louis feels when excluded from royal events.

Louis' still drunk for most of the day, hangover creeping after their late lunch and resisting Niall's pressure that a lager would make it better, much to Liam's approval. That night, his sisters take him to a different nightclub and he misses Harry two boilermakers in, a good sign that hanging with his girls was definitely something he emotionally needed, so they insist he invite the prince out.

He apologizes for being a mushy brother in love and they throw ice cubes at him as he walks away towards the patio.

"Well, hello stranger." Harry's voice makes Louis grin far too wide. "You haven't drunk called me in a while, I was getting concerned."

Louis laughs. "I'm...actually not that drunk."

"Really? Now I *am* concerned."

Harry's settled in for the night but invites them to come over, he can show Louis *their* new place and he's got plenty of booze—

"Did you just ask me to move in with you, your royal highness?"

Harry blushes because, yeah, he guesses he did. It's not technically allowed, per say, then again, neither is his disrespect for some rules. He admits, "It might be unbearable to not see you when I know you're near."

Louis smiles sadly to himself. "I might've come to that realization, too, love...and I'm sorry."

"Come over and you're forgiven."

His sisters, Lottie and Fizzie, are hilarious, candidly sharing stories Louis would rather take to his grave but all in love and good fun. Harry vaguely knew about a few from when security background checked before their first date and getting the full stories now, retold by his sisters, was worth the wait.

All four fall asleep on Harry's bed around two and he wakes up far too soon at seven-thirty, gently rousing a snoring Louis to ask, "What time d'you leave today?"

He belches and smacks his lips, rolling his heavy head to look dizzily up at Harry. "Hmm." He goes to poke Harry's nose but, as it's moving in his inebriated eyes, misses. "Maybe... eight-thirty."

"Right, you gotta leave, like, an hour ago." He mumbles nonsensically while slowly getting up, Harry balancing him and his wobbly feet. "I'll take care of them," he nods at his sisters. "Mr. Joseph's waiting with a car."

"Mr. Joseph?"

Harry releases a long sigh. "Mr. Martin's substitute."

Louis yawns and tugs on Harry's hands, gets him to stand. "You're too good to me. You're too good *for* me—"

"We can argue about that later." He kisses him softly, knowing they won't. "Get to L.A. safely first. No drinking today."

After letting Louis' sisters visit and spend the night, it's expected when his mum demands his presence that evening but unexpected is the additional presence of the prime minister.

Well, shit.

In her office, he takes his usual chair on the left, to her right, and breathes out through his nose in audible irritation. If she were to take action against him, it'd be as queen to her prince and not warranting Simon being there. She has more grace than stripping his title in front of someone he openly despises, yet the very possibility is in front of him.

Firm smile resembling a grimace, she slides a manila folder to him and he rolls his eyes, can't stop himself. Not once have her damned folders contained good news.

He snatches it, flips it open like a book so Simon can see only the back cover and barely scans both sides before tossing it back on the desk. “No.”

“Darling—”

“What haven’t I made clear? What hasn’t made sense to you?”

Simon has the audacity to remark, “There are plenty of young eligible women,” referring to the female profiles in the folder, “who are more than able to—”

“Let me spell this out for you both.” His hands are curled around the round knobs of the armrests, knuckles white and popping red veins. “I don’t want a lady. I don’t want any lady. I want Louis. If not Louis, I want a man, a male, a human with a goddamn dick, a penis.”

Anne raises an eyebrow.

“Have I made myself clear? Is there any part that I need to elaborate on?”

Simon, face red and obviously uncomfortable, clears his throat. “You...cannot feasibly be in love with the first m-ma-man you’ve ever be-been with—”

“I see I haven’t made myself clear,” he growls, turning in his chair to face Simon. “Listen carefully, Minister Cowell, because even I know you’re too intelligent for me to be speaking this way to you.

“Imagine a world without Louis. There is no Mr. Tomlinson that exists and I am a young prince with Ms. Pefter on my arm, a beautiful lovely soul that any heir apparent could dream of. Right, now imagine me saying to you, with no one but Aly in my future, ‘I don’t want a lady. I don’t want any lady. I don’t want Aly. I want a man, a male, a human with a goddamn dick, a penis.’ What now?”

Simon shakes his head, almost frantically, unable to comprehend. “Wh-Why would you ever possibly reject Mrs. Pefter when she is the ideal making for a—”

“Fuck it.” Harry stands up. “Mum,” he takes a deep breath, “you let me know what you decide to do with your,” he uses air quotes, “‘queer prince,’ because I’m not wasting time or energy from my duties to deal with this shit.” He looks between them. “It’s. It’s so. Shameful, bloody shameful, our youth goes through th-this and you two don’t see anything—”

“You’re excused,” Anne commands, directed at Simon with her decisive tone and icy glare.

He stands and stares eye-to-eye with Harry, disgusted and livid. “Long live the Queen, because over my dead body will a faggot like you sit upon that throne.”

Harry rolls his eyes passively, immune to the minister’s vile tantrums at this point although, blood boiling, he clenches his fists to resist kicking his ass. “Careful what you wish for.”

Simon turns to Anne, points a finger. “I’ll make this hell for you and the palace.”

“Careful what you wish for,” she relays, husky voice low and glare challenging his. “Get the hell out.”

Simon slams the door because he’s a little bitch and the chandeliers rattle, the only movement and sound in the office until the jewels settle, replaced by silence.

Fuck, he hates that guy.

Anne pulls out a desk drawer and places a piece of paper in front of him, no folder.

He leans over to read it, eyes wide and brows high. “Aren’t you a queen before a mother?”

“I am. To be a queen before a mother, doesn’t mean the mother is forgotten.” She leans over the desk, serious suddenly. “This isn’t just about you and Louis, it’s also about other mothers, mothers who aren’t queens that have sons and daughters who aren’t princes – like Jay.”

He looks back at the council order.

A marriage as a condition of eligibility to heir apparent is voided. A marriage requiring the production of issues as a condition for approval is voided. Pre-established conditions of eligibility for a suitor are voided in favor of the authorities granted in the Succession to the Crown Act.

He should be mad, hell, he *wants* to be pissed, infuriated at how everything he’s gone through, Louis and Aly too, has been bullshit because it all could’ve been avoided. But it’s not anger he feels, nor vengeance or resolve, more of a mixture of relief and discontent. “May I be excused?”

“I thought you’d be happy.”

Happy. *If putting the crown first, then truth is he values his happiness with Louis...*

“You made it goddamn awful loving him, *for* loving him. You made it awful for him to love me. You pulled Aly’s puppet strings when she wasn’t your puppet, treated her like family because that’s what you wanted.”

“Royalty doesn’t have the luxury of wants.” He rolls his eyes; these mantras are getting stale. “My intent was never hurting anyone. It was the crown and it’s unfortunate that pain was caused along the way.” She exhales shakily and Harry knows she’s about to do what she normally doesn’t. “For that pain, I apologize.”

He understands more than anyone, though understanding and agreeing aren’t the same. When he’s king, he’ll need to face shit he disagrees with and use his power not for himself but for the people, *his people*.

“Any other requests for shaping this family’s legacy in history, Harold?”

But as of right now, he’s not king so he’ll try using the monarch’s power for himself. “Louis keeps his career.”

...he values his happiness with Louis more than he values the throne. He still values the throne.

She inhales sharply. “Spouses support blood royals in their work and role to the Throne. He can maintain his career and life...”

Harry clenches his jaw, finishes, “As long as he’s not my spouse.”

She nods once. “That said,” sharp inhale, “spousal inheritance including security, transportation, and residence would be inapplicable.”

Harry huffs a laugh in disbelief. “I don’t have to marry but being with him unmarried will still be hell.”

“There’s no way around it, Harry, as the parliament grant won’t fund a commoner who happens to be romantically involved but not legally bound with a prince.”

He taps the armrest thoughtfully. It seems that any hope of having a life with Louis would require a marriage: to live together, to have Mr. Martin chauffeur him in the mornings, to supply sufficient security, to travel together; also forcing obligations onto him. He slowly shakes his head. “What if I contribute part of my income to cover his expenses? I can’t imagine his living here would be astronomical.”

“It’s not just the cost, it’s the message of you spending royal allowance on a commoner. Is that fair to the others?”

“I get it, fine.” He sighs, repeats after a minute, “Louis keeps his job.”

“Harold—”

“I’m not making him do anything he doesn’t want.” She may have worked out clauses for him but they didn’t exactly benefit Louis, so he focuses on that. “He’ll perform duties when his career allows. Spouses support royal blood, why can’t royal blood support spouses?”

“I can think of two castles and a holiday chateau worth of reasons.”

“Mum.” He lifts his shoulders. “I need him. That’s all there is to it.”

“I’m gonna miss this place.”

Louis’ officially moving out of his shitty flat to Clarence House, boxes and bags packed so sloppily that Harry’s security give him judging glances with every trip they take downstairs. He disagrees, “I definitely will not.”

In the corner of the living room to be out of the way, Harry hugs Louis from the side. “Our first date, though.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Our first kiss, though.” Louis blushes when he whispers in his ear, “Our first time, though.”

“And our last time,” Louis adds, referencing that morning, “as of this moment.”

Harry chuckles and kisses his cheek. “I could be a non-prince here. Run from my life and be in a normal life with you for a while. Breathe easier.”

“Fucking almighty, Haz, do you want me to fucking stay here instead—?!”

“No no no,” he laughs, gives Louis a squeeze. “No, you’re my escape, Lou, not your flat.”

Louis raises an eyebrow. “That,” he kisses Harry quickly, “was horribly cliché.”

“Your royal highness,” one guard calls out as the others exit with the last of the boxes.

“We’re done here and will head back now to unpack.”

“Thank you, Oliver. Get yourselves some lunch first, yeah?”

Oliver nods while bowing, shutting the door behind him and leaving the two alone.

Harry watches Louis deeply inhale, staggered air wavering and eyes scanning rapidly over the empty apartment. “Whatcha thinking?”

Louis shrugs. “Dunno. I’ve lived here since signing day.” He rubs the bridge of his nose, wills his tear ducts to stop tingling. “It’s only the second place I’ve called home.”

Harry softly smiles at his somberness. “Third home’s the charm, hmm?”

“It’s looking that way, innit.” He presses his face to Harry’s neck until the soothing, soft warmth levels out his breathing. “Can... Can we go, love?”

Harry hums, takes his hand, follows him out, and as he closes the door, Louis doesn’t look back, so he doesn’t either.

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