Winter Pines and Ocean Eyes

by binariesunsets

Summary

Harry is awoken by the sudden weight of his dog across his chest, and he yawns and stretches his arms above his head, relishing the crack of his back the gesture produces and sending Fen tumbling down onto the bed. There’s a niggling sensation that he has something important to do that day, but in his still-sleepy state he’s struggling to recall what it is. When it hits him, he freezes mid-rub of his eyes, and his hand slowly falls to the furs strewn across the bed. His fingers tangle into their soft texture and he bites his lip.

Right. It’s that day.

The day he’s meant to travel south.

Or, the arranged marriage au between young viking Harry, son of his clan's chief, and a certain caesar by the name of Louis, heir to the empire.

Notes

So I wrote this as a pinch hit for the Royalty Direction fic exchange, based on the prompt of "OR ALTERNATIVELY MAKE THIS AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE BETWEEN LOUIS AND HARRY AND I WOULD PROBABLY DIE". I hope it's okay. I meant for this to be between 4 and 8k, but somehow it ended up being closer to 15k. And yet, it still ended up focusing entirely on Louis and Harry and the other boys aren't mentioned, so hopefully that's okay! I also picked a bit of an unusual combination as far as Louis and Harry’s general cultural backgrounds go, so hopefully that's okay. The representations of their cultures are not meant to be entirely accurate to their real world counterparts (ie, the vikings...
and the Romans), but are rather inspired by them, so if something isn’t quite as it is in reality, that’s why.

Much thanks to the mods for being so patient, especially with how late this ended up being (so so so sorry!).

Anyhow, I hope you enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.

Harry is awoken by a sudden weight across his chest, wetness on his face, and plenty of fur—although that last one is no trouble to find during the winter months, especially when the season is as cold as this one has been. As he comes to consciousness, he hears the whines of the creature currently squirming atop him and he can’t help but laugh.

“Fen you silly dog get off of me,” he says, and pushes the black and white malamute bundle of fur off his chest. The dog jumps onto the wooden floor boards of Harry’s bedroom but his excitable state doesn’t diminish.

Harry yawns and stretches his arms above his head, relishing the crack of his back the gesture produces. As he’s rubbing the sleep-sand out of his eyes, he reviews his tasks for the day. There’s a niggling sensation that he has something important to do that day, but in his still-sleepy state he’s struggling to recall what it is. When it hits him, he freezes mid-rub of his eyes, and his hand slowly falls to the furs strewn across the bed. His fingers tangle into their soft texture and he bites his lip.

Right. It’s that day.

The day he’s meant to travel south.

South over the icy channel. South to the mainland. South through the mountains. South to where the ocean is clear enough to see through to the bottom, and so so blue. South to where the sweetest fruits grow in abundance, and where the trees grow tall and their leaves broad. South to where the sand is the colour of snow, and where snow never falls. South to where the sun is hot, hot, hot. South to his betrothed. South.

The content mood from when he’d first woken up has long since abandoned him, and he struggles to leave the warmth and safety of his bedding. He doesn’t want to start his day just yet, wishes he didn’t have to. No matter how long he has known about today, no matter that he’d agreed to it, he doesn’t feel ready. To leave, to get married. He’s not sure if he’ll ever be.

Fen barks again, drawing Harry out of his reverie. The dog wags his tail, and it manages to put a small smile on his face.

“Alright, you. How’s about one last walk by the river?”

Fen barks again, and Harry takes it as agreement, so he drags himself out of bed, his reluctance this time stemming from anticipation of the cold he’s about to face outside. The realization hits him that this will likely be the last time he’ll experience cold like this, and the wave of sadness that crashes through him and causes his throat to tighten and his eyes to glisten catches him off-guard.

No matter how far he travels, or how long he’ll be away from his home here, he vows that he’ll always remember these last few hours for the rest of his life.
Harry slips out of his loose nightclothes and begins to put on the many layers he’ll need to keep warm outside. His socks, woolen, are pulled on first, followed by brown woolen trousers, baggy and loose around his thighs and hugging tight from his calves to his ankles, which he draws tight at his waist. Next, he pulls a soft white linen under-tunic that hung down to mid-thigh, and a dyed-olive kirtle over-tunic, which is lined at the cuffs and around his neck with woolen braids, dyed a burnished gold. He cinches an oft-worn leather belt around his waist, straps his knife and leather pouch on either side of his waist, and pulls on tall leather boots before drawing his heavy woolen cloak around him. The cloak has a mantle of fur across his shoulders to help keep him warm, but he nevertheless slips on a hat, also wool, to keep his head and ears from the frigid air. The process of dressing for the cold is almost therapeutic, and by the time he’s grabbing his fur-lined leather mittens from the table sitting by the door to his room, the knot of anxiety in his stomach has lessened somewhat.

“Come on, then, Fen. Let’s go to the river,” he says and the two leave the warmth of the wooden house, Fen bounding ahead and Harry following at a more sedate pace. The sun is not yet in the sky, and the only light comes from the pinkish-orange pre-dawn glow at the edge of the horizon. Only a few other early-risers are beginning their days, and the village, despite being one of the largest in the region, is mostly silent except for the crunch of Harry’s boots on the snowy ground.

The walk to the river isn’t a long one, maybe a quarter of an hour, and Harry does his best not to let his thoughts endlessly circle around the long journey he’s to make in a few short hours. Instead, he focuses on the environment around him. He focuses on the crisp, cold air as it fills his lungs, the sound of his boots, Fen’s excitement as he bounds through the snow in front of him, the way the light of the rising sun washes across the white of the landscape and sets it afire. Every so often he hears the sound of birdsong, but most of them have long since flown south for warmer weather. South, where he’ll soon join them.

Harry and Fen shortly arrive at the river. It’s quick-moving, and its current has prevented the centre of the water from totally freezing over. Only the edges of the river have managed to turn icy, and Harry brushes the snow off the ashen, dead wood of a fallen tree before he settles down to watch Fen as he runs around. When Fen brings him a fallen branch, Harry spends a while throwing it for the dog, who eagerly runs to fetch it and bring it back for Harry to throw once more. It’s a nice distraction, and he gets caught up in the game, in the now early dawn light, in the rushing sound of the river, in the way his air comes out in puffs in front of him, and doesn’t notice the presence who has arrived until the log sinks with the added weight of another person.

“Thought you might be here.”

Harry jolts, and turns to face his sister. “I didn’t hear you coming.”

Gemma laughs, “No, seemed like you were preoccupied.” The smile falls from her face and she frowns, “How long have you been here? We were looking for you. You’re heading out in an hour.”

Harry shrugs. “Was up before dawn.”

Gemma frowns and asks, “Couldn’t sleep?”

Harry shakes his head. “Fen woke me up. When I realized today was the day, I decided I wanted to come out here one last time with him.”

Her faces softens, and she squeezes his arm. “It’s a brave thing you’re doing for our people, and an important one.”

He shrugs again, and says, “It’s what needed to be done. I have a duty to our people, same as you. It
was the only way to keep our society from disappearing into the empire like so many others. After all,” Harry looks meaningfully at his sister and gives her a smile, proud and fond, “we couldn’t exactly marry off our future chieftain.”

Gemma smiles in appreciation, but the smile slips away after a moment and she sighs. “Just because it might be the right thing to do doesn’t mean it’s any less difficult or any less frightening.”

Harry lets out his own shaky sigh, and buries his head into her shoulder, rubbing his cheek in the fur that lines the mantle of her cloak as it does his. Gemma frowns and her mouth turns downward in upset at the sigh. Her hand comes up, and she pets the back of his head in comfort.

“Yeah,” he mumbles, “yeah it doesn’t.”

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The journey south take roughly three weeks, with the cavalcade stopping briefly only when necessary. It’s the farthest Harry has ever been from home—the farthest almost any of his people have ever been—but he struggles to appreciate the lands through which they travel. He barely registers the way the landscape changes before his eyes as they move south, shifting from vast icy tundra where only stout shrubs and sparse pine forests grow, to softer powdery white hills and broad firs heavy with snow, then to the sprawling forests of hardwood trees and plump shrubbery, now naked and brown for the winter except for the occasional spots of colour from the winter berries and the wildlife which hasn’t fled from the cold. Even the jagged peaks of the mountains which cut into the sky can only leave him in awe for so long before they remind him just how far from his home he’s come, before they remind him just how foreign these lands are. His life, he knows, will be changed forever when he arrives at the capital, and the thought hangs like a shadow over the journey.

It’s not the arranged marriage that bothers him, exactly. In fact, as the second child of the chieftain of their clan—and a son at that—he had expected nothing less. If his parents had not had a daughter, he would have been expected to take a wife who would assume leadership over the clan once they were married. No, a political marriage was always something for which he had been prepared, if not expecting, in his future and in which he was more than willing to participate. If it would benefit their clan, help ensure its stability and its prosperity, Harry wanted to do his part. What he hadn’t expected, however, was having to leave his homelands for a strange land and an even stranger culture to do so.

The permanency of this journey, however, doesn’t hit him until they’ve made it through the rough passage through the mountains and stopped to switch into lighter summer clothes because none of them could bear to stay in their heavy winter garments any longer. The landscape is greener here, and he hasn’t seen any snow for some time now. Harry can’t quite wrap his mind around it all, the fact that it’s the middle of winter and yet they’re dressed as if it’s the middle of summer. His adviser who is making the move with him has been reviewing the history, culture, politics and geography of their new home with him, and Harry knows it’s only going to get warmer the closer they get to the capital. He’s not sure they even own clothing appropriate for the climate. Something else he’ll have to adopt, he supposes. His stomach twists at the thought.

Within a few days, they’ve arrived at the capital, and the sight of the bustling city makes Harry feel like he’s slipped out of reality. Even the busiest of villages in his homeland don’t have this many people living there. Perhaps the closest he’s ever experienced to this bustle is when clan meetings are held, but he knows even those gathers don’t hold a candle to this. The buildings, made of white stone, are huddled close together and line the twisting cobblestone streets. Overhead, flags and lines of washing strewn from one building to another or dangle out of windows. The buildings are
decorated with colours that are brighter and more varied than Harry knew existed. All the city’s architecture looks nothing like the log houses to which he’s accustomed, and it’s both exciting and terrifying.

Their cavalcade is travelling along the main thoroughfare, the widest in the city, yet even it is still crowded with merchants and their beasts of burden and their carriages, with citizens going about their daily affairs, with guards of the city, and with yet other travellers coming and going through the city. In the villages up north, the harsh weather and smaller populations ensure that all the people of the village know one another, even if just by name or reputation, and he’s struck by the realization that that would be impossible here. Even without all the transient individuals who pass through the city, there are simply too many living here to ever know them all. In that instant, Harry is overwhelmingly grateful that he’s not here alone and, even, that his intended is here. He won’t have to come to terms with the kind of total anonymity this city offers, the likes of which he’s never known before in his life. He’s not alone in this city.

They arrive at the royal palace before long, situated up a hill at the edge of the city and flanked on either side with the green of the hillside and otherwise separated from the road by a tall, sprawling fence, on top of which Harry can see more guards on watch. It’s not as noisy here as it is in the city centre, and the overwhelming bombardment of smells both pleasant and not which had rapidly been giving him a headache have dissipated in favour of the clean and sweet smells of the the fruits, flowers, and vegetation which grow in the hills. Here, too, Harry can finally detect the salty smell of the sea, and it helps to settles his nerves a little—it’s a familiar smell, and it reminds him of home.

They’re let through the gate without much fuss, as they had sent word ahead and are expected by the emperor, empress and Harry’s betrothed, the caesar. As they approach the palace, Harry tries to take in its appearance, but it’s difficult, because it’s easily the biggest building Harry has ever seen. The palace is made of the same white stone the rest of the buildings in this city are, but its walls are decorated in gold designs and it’s bigger than any of the other other buildings in the city—so, so much bigger—that it makes Harry dizzy to think about it. And for the first time since he had agreed with his parents to the arranged marriage in what feels like another lifetime, now, he wonders what he’s gotten himself into.

They’re welcomed into the palace, and Harry continues to do his best not to make a fool of himself by gawking. Instead, he focuses on the way even his lighter linen summer clothes have begun to stick uncomfortably to his back with sweat. It’s so hot here, and he’s not sure how he’s going to handle summer if this is what winter is like. He and his adviser are led into the throne room where the emperor and empress sit, and Harry’s nerves settle a little at the more familiar territory. Though he’s never met an emperor or an empress before, both he and his sister were taught about diplomatic relations—as children of the chieftain, it was expected, even if Harry had not been intended to ever take over the leadership of the clan. So he lets his years of education take the lead, and his mind goes blank.

His first interaction with the emperor and empress ends without any disasters and Harry offers his thanks to the gods—he’s going to be seeing an awful lot of the two of them for the rest of his life, since they’re the parents of his betrothed and the current leaders of the lands he’s to call his own now, after all. While his adviser goes to get settled into his own chambers, another servant leads Harry away to a secluded terrace, over which hang curling vines, overlooking the gardens behind the palace and, beyond them off to the side, the teal expanse of the ocean. There’s a table at the centre of the terrace, and on it is a rich and colourful spread of food consisting of fruits, nuts, cheeses, breads, jams, juice, and wine. It’s set for two, and Harry’s stomach growls at the sight. It’s mid-morning now, but he hasn’t had time to eat breakfast yet, and he hopes the food is for him.
Before she leaves, the servant bows and says, “His Most Noble Caesar will meet you here shortly.”

His betrothed. His intended. He’s about to meet the man he’s to marry. The heir apparent of the empire. If nothing else, he supposes, at least this means the food is probably for him.

Harry is contemplating taking a seat and beginning to eat without him if the caesar doesn’t arrive soon when he hears somebody clear their throat. His stomach swoops and plummets, and his breathing catches. Slowly, he turns around, and prays that his hands don’t start visibly shaking with nerves.

He’s faced with a man whom he knows is the most beautiful person he’s ever seen in his life. The man’s skin is a warm and obviously sun-kissed, especially compared to Harry’s own pale colouring. His hair is a similarly warm copper shade, streaked with what Harry can seen with the sun hitting the man’s hair to be red highlights. His hair looks soft, so soft, and Harry is overcome with the urge to run his hands through it. The man has a well-groomed beard, too, which shares the same reddish colour as the man’s hair and his eyes—gods, his eyes—are blue as the glaciers that sometimes drifted in the ocean back home.

The man is draped in a toga—the customary dress of the people of this city—the cloth of which itself is white, but the edges lined in purple, over-top a white tunic with two vertical purple stripes. The emperor and empress, Harry remembers, also wore outfits of purple, though theirs were lined with gold embroidery, and it hits him that this man is the son of the emperor and empress—the man for whom he had been instructed to wait and to whom he is betrothed. This man is his future husband and he has no idea how he’s supposed to handle it.

“Hello, I’m Caesar Thomas Aloysius,” the man says in the common tongue, “but please, call me Louis.”

It takes Harry a moment to realize he should reply, too busy caught up in staring at his appearance, and manages to stammer out a response in the common tongue of, “Uhm, hello. I’m Henrik of clan Stylesing. Just Harry, is fine, though.” So much for his lessons on diplomacy. He’s glad his parents and teachers aren’t here to witness this disaster.

Louis doesn’t seem to notice, though, because he only smiles and says, “It’s nice to finally meet you, Harry. I hope your journey here was smooth? I’m truly sorry it was such a long way for you.” Now that Harry is recovering from the man’s—his betrothed’s, gods help him—appearance, his wariness at his current situation has returned. Louis, however, seems genuinely regretful that Harry had to travel such a distance to make it to the capital, and that warms him to the man.

“It was, thank you. It was long but otherwise free of complications,” he says cautiously.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. My parents, the emperor and empress, decided it might be best for us to first meet in a more intimate and relaxed setting. Give us the best odds of starting off the right way. So,” his gestures with his arm to the table filled with food, “we’ve had this meal prepared for just the two of us. Even the servants will stay clear until we call them in.” Louis shoots him a look, and Harry thinks he even sees some nervousness in the man. “I hope that won’t make you uncomfortable. If you’d rather we not carry through with it that’s more than alright. It’s just meant to be casual. No presumptions, no facades, no expectations. No need to put on airs or behave according to specific rules. Just us. Well,” a playful smirk quirks Louis’ lips, “just us and the food, anyway.”

Harry laughs, appreciative of the effort Louis is making to lighten the atmosphere. Harry is beyond hungry at this point, so he can’t imagine turning down the food for any reason, but truthfully, “No, it’s perfect, really.”
“Then let’s eat,” Louis declares, and there’s a bounce in his step when he goes to take a seat.

The beginning of their meal is quiet. For all their combined diplomatic experience, neither Harry nor Louis is able to broach a topic of conversation. At the very least, they have some time before it becomes especially awkward, as for now they have the spread before them into which to tuck. Considering he’s currently dining with the caesar in the empire’s capital, Harry’s not really that surprised at the quality of the food. What does surprise him, however, are the myriad of unfamiliar flavours which hit his tongue, and he tries to let himself forget about his circumstances for a moment so that he can fully appreciate the tastes before him—the sweet, juicy fruits, the earthy nuts, the spiced meats, the soft cheeses, and the buttery breads.

The two men can only proceed without conversation for so long, however, and as the pace of the meal slows down, the expectancy of properly engaging in conversation with one another rises. Harry racks his brain for topics to open up a conversation between himself and Louis, and is just about to resort to discussing the weather or the beach when Louis speaks first.

“I think it might be easiest for us if we discuss what the reason was for you to be brought to me here in this city. There’s not much sense trying to pretend otherwise.”

The tension eases from Harry’s shoulders marginally. It’s a reasonable plan, and one with which he agrees. The sooner they figure out where they stand with one another and discuss the nature of their marriage the easier it will be to learn about one another as companions and affianced husbands.

“Yes, I agree. I think that would be best.”

Louis gestures lightly between the two of them and says, “Our marriage.”

Harry nods. “Our marriage.”

Louis delicately sets down the knife he had been using to cut and spread cheese on his bread and takes in Harry’s appearance a moment before he says, “The expectations we have of you and your kith and kin have not changed, and I don’t expect we’ll be seeking to amend them any time soon, as I believe we came to an agreement that suited both parties. There’s no doubt in my mind that the trade of resources between our peoples will serve us both well in the long-run. However,” Louis continues after Harry verbalizes his agreement, “what we haven’t yet discussed are our personal expectations of our marriage.”

Harry frowns lightly and asks, “You mean what we hope to get out of this on a personal level?”

Louis nods and offers him a small grin, “Yes, exactly. Just because our marriage was arranged doesn’t mean we can’t also hope it’ll be pleasant for the both of us. We’re going to be bound together for life, after all. No sense in being miserable the whole time.”

A small smirk curls the corner of Harry’s mouth while a red flush unfurls across his cheeks at the innuendo, and he wonders if it was deliberate or not. He supposes once he’s had a chance to know his betrothed he’ll also learn whether or not he’s the sort to insert innuendo into his speech or if it was an honest coincidence. “Yes,” he says, mouth dry as he tries to push aside the images Louis’ words have conjured in his mind, “I agree. Completely.” And he does. He just hopes he’s managed to convey his sincerity.

Louis’ eyes crinkle when he smiles at Harry this time, and Harry thinks maybe he’s managed to convey his sincerity after all. “I’m glad,” Louis says, “I want to be a good husband to you, Harry. I know you’re far from your home, but I hope that one day you’ll have one here, too.”

Harry’s features soften and he sends Louis a small appreciative smile in return. “Thank you, Louis.
I’d like that too. I think I’ll be able to, I do, it’ll just take some time. Everything is so different here, compared to where I’m from.”

“Of course,” Louis nods in assent, “and I promise I’ll do anything I can to help make that happen. I want our marriage to work, truly. For us, and for your people and mine.”

“I do too,” Harry says, voice soft. He hadn’t had any preconceptions of what to expect of his betrothed and this marriage, not really, but he’s finding that Louis is blowing any notions he could have had out of the water. He reminds himself to send prayers of thanks and gratitude to the gods later.

A thought crosses Harry’s mind, and he bites his lip, unsure if he wants to even vocalize his question. He knows, however, that if he doesn’t ask Louis it’ll be on his mind until he finally asks.

“And what about heirs? I can’t bear you any children. Will you take a consort?”

Somehow, the question seems to take Louis by surprise, as if he hadn’t considered—or perhaps had forgotten about—the issue of producing an heir. “It’s certainly something my parents and I discussed when we decided that an arranged marriage was the best way to unite our two peoples, but it was not something we were overly concerned about,” Louis shrugs. At Harry’s furrowed brow and the tilt of his head, Louis explains, “In our culture, your birth status isn’t related to your status as an heir. My father is not the one who sired me, but I am his and his heir by the bonds we made for ourselves.”

“Then there is no need for either of us to produce an heir ourselves,” Harry murmurs.

“That is correct. There is nothing that we must do but wait. Eventually, the gods will guide us to the child who is meant to be ours, as They always have when we need Them,” Louis says, and shrugs. “I have faith in Their designs, and choose not to dwell on the endless possible futures. What is meant to happen will, no matter how we feel about it.”

Harry considers him for a moment, digests his words, and nods, accepting Louis’ explanation. “The gods of my people look more favourably upon initiative and action, rather than patience and inaction, but They also have plans which They’re aware of that we are not, and we rarely, if ever, fully understand the plans which They allow us to know. So I think I agree with you that, when the time comes, both your gods and mine will let us know what do. For now,” Harry pauses and bites his lip, glancing out over the balcony and at the teal ocean horizon before returning his gaze to Louis, who patiently waits for him to continue, “I suppose all we should focus on is our marriage. On us.”

The smile Louis gives him is warm, and his blue, blue eyes glitter like the surrounding ocean waters do when the sun hits their surface. “Yes, that we should.” He places his cutlery down, and rises from the table. Both he and Harry have had their fill, Harry having put his cutlery to the side when he had first asked about the matter of an heir. Louis continues, “Would you care to join me for a walk in the gardens after you’ve settled in? After all,” his smile takes on a playful quirk, “I would quite like to get to know the man I am to marry.”

Harry takes in Louis’ open body language, the warm and welcoming tone to his request—but also the polite restraint, the obvious wish to not pressure Harry into anything he doesn’t want to do, and offers a smile to Louis in return. It’s not quite as warm as Louis’ is, but he has a feeling he’ll get there before long. “Yes, I think I’d like that.”

Louis’ smile splits into a blinding grin and he says, “Wonderful. Then let me take you to your chambers and after that I promise to let you be. If you would like any help with your things, you’re welcome to ask any of the servants and they’ll happily do what they can.” Louis lowers his voice and whispers conspiratorially, “You’ve made quite the impression on them.” He sends Harry a wink,
then turns to lead them off the balcony, gesturing for Harry to follow him, and Harry does.

Harry’s surprised at the way everything about the exchange, from Louis’ smile, to his joke, to the wink at the end, has so fiercely set his heart aflutter and burned his cheeks to the tips of his ears red, and he thinks he’ll probably be able to return Louis’ warmth sooner than he thought. He swallows, mouth dry, and manages to mumble, “Yeah, okay. Thank you,” and follows Louis.

Since they had begun their meal, the temperature has increased, and even Harry's summer clothes are starting to feel a little warm. In an effort to cool down, he ties his hair back with the leather cord tied around his wrist and pushes up his sleeves. Louis doesn't seem uncomfortable in the current temperature, so Harry doesn't think it's actually as hot as he thinks it is, but he can't help but perceive it that way, anyway. He's wondering whether or not he should find his water skin and fill it up with water for their walk later that day when Louis speaks up, drawing Harry out of his thoughts.

"Feeling a little warm?" Louis asks. He has an amused look on his face, but there's an undercurrent of real concern for Harry's comfort, too, that Harry appreciates.

Harry shrugs. "Yes. These winter temperatures are warmer still than the summer temperatures in my homeland." He gestures towards his outfit, "Even my summer attire is too warm for this climate. I won't deny that it's uncomfortable, but not unbearably so."

Louis shakes his head. "I don't think I can even imagine the kind of cold you know. Would you like for me to arrange for a toga for you? I'm sure there are some spare ones around. Otherwise you're more than welcome to borrow mine until we've acquired you your own. It would help to keep you cool in this weather."

"That would be wonderful, thank you," Harry says warmly. He's not sure how yet how to best show his appreciation for what Louis has done for him in the short time they've been together, but he knows he wants to do something.

"Then I'll send for it once we’ve reached your chambers, and you can go change into it before our walk, if you'd like,” Louis says.

"I think that sounds perfect," Harry replies. It doesn’t take long for them to arrive at their destination, and Louis bids him a temporary farewell while Harry settles in his new chambers and Louis goes to ensure one of the servants finds Harry an appropriate toga to wear.

Harry is just about finished settling into his chambers—he had declined the offer of help from one of the servants, wanting to become acquainted with the place he’ll be staying until, he presumes, he and Louis are officially married—when another servant knocks on the door and enters with his toga. The servant lays the outfit on Harry’s bed, and asks if he would like any help putting the outfit on, but Harry declines her assistance, too. He doesn't think the outfit will be so complicated that he'll be unable to figure it out himself.

Harry finishes organizing the last details in his room before turning to the outfit laid out on his bed. Just like Louis’, there’s a tunic to wear underneath the length of the cloth. On the floor are a pair of sandals which Harry can see are meant to be corded around his ankles. The cloth and tunic, Harry notes, are identical to Louis’, and he wonders what it means, wonders if these are Louis’ clothes or if there’s some wider cultural importance he isn’t aware of yet.

Harry undoes the belt around his waist, steps out of his boots, and strips out of his own tunic and breeches. He doesn’t have any trouble with the new tunic, and is grateful for the cool, linen fabric and the way he immediately feels more comfortable. The strip of fabric he’s suppose to wrap around his body, on the other hand, is not nearly so straightforward.
Harry wraps and re-wraps the cloth around his body in a variety of ways, but each time he fails to do it correctly. Sometimes, the wrap isn’t secured properly and falls to the floor, sometimes, he’s managed to wrap himself in such a way that he’s somehow taken away his ability to move. It’s too loose, it’s too tight, and more times than he can count the cloth just looks wrong. He doesn’t know how long he spends trying to figure it out, but he’s just about to call for a servant to help him when he hears a knock on his door. He bids the person at the door enter, and turns around expecting a servant from whom he can ask for some help after all. Probably, a lot of it.

Except it’s Louis. Again.

Blood rushes to Harry’s face and heats his ears red. He wants to jump off the balcony attached to his room and into the water that crashes against the cliff, atop which this wing is built. The day had started off so well, only for him to make a complete fool of himself now.

When they lock eyes, a giggle bubbles out of Louis from behind the hand he has brought to his mouth in order to suppress the noise and his eyes have crinkled shut in mirth. Harry thinks he might be okay with embarrassing himself like this if it means Louis will respond like that.

“So do you need some help?” Louis asks, voice breathy as a few more giggles escape him at the sight. Harry’s gut swoops and his flush burns with a renewed heat. He sighs, glances to the side, and mumbles, “Yes.”

Louis walks over to Harry and lightly, ever so lightly, turns Harry’s face back to him with his knuckle under Harry’s chin before he lets his hand fall to squeeze Harry’s shoulder in comfort. “Hey now,” Louis says, “there’s no need to feel embarrassed. Everybody has trouble with these before they learn how to put them on, and even then we all still have our days. It’s not like you’ve ever had the chance to learn how to wear a toga before.”

Harry can only shrug. He’s lost his voice, somehow, being this close to Louis, but he still nevertheless feels embarrassed with himself and his failure.

“C’mon”, Louis says, “arms up. I’ll teach you.” He smiles reassuringly at Harry, and that gets Louis a smile in return.

Harry does as Louis tells him, and Louis begins by draping part of the long cloth over Harry’s left shoulder and moving to wrap the rest around Harry’s body in such a way that the cloth is tight around his torso and anchoring the end hanging over his one shoulder, but is otherwise loose and does not impede his ability to move. It’s done with such ease that Harry wonders again how he managed to make such a mess of it.

And yet, “I still don’t quite understand what you just did.”

Louis laughs, and pats Harry’s chest lightly. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just have to show you some more, hm?” There’s that wink again, and Harry’s heart skips maybe a beat or five.

“For now, though,” Louis speaks again and Harry tries to push aside his racing heart, “Why don’t you slip on your sandals so we can head to the gardens. There’s somewhere I’d like to take you a bit later.”

“Yeah, okay,” Harry says, swallowing past his dry mouth. The sandals, thankfully, he manages as well as he did with the tunic, and the two are shortly off to the gardens. There’s a constant, light fluttering in Harry’s stomach, and he’s having a hard time remembering that he’s only just met his betrothed. More than meeting the emperor and the empress, this walk with Louis has Harry left
feeling both nigh terrified and giddy with exhilaration.

He thinks he can see a bounce in Louis’ step, too.

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The garden is beautiful, and nothing like Harry has ever seen back home. There are flowers up north, certainly, but most of them are small, hardy wildflowers that bloom for a short period in the spring. This garden is full of flowers of all shapes, sizes, and colours, so many of them and he can't name a single one—and it's only winter. It smells sweet here, almost overwhelmingly so, but also clean and fresh, with the ever-pervasive smell of the ocean cutting through the heavy floral smells. He can only imagine what this garden must be like in the warmer months, when the seasonals come into bloom. He catches himself wishing he could be here to see it, and his stomach swoops when he realizes that that's something he will, in fact, be able to do. He's going to be to see these flowers bloom for many years to come. It's an idea to which he's ever so slowly growing accustomed.

Harry can see out of the corner of his eye Louis looking at him expectantly, and Harry finally brings himself to tear his sights away from the vibrancy of the garden around him. "It's beautiful," He breathes, and that draws a soft laugh out of Louis.

"You should see it at the height of spring or summer. It's like you've been transported to another realm," he says, echoing Harry's earlier thoughts.

"I can only imagine," Harry agrees, and bites his lip before he asks, "Will you show me, when the spring and summer months arrive?"

At Harry's question, Louis' eyes crinkle and a sunshine grin breaks across his face. "There is nothing I would like to do more."

Harry's heart stutters, and he flushes again. He's lost count how many times Louis has coaxed that reaction out of him, and Harry wonders if it's possible to be permanently reddened from blushing so much.

Louis beckons Harry to follow him deeper into the garden, and the two begin their walk.

"Beyond the toga, I hope you settled into your chambers okay?"

"I did, thank you. It's bigger than I'm used to. Where I'm from, our homes are built to keep in the heat, so our rooms are smaller and less...airy, I think would be the best way to describe it. The balcony overlooking the ocean is beautiful, but we could never have something like that up north. You'd freeze and then die of the cold."

Louis shakes his head. "I don't know if I could live there. I can't even comprehend that kind of cold."

Harry shrugs and smiles fondly. "It's all I know. Maybe it is harsh and cruel, but until I came here there was nothing for me to compare it to. Even still, I have no doubt I'll miss it, anyway. It's home, and a part of me, I think, that will never go away."

Louis nods. "Like me and the ocean. I couldn't fathom ever living away from it, but I know from the stories of travellers that there are parts of this empire where people spend their entire lives without ever seeing the sea. That's unimaginable to me."

Harry is just about to respond when their attention is caught by the sound of shouting. Both Louis and Harry share a frown, and they quicken their pace, turning down a path that Harry learns leads to an alcove surrounded on all sides by trimmed shrubbery and curling vines, on which grow sweet-
scented powdery white flowers. Harry can see colourful bugs flutter from flower to flower, and their
delicacy is a stark contrast to the scuffling children in the centre of the alcove. The shouting,
obviously, had come from them.

Tied by a rope to the legs of a small stone bench Harry can see a dog, really no more than just a
puppy. The sight twists his heart and a surge of sadness courses through him at the reminder of fact
that his own dog, Fen, hadn't been able to make the journey south with him. As a working dog, Fen
had been needed back home. Besides which, Harry doesn't think the heat would have been good for
a ball of fur like him.

Harry approaches the dog, who's quivering because of the noise and commotion. It's young, still a
puppy and probably barely weaned off its mother. It’s a wiry little thing, with blond patches around
its ears and eyes, and a few spots of it on its back. It almost looks like it has a beard, which Harry has
never seen on any of the dogs back home, but also the fact of which Harry can’t help but find
hopelessly endearing. Its paws are too big for its small, round body, and it's apparent that the little
thing has a lot of growing into them to do before its paws will look less ridiculous on its body. Harry
clicks his tongue and pats the ground, crouching low and holding his hand out to the dog to pull its
attention away from the commotion the children are making. It works, and the dog soon moves to
sniff Harry's outstretched hand before giving it a tentative lick.

"There you go," Harry murmurs, scratching the tiny thing behind its soft ears, under its whiskery
chin, and all along its sides and backs. The tentative licks quickly turn into enthusiastic ones, and
after he's indulged the dog's request for belly rubs—a boy, he notes—and as soon as Harry feels he's
earned the dog's favour, he scoops him into his arms and unties the rope from the leg of the bench.
The dog doesn't seem to mind, continuing to wriggle happily as he wags his tail and licks Harry's
chin and cheeks. Harry presses some kisses to the top of his head in response and, ensuring that the
dog is held securely in his arms, turns back around to see how Louis has fared with the children. He
had heard Louis call out the children while he had approached the dog, the both of them realizing
quickly that the children had been fighting over the creature, with them loudly declaring that one or
the other had seen the dog first, or that it was theirs because they were the oldest and the others
already had a dog anyway and that yet another always took anything the children found for themself.

"What is this commotion about?" Louis says sternly, lips pressed in a tight line and a frown on his
face. Harry moves to stand beside him, and sees that Louis has managed to wrangle the children
apart from one another. Now, the children stand in front of them, hands fiddling with the hems of
their tunics or crossed behind their backs, toes scuffing at the ground, heads bowed and frowning or
biting their lips.

"Well?" Louis prompts, eyebrow raised in question. "It must have been something important for you
all to fight like that."

The children's eyes have been flickering over to Harry and the dog in his arms since he had moved
beside Louis, and finally one of the girls confesses, "The puppy, Caesar Louis."

"The puppy?"

"Yes, Caesar," one of the younger boys, one with dark cropped hair, confirms.

"What about the puppy?"

A moment of silence before what appears to be the oldest of the children, another boy, this one with
olive skin, speaks up, "It's the runt. The master of hounds said that it's useless for work and that if
one of us wanted it we could have it, else he would just get rid of it. We were talking about who got
to keep it."
"Were you, now? That's a pretty funny way of talking."

The children flush at being called out, and some of them hunch their shoulders.

"I don't think that's how your parents taught you to fix your problems, hm?"

"But you send the soldiers to go fight when we have problems with others!" A girl with warm brown eyes protests.

"We do," Louis acknowledges, "but only after we've tried talking with them to come to an agreement first. We did that with Harry and his people here," Louis nods at Harry. "And sometimes, even if we have no other option but to fight, it's not the right course of action, so we don't fight. Did you try to talk about it first and come to an agreement that way?"

"No," the children mumble sadly.

"Do you think you should have tried that before fighting?" Louis continues, voice gentle but firm.

Sighs, and agreements of, "Yes" and "Yes, Caesar."

"Next time if there's a disagreement, make sure you talk it out, first. And if you can't solve the problem, ask an adult to help instead of fighting each other, okay? It's good to ask for help from people who aren't part of the disagreement because they often have different ideas that can help solve the problem. It's why both Harry and I have advisers, so we can hear different ideas than the ones we have."

"Other people tell you what to do?" The same young boy with dark cropped hair exclaims, incredulous.

Louis laughs, "Sure, sometimes."

"But why?" Says a different girl quietly, this one with tight black curls. "You're the caesar," she continues, "why do you have to listen to what other people tell you to do?"

Louis gives her a smile and says "Because sometimes I have to, and sometimes other people know better than I do. Nobody knows everything, neither me nor even the empress or emperor."

That elicits horrified gasps out of the children, and the girl with the warm brown eyes speaks again, "Not even the empress and emperor?"

Louis nods, "Not even them."

"Wow," the girl breathes, and Harry can't help but laugh, just a little.

"Now," Louis says crossing his arms across his chest, "since you all chose to fight over the dog instead of responsibly talking through your problem or asking an adult for help, I'm afraid I don't think any of you are ready for the responsibility of taking care of another living creature."

There's a rush of protests from the children but Louis merely cocks his eyebrow and asks, "Do you?"

The children's protests die and they sigh, letting out mumbled agreements of "No" and "No, Caesar."

"What will happen to the dog?" The boy with the olive skin asks tentatively. "Will you give him back to the master of hounds?"
Louis eyes the dog in Harry’s arms, his eyes flickering up to Harry’s face a moment before he turns his attention back to the children. “No,” he says, “we’ll find a home for him, don’t worry.”

This seems to mollify the children’s disappointment somewhat until Louis continues, “Unfortunately, I’m still going to have to inform your parents about this”—at that, the children let out groans—“Yes, yes, I’m awful and no fun,” Louis laughs, but says more seriously, “You were still all fighting, and your parents need to know. I promise I won’t let them get you all into more trouble though, because I’m sure we’ve all learned our lesson, hm?”

The children half-heartedly mumble their agreement, and Louis’ lips twitch and threaten to break into a smile. “Right? Unless you all think you should be punished more,” he prompts once again.

“Right!” and “We promise!” the children exclaim with more enthusiasm. Louis rolls his eyes fondly and this time Harry does laugh aloud.

“Right then. I’ve had enough of you lot. Off you go. For now, I want you all run along and find somewhere else to play. The gardeners will be through here soon and I don’t want you in their way.”

The children vocalize their assent, and Louis lets them all pet the dog—still comfortably cradled in Harry’s arms—one more time before they leave, waving their arms wildly as they go.

Once the children have left the alcove, Harry turns to Louis and says softly as he gently puts the dog down and ties the rope around him like a harness so that it isn’t hurting him but is still useful as a lead, “You were very good with them.”

The two resume their walk and Louis shrugs but blushes red, high on his cheeks, at the compliment. “Thank you. I hae six younger siblings, so I have plenty of experience around little ones.”

“Six?” Harry says, eyes wide, “I’ve only got the one older sister. I can’t imagine what six must be like.”


Harry laughs. “I bet.” He nudges his shoulder lightly against Louis’. “It wasn’t just how good you were with the kids, though. You’re a good teacher and a good leader, Louis,” he says sincerely.

Louis shrugs again. “I’ve had good teachers.”

“Maybe so, but you were the one who listened to them and took their lessons to heart.”

Louis flushes redder and mumbles, “C’mon now, laying it on a bit thick, don’t you think? We’re already betrothed, there’s no need to try to endear yourself to me. Besides which,” he adds quieter, almost imperceptibly, “you’ve already succeeded at that part, anyway.”

Harry shakes his head and lightly grabs Louis’ arm so that he’ll stop walking and face Harry. “I’m not,” he says, “I’m saying that as somebody who was taught about diplomacy and governing his people, just like you were, even if maybe for different circumstances. You’re good at what you do, Louis. Really good.” Harry shakes his head, and bumps his hip against Louis, voice light and teasing when he says, “Just take the compliment, already.” He hopes he hasn’t been too forward, but he’s quickly growing comfortable around Louis. He hopes it means good things for their future together. He likes to think so.

Louis smiles a small smile at Harry, obviously still unsure how to accept the compliment but grateful for it nonetheless. “Thank you,” he says finally, before motioning for Harry to continue the walk with him. Harry tugs gently at the rope and clicks his tongue again to prompt the dog to follow them.
Louis eyes the dog and Harry a moment and says, “You’re very good with it.”

“Him,” Harry says absently, trying to see what has so caught the dog’s attention. He’s hopes it’s not something unsavory. The day has been going well so far, and he’d like to keep it that way.

Louis huffs a laugh. “With him, then. And quite attached.”

The dog bounds up to Harry, ears flopping at the movement, when Harry tugs at the rope this time. Harry shrugs, and smiles down at the dog fondly. “I had a dog back home. Fen. He was this great big furry black and white malamute. He couldn’t make the journey south with me. The journey is too long and he’s too old. The heat here would probably kill him in the summer. He’s meant for the ice and cold. Besides which, as a working dog, he was needed back home. I miss him, more than I thought I would. He was one of my best friends. We were always going on adventures together, down to the river or on a sledge run with the other sled dogs. We even went as far as the ocean together, once, when my sister and I were sent as emissaries to the other clans. He was smart, but kind of clumsy, and the friendliest dog you’d ever met. Fiercely loyal, too. Was ready to protect me from anything and everything at even a hint of danger. This guy reminds me a bit of him when he was a puppy.” As he recounts his memories with Fen, Harry’s smile takes on a sad tinge.

Louis touches Harry’s hand lightly and asks, voice soft, “He’s yours, then, if you want him. Not as a replacement, of course—it doesn’t sound like any dog could do that, anyway—but maybe as a companion for you to make new memories with. As the children said, the master of hounds would only get rid of him. Besides,” Louis’ lips curl into a smile, “I distinctly remember promising the children I’d find him a home.”

“Really?” Harry asks, joy clear in his voice.

Louis nods, grinning, and says, “Really.”

Harry’s mouth breaks out into a grin and he kneels down, scooping the small thing into his arms, where the dog proceeds to lick kisses all over Harry’s face, tail wagging so furiously the creature seems ready to fall over at any minute.

“Seems like he’s attached himself to you already, anyway,” Louis laughs.

“Yeah,” Harry bursts into laughter, “looks like.”

Setting the dog gently on the ground, Harry stands up, and presses a light, chaste kiss to Louis’ cheek in thanks before looking at Louis in question about whether or not they’re going to continue with their walk. Louis spreads out one arm and gestures forward, lightly pressing his other hand to Harry’s hips to guide him in the direction they’re headed. Harry’s waist burns where Louis’ hand touches him, and with the way Louis drops it quickly from Harry’s waist, he wonders if the feeling is mutual. Harry misses the weight as soon as it’s gone.

“So,” Louis clears his throat, “what are you going to name him?”

Harry blinks and looks at the dog, bounding happily alongside the two men without a care in the world. “I honestly have no idea.”

“What about Clifford?” Louis suggests, watching as the dog starts gnawing on the length of his lead.

“Clifford, huh?” Harry tries, then smiles. “I like that. Clifford.”

Clifford barks, seeming to approve of the name, and Harry and Louis laugh, and continue on with their walk, hands bumping against each other as they go. If the two tentatively hook their pinkies
together, and a warm flush blooms on both their faces at the contact, they don’t mention it. It’s a secret shared between them, cradled dear to their chests.

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What is only supposed to be a few hours in the garden to become better acquainted with one another quickly turns into Louis and Harry, along with Clifford, spending the entire day together. They walk the length of the garden, which is much greater than Harry had realized. That there can exist so many flowers and fruit-bearing trees and bushes—with all of them thriving—is still hard for Harry to wrap his head around. It’s beautiful, though, so beautiful, and Harry can see that this will probably be a place where he’ll spend a lot of time in the future. He and Clifford, certainly, and just maybe Louis, too.

The two men retire indoors momentarily mid-afternoon as they are both being feeling peckish and because they agree that Clifford, the young puppy that he is, needs water and food for himself. While nowhere near as extravagant as the meal they had shared that morning, the warm sweetbread and fresh juice they grab from the kitchens is just as delicious. Before long, however, Louis is taking Harry on a tour of the grounds besides the gardens, with Clifford trailing along behind them, now nourished and rested. As he had done briefly when they’d stopped in the kitchen—not long enough to terribly disrupt the kitchen staff, respecting that they were busy preparing food—Louis makes sure to introduce Harry to any servants they pass.

Just as with the children, Harry notes, Louis seems to genuinely care about the servants. He knows all their names, or is at least familiar with their faces, and makes a point of asking after them. Not because he feels they owe him the information, but because he genuinely is interested in how they are doing. To one young woman, introduced to Harry as Aquila, Louis inquires as to how her sister was doing and if she’s recovered from her illness or if they would like for him to send for any more medication. To a young man, introduced to Harry as Marcus, Louis asks as to how his newborn baby was doing, if there are any complications, and if he likes being a father. To an older woman, introduced to Harry as Octavia, Louis queries as to how her son is doing, and if he has officially joined the ranks of the legionaries or if he has not yet finished his training, and how does he like it, does he feel like it’s the life for him? And Harry is introduced to many others. It makes his head spin, and he resolves to eventually also know the names of all the servants, just like Louis has, to the best of his abilities. It might take some time, but he will do it. The people here, these servants in what will be his new home, deserve just as much respect from him as his future husband gives them.

Harry enjoys this meandering walk through the grounds just as much he had enjoyed the time in the garden with Louis earlier that day. He likes seeing Louis in his element like this, appreciates the way it shows a side of him that Harry hadn't seen this morning over their meal or even with the children in the garden. It all helps Harry to put together a better picture of the man to whom he’s betrothed, the man with whom he's going to spend the rest of his life. If it also means Louis shares with him all his childhood haunts and the teachers of Louis' whom they encounter share plenty of stories of a young, mischievous, Louis. Well. All the better for Harry. Idly, he hopes that one day he'll be able to do the same for Louis, show him the landscape of his own childhood.

It's while they're walking along the bank of the ocean, back outside again, on the grounds where, Louis explains, that he learned to swim, that they realize the sun has begun to sink low to the horizon and will soon set. Somehow, they've managed to spend the entire day together. It doesn't feel like it. And even now, Harry can't help but feel an unquenchable thirst to know more about Louis, can't help but feel the unceasing burn to let Louis know more about him.

Harry bites his lip, and Louis seems to sense the shift in mood. He swipes his tongue across his lips once and says, tentatively, like they haven't just spent unplanned hours together, "Would you like to
have dinner together? There’s a place out here that I like to go to. It's a bit out of the way so there aren’t many who bother to go there. It’s quiet. I meant to show you earlier but well, we got a bit distracted."

Harry swallows. His throat is dry and, oddly, his nerves, which had entirely dissipated over the day he’d spent with Louis, have returned with full force. His hands are clammy, and when he responds he almost does so in his own tongue, rather than the common one, "I would love to."

Louis grins at Harry, but Harry can see that he's nervous with the way his hands can't seem to keep still, and instead flutter about as they seek something to keep them busy. "Wonderful," Louis says, and leaves momentarily to find a servant to request that they bring dinner to wherever it is Louis will be taking them.

Harry looks down at Clifford, who has found a stick and is happily chewing on it, and says to the dog, "First day I've met my betrothed and we're already sharing private dinners. What have I gone and gotten myself into?"

Clifford, of course, doesn’t respond, preoccupied with his stick. He wags his tail, but Harry's pretty sure that's just because he's thrilled with his stick. Of course, Harry reasons, if it such intimacy between intendeds before marriage was improper, surely Louis wouldn't have suggested it? On the other hand, Harry lets himself admit, quietly, embarrassed, "I can't say I would care if that were even the case." He wants to spend this time with Louis, he really does, even if they've already had the day together. Even if it means they're chafing against certain customs.

Louis returns and informs Harry that the servants know where to find them and will bring their food out to them, and that the only thing left for them to do is head there themselves. As Louis leads them to their mysterious destination, Harry notes that it really does seem to be out of the way, because the path they take is meandering. It's a pleasant walk, though, and Harry can hear the rush of the ocean and smell the sharp scent of salt in the air. Now with Clifford by his side, it reminds Harry of all the walks he used to take with Fen along the river, and he's hit with a wave of homesickness. When he looks up, though, he's met with Louis' eyes on him, and Louis smiling. He's not sure if Louis meant for him to see that smile, but the sight of it helps to bring Harry back the present, helps soothe the jagged pain of homesickness and makes it a little bit easier to bear, and he returns the gesture.

They shortly come to their destination, which Louis proclaims to Harry with a sweep of his hand and a joking bow. In contrast to Louis' irreverent behaviour, their destination takes Harry’s breath away. They’ve come to a kind of nook in the garden, cloistered on all sides by trees and shrubbery. The ground is on a gentle incline, and eventually blends into the ocean. It’s the sort of place, Harry notes, that one could dock one of his people’s karves, or any other small, shallow boat, and he wonders if that’s what was once its purpose. Stories of secret star-crossed lovers meeting here under the cover of night cross his thoughts, and he can’t help but be thankful that that’s not his and Louis’ fate.

Closer to the two, further from the bank, is a tree with long, dangling, almost vine-like branches that sway with the wind, blooming with white blossoms, under which sits a carved white stone table with a matching small stone bench that curves around one side of the table to face the ocean. Around the base of the tree and the table and benches are yet more flowers, these ones delicate blue in colour. Vines weave through the shrubbery surrounding this little clearing, and it lends a kind of refreshing unruliness to the place that Harry appreciates.

The entire clearing is breathtaking, but what gives the entire place its ethereal quality for Harry are the tiny little glowing lights he can see, winking in and out of existence. He’s just about to ask what
these things are when one of them flickers into being right in front of his face, causing Harry to jolt and go cross-eyed trying to see it. Louis laughs, and the sound draws Harry’s attention away from whatever it was that had approached him. Clifford, on his part, has decided to chase after the things, bouncing and snapping his little jaws in an attempt to snatch some from the air.

“I think you would call them lightning bugs in the common tongue,” Louis says.

“Lightning bugs?” Harry says, voice thick with disbelief. “That’s a bug?” It doesn’t look like it’s made of lightning, but Harry’s not exactly an expert. Although, they do flash in and out of existence so he can see why they might have been given the name. He wonders if they belong to the lightning-bringer.

Louis laughs again, softly this time, and says, “Yes, they’re bugs. My sisters and I used to catch them when we were little.”

“I’ve never seen anything like them before,” Harry says, awe not quite lost from his voice yet.

“No, I didn’t think so,” Louis teases, gently, and Harry flushes but smiles.

Louis turns to look at the bugs drifting about the clearing and says, “There’s something about this place that they like, I think. They’re here year-round. Usually you only see them in the summer.”

Harry frowns, “Really? That’s very strange.”

Louis nods, and muses, “I’ve suspected for a while that this place might have been favoured by the gods and that They’ve blessed it. Long before I ever showed up, of course. It seems these bugs have been here as long as anybody can remember.”

Harry chances a suspicious, bemused, glance at the sky. He makes a note to send a letter to priestess back home to see if she has any insight into these strange bugs.

Louis seems to notice Harry staring at the sky and says, “I’ve asked our priests and oracles about the bugs and our people’s sky god. They’ve not been able to learn anything just yet. Perhaps someday they will, if the gods will it.”

Harry nods. “I was thinking that I might send a letter back to my clan’s priestess for her opinion.”

Louis lights up at the suggestion, and says, “I think that’s an excellent idea. A fresh, foreign perspective could help solve the mystery.”

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see,” Harry laughs before he turns his attention back to the clearing to more thoroughly take it in. He watches the lightning-bugs blinking, and thinks about some of the places back home—the clearing in the woods, the cluster of rocks on the riverbank, the wildflower field that blooms in the spring. He thinks about this clearing, too, about how he’d gotten the sense that there was a kind of stillness to this place, a kind of peacefulness and serenity and weightiness to it that he knew was untouched by the tumult of the earthly plane the moment they had entered the clearing. He thinks, perhaps, that he might have an idea of what this clearing might have been used for, once, at least privately. He wonders if he’ll be welcome to use the clearing and the ocean in the same fashion here, wonders if his gods will hear him so far south, wonders if They’ll accept his offerings. He hopes They will.

“Could it be,” Harry begins, hesitantly, “that your people once worshiped your gods in this place? Maybe that’s why They’ve blessed it. I know you usually use temples, and my people sometimes do, too, but it’s not unusual to forgo the temple, either. At least for us.” He shrugs. “Sometimes all you need is an open flame. Sometimes it’s all you have.”
Louis tilts his head and hums thoughtfully. "I hadn’t considered that before, but you might be onto something with that. It would make sense that the gods would favour this place if that were true. There’s always been something about it…"

“A kind of energy or presence, right?” Harry supplies.

“Yes,” Louis nods, “Exactly. You’ve felt it too, then.”

Harry nods in response. “Yes, since we arrived here. It reminds me of places back home where the veil between our world and the gods’ is thin. Places where Their presence is more grounded in our world than it usually is.”

Louis is silent for a moment, frown light on his face before he says, “Then I think it would only be right that we take a moment to pay respect to our gods before we eat tonight. If They have claimed this clearing we should show our thanks for being allowed to use it so that we can know each other.” Louis smiles at Harry at that, and Harry returns the gesture with a small laugh.

“Are you implying that the gods have given us Their personal approval?” He is awed by Louis’ audacity, yet it only serves to fan the flames of his affection for and attraction to the man.

“And, well. He does have a point. If the gods hadn’t wanted them to be betrothed, it would not have happened with such ease—if it had happened at all—and they certainly would not be so welcome in a place as important as this. Possibly even as sacred a place as this. He really needs to get in contact with his clan’s priestess.

“I think,” Harry says, voice low and, as he takes in the appearance of the man he’s been fortunate enough to begin to know over the day, fond, “offerings would not be remiss.”

Louis holds his gaze, eyebrow arched in question, almost daring Harry to say what’s on his mind with an air of confidence—arrogance, even, if of a playful sort—belied only by the way his free hand twists into the hem of his toga.

With Clifford momentarily preoccupied, the two are able to much more quickly finish their task, and
a fire is soon happily crackling in the pit. Harry and Louis share a satisfied, triumphant look before they move to the table to grab some food. Here, they both pause a moment, eyes moving between the food and the fire as they consider their offerings.

"To love, marriage, and the gods and goddesses as a whole?"

Harry nods, "Yes, I think so."

Thus, the two of them grab some of the meat from the table, making do with the offerings they have available—even if they're not exactly specific to the gods and goddesses to whom they're praying—silently sending the gods and goddesses prayers of thanks, for their fortune and for allowing them to share this space this evening.

And so, just as they had that morning, Harry and Louis tuck into a meal together. Unlike that morning, however, they do not struggle quite so much to find words to occupy the space between them. At their feet, Clifford happily digs into his own dinner, consisting of scraps from the table neither Harry nor Louis can bear to withhold from him—even if he more scarfs down the food than he does take his time to actually chew it. Harry hopes he won’t make himself sick, but resolves that that’s a problem for another day if it should happen.

Before long, a couple hours have slipped away into the night, during which a servant has come and gone with their things. Harry and Louis are so engrossed in one another that they nearly forget to thank the servant and accept his offer to bring some fruit for a sweet chaser after dinner. Indeed, if they had been paying more attention, they would even have seen the curl of a smile on the servant's face at the sight of the two men's fierce affection for each other.

As it is, the servant simply comes with their fruit and leaves as silently as he arrived. It's big, round, hard, and a bright red colour, and Harry picks it up gingerly. It's surprisingly weighty, and he doesn't have the faintest idea how to even eat it, let alone how it might taste.

"It's a pomegranate," Louis says, seeing the bewilderment on Harry's face.

"A pomegranate." Harry says flatly.

"Yes, a pomegranate." When Harry only continues to look at Louis and then the pomegranate again in confusion, Louis lets out a soft laugh, and says, "Right, this one is on me. You've never seen one before, yeah?"

Harry shakes his head. "No, never. The only fruit we really had back home was berries. The kind that could grow under harsher conditions."

"Of course, I'm sorry. I should have realized. I've been eating these since I was little," Louis says, shuffling closer to help Harry, "But it's a bit of a process to actually get to the eating part."

At this Harry laughs, and says, "Sure seems like it," but otherwise stays out of Louis' way and watches as he shows Harry how to open the pomegranate.

"There's a story," Louis begins, as he takes a knife, slicing part of the pomegranate before he uses his hands to crack open the rest of the it, giving one half to Harry and holding onto the other half, "about pomegranates, in my people's culture."

Harry, who had been taking in the strange, bulbous, blood-red insides of the fruit, trying to make sense of what he was seeing, looks back up at Louis at the comment. "A story? I can't say anything is coming to mind."
"No, probably not. It's about our god of the underworld, Pluto, and His wife, Proserpina, queen of the underworld. Proserpina, daughter of our harvest goddess, Ceres, was kidnapped by Pluto and brought down to the underworld. Her mother Ceres searched to the ends of the earth for Her daughter, and all the while She refused to allow anything to grow until Her daughter was found."

"Winter," Harry says thoughtfully.

"Yes, winter," Louis confirms.

"And the pomegranate?" Harry gestures to the fruit.

"While Ceres fruitlessly searched for Her daughter above, Pluto tricked Proserpina into eating the seeds of the pomegranate," Louis digs out one of the beads of the pomegranate, and shows it to Harry. "For every seed she ate, she would be forced to return to Pluto's realm each year. Every year since then, Ceres refuses to allow almost anything to grow, in protest of Her daughter being taken."

"The seasons," Harry says, softly, taking in the pomegranate in a new light.

"The seasons," Louis confirms.

A wry smirk curls on Harry's face, and he says to Louis, "Trying to keep me here, are you?"

Louis flushes and splutters, "I mean, yes, but not against your will, or anything!"

The smirk falls from Harry's face and he says, hand light on Louis' arm, "You wouldn't have to trick me into eating enchanted pomegranate seeds to keep me here, anyway."

Louis opens his mouth meaning, Harry presumes, to tell him that he knows that, but Harry continues, soft enough that he's not sure he even means for Louis to hear him, "Or use the arranged marriage, for that matter."

Louis' mouth opens and closes a few times, but all he manages to say is, "Oh."

They're silent a moment, with Harry once more contemplating the pomegranate before him before a look of resolve settles on his face, mouth set in a determined line, brow furrowed, and eyes bright. He says, "Pomegranate seeds, huh?"

Louis blinks, "What?"

"In the story," Harry clarifies, "Proserpina ate the pomegranate seeds, and the underworld became Her home?"

Louis frowns, "I," he licks his lip, "Yeah, that's one way of putting it." He clears his throat, and says again with more confidence, "Yes. The pomegranate seeds She ate means the underworld is Her home now, same as it is Pluto's, for however long she visits Him every year."

"How many seeds do you think are in this half of the pomegranate?" Harry asks.

Louis frowns, "I'm not sure. I've never counted them before. I couldn't even begin to guess."

"More than fifty?"

"Probably? Why?"

"Enough for a lifetime, anyway, you think?"
"What? Harry what-" Louis' voice cuts off when he, obviously, realizes what Harry is implying. He continues, instead, voice rougher than Harry has heard it all day, "Harry, that's so much. We're already betrothed."

"I know," Harry says, and his tongue darts out to wet his lips. "Think of it as a promise from me to you. Not between our peoples. Just Harry and Louis. My promise to you to be faithful and committed."

"Harry...You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Then let me do the same," Louis says, hand resting lightly on Harry's so that he can't eat the seeds just yet.

"I don't think it would mean quite the same thing, Louis," Harry says, voice gentle.

Louis sighs and says, "No, you're right. It doesn't really make sense the other way around, does it?"

Harry bites his lip and takes in the way Louis seems genuinely upset that he can't return the gesture and says, "One of the things I brought with me from my home is a wristband, made of gold with an iron core. It was made by the finest metalsmith in all the clans, and my mother intended for me to do with it what I will. I want to give it to you."

Louis frowns, and says, "Harry, you're already giving me so much-"

"No it's-" Harry frowns and worries his lip, trying to find the right words. "It's a gift, yes, but in my culture gift-giving is...Well. People go to war over gift-giving, Louis. It creates a bond between the two in the exchange. A permanent one, and one you're expected to honour."

"Like the pomegranate," Louis breathes.

"Yes, like the pomegranate. Accepting the gift means you're consenting to creating that kind of bond between us."

"I'll do it," Louis says quickly, determined. "I'll proudly wear the wristband the moment you place it in my hands."

Harry smiles and says, "I know you will. For now though," he says and turns his attention back to the pomegranate, "I think I'd like to finally try this fruit."

Louis laughs softly, and grabs his own half of the pomegranate. There's a lingering sobriety in the air from their promises, but it's not overbearing, and Louis responds, "Then let's dig in. You just need to scoop the seeds out and," Louis scoops out a few and pops them into his mouth, "just like that you can eat them."

It's not as easy as Louis makes it look, but the effort makes the burst of juice from the seed all the sweeter, juicier, and tangier when he finally succeeds. And really, even if there hadn't been a deeper importance to the fruit they're sharing, Harry thinks he would have remembered this moment for many years to come, because the pomegranate is absolutely delicious. It will become, he's sure, as much a staple of his diet here as it is Louis', if the gusto with which Louis is eating his own half of the fruit is any indication.

Somehow, despite the effort it takes to eat their pomegranate halves, Harry and Louis make quick work of the fruit. Of course, it leaves them with juice all over their faces and hands. Harry,
somehow, has also managed to stain his toga with it, and he resolves to apologize to the servant who has to clean his toga after he's barely worn it a single day.

As Louis takes in the sight of Harry, covered in sticky fruit juice like some sort of child, and a giggle bubbles from his chest. It's infectious, and soon both Harry and Louis are laughing hard enough that there are tears in their eyes.

As their laughter dies out, Louis and Harry are left smiling at each other, caught up in the mirth in each other's eyes. They're silent a moment longer, simply enjoying each other's company, before Harry says, "Thank you, for today, Louis. Truly. We've only just met, and you've done so much for me already. It means a lot to me. More than you could know." Harry's eyes are fixed on his lap where his hands are clasped. He can't quite bring himself to say this straight to Louis' face. Even despite everything they've shared today, it's too much, too soon.

Louis reaches out with his hand, slowly enough so that if Harry chooses he can stop him. Harry doesn't. Louis' hand, warm and surprisingly rough, rests atop Harry's and squeezes. Louis seems to sense that he's not done, and his silent support helps Harry find the resolve to continue. "Of all the possible people who could have been my intended, I'm glad it was you." His voice is quiet, barely above a whisper. There's a weight in the air again, but it doesn't feel oppressive.

Louis squeezes Harry's hands again and says, just as quietly, "Me too." There's a moment of silence before Louis speaks again. "Can I ask you a question, Harry?"

Harry looks up, and meets Louis' gaze. He frowns lightly, and says, "Of course. I can't guarantee I'll answer, but you can always ask."

That stirs a huff of laughter out of Louis. "You're a cheeky one, aren't you? I certainly hope you'll answer this one, then." Another pause. A lick of his lips. Louis says, "Harry, can I kiss you?"

In the moonlight, Louis' eyes have taken on a silvery character, almost seeming to glow with their own gentle light and, coupled with the whisper of the ocean and the winking lights of the lightning bugs around them, Harry feels like the question has slipped him out of the present into an endless moment where only he and Louis exist. It’s hard to find words, feels like he can’t wrap his mind and tongue around language, but eventually he manages to say, "Please do."

At that, Louis surges forward, sliding across the remaining space between them on the bench on which they're both sitting so that he’s flush against Harry, and presses his lips to Harry’s. One of Harry’s hands moves so that it’s cradling Louis’ jaw and the other fists the fabric of Louis’ toga while one of Louis’ hands cups the back of Harry’s head and curls into his hair and the other presses firm against Harry’s stomach. Harry’s eyes flutter shut, and he lets himself be lost to the myriad of sensations he’s experiencing. The heat of Louis’ mouth, Louis' breath, Louis' hands, Louis' everything. The scratch of Louis’ beard against his skin. The tickle of his soft, soft, hair against his eyebrows. The wetness of his tongue. The movement of their jaws as they begin to deepen the kiss. It all zips through his body and burns him from the inside out and he wants more, more, more. Their mouths and hands are still sticky from the pomegranates they had eaten earlier, but Harry doesn’t care. In that instant, the kiss is all he could ever hope for. He doesn’t think he’ll ever get enough of this sensation.

The tension that had been building between the two of them all day finally coming to a head, for which Harry is nothing but grateful, considering the results, and yet in the midst of it all it’s obvious to Harry that Louis still makes sure to be so, so tender and gentle with him. He doesn’t push further than Harry wants to go, and his hands on Harry’s body are as much to ratchet up the sensations between them as they are a way to keep him grounded, mixing with the pleasure the pressure of their presence and their pain when he tugs on Harry’s hair or digs his nails into Harry’s skin. They don’t
know each other intimately just yet, certainly not physically like this, but Harry’s okay with that because it means they’ll be able to get to know each other in this way, too.

The two finally break apart, and Harry’s lips are tingling. He feels a bit out of sorts, a bit dazed. The world seems out of focus, blurred on the edges, and in that moment Louis looks, like a dream, like some divine creature, like he’s one of the ranks of the Aesir. It leaves Harry momentarily stupefied, and all he can do is take in the sight of the Louis’ kiss-bitten lips, the flush of his cheeks, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he pants, breath hot, and tries to catch his breath, and the mesmerizing now-stormy shade of his blue, blue eyes.

Though they’ve pulled away from each other, Harry’s breath still seems stuck in his throat, and he’s only able to shakily exhale when Louis runs his thumb along the seam of Harry’s mouth before he cups Harry’s cheek and presses one last, slow, feather-light kiss to Harry lips. His lips chase Louis’ own when he pulls away, this time, and he tips forward at the action, a little off-balance. Louis steadies him with a hand to his chest, and the tension eases at the soft laugh Harry’s clumsiness draws out of Louis.

“I guess it was good, then?” Louis says, voice hushed and light.

Harry responds with his own soft laugh and tilts his head to the side so that he’s looking up underneath his lashes at Louis from where he’s still slumped forward from his earlier clumsiness. “Yes,” Harry says, voice hoarse and hushed like Louis’, “More than good.”

Louis helps Harry straighten himself and Harry takes the opportunity to slide even closer to Louis and tentatively but determinedly lean into Louis’ side and rest his head on Louis’ shoulder. Louis seems a little surprised at the gesture, but readily welcomes it, and carefully entwines his fingers with Harry’s, resting their clasped hands on his thigh.

Harry’s not sure how long they sit there, silent, taking enjoyment simply from being around one another. Even Clifford has settled nearby, thoroughly tuckered out from the adventures of the day. They’ll have to head in and retire shortly, Harry knows, but he’s reluctant for this moment to end, reluctant to allow time to start moving once more as it inevitably must. Tomorrow doesn’t frighten him, not like it did all those weeks ago before he set out on his journey here, but there’s no sense rushing towards a future that he’ll eventually meet no matter the choices he makes. So he decides to be selfish, just a little longer, and enjoy this shared now between him and his betrothed. Between him and the man he is glad to know as Louis.

End Notes

Thoughts? As usual, please feel free to comment below if you’ve noticed any grammar mistakes, or typos, etc. and I’ll make sure to fix them asap! Thanks for reading! The fic post is here if you’d like to reblog it or follow me on my tumblr!

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