

The Royal Romance - The Valtoria Diaries

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The Royal Romance - The Valtoria Diaries

by [Certainlittlesmile](#)

Summary

Now that the wedding is over and Cordonia is saved, how will the new Duke and Duchess of Valtoria adjust to everyday life?

These characters are not mine, but I wanted to explore what happened in the gap between the wedding and the honeymoon a little further

That went without saying

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so tired,” Jen sighed, as she rested her head on her husband’s shoulder as their car pulled into the palace grounds. “I neeedd sleeeeeep...” She shut her eyes.

“I’m not exactly planning on pulling a late one myself,” she heard him say. “But, we need to show our faces.”

They were staying one more night in the palace before their journey to Valtoria, and Rick had arranged for a small gathering tonight. It was only going to be their nearest and dearest, an informal buffet style meal, and drinks. But Jen wasn’t exactly relishing it after how exhausting yesterday had been, both mentally and physically. And despite their sleepy afternoon on the beach, she was still feeling like she needed to stop the world and get off. Taking Maxwell with her, of course. That went without saying.

The car pulled to a stop, and she felt him nudge her gently. “Come on, sleepyhead..”

“Ugh. Your fault. You wore me out.” She gradually pulled her head up from its happy place, and opened her eyes to see his looking into them with a wicked glint, making her wonder why she’d ever wanted to close them in the first place.

“You weren’t complaining at the time.”

She giggled. “I have no response to that comment.”

“Come on, then.” He got out of the car and held the door open for her. “Your Grace.”

“Thank you, *Your Grace*,” she said as she got out of the car, being careful that her dress remained in place. It was the midnight blue number he’d bought her for their engagement photo, one of the shorter ones in her wardrobe.

“Ooh, you’re the first person to call me that!”

“I *think* you were the first person to call me that too..”

They walked together into the palace, with Mara following a short distance behind. They were met first by Madeleine, her usual complacent sneer on her face, and sarcasm in her tone.

“Ah. The Duke and Duchess of Valtoria. Congratulations. I trust your first day of married life has been enjoyable.”

Jen looked at Maxwell, and the two of them burst out laughing.

Madeleine huffed. “Don’t answer that. His Majesty King Rick is awaiting your company in the drawing room.”

“Let’s go!” Maxwell announced.

Hand in hand they wandered into the palace drawing room. Jen was relieved to see that there were only six people in the room; Rick, Hana, Drake, Leo, Olivia, and Bertrand. Chance was there too, sitting at Hana’s feet. They all stood up to greet Jen and Maxwell.

Hana ran forwards first to give them both an excited hug. “How was your first day as Mr and Mrs Beaumont?”

“Pretty good,” Maxwell said. “She hasn’t had any complaints so far..”

“I trust the beach was to your satisfaction?” Rick said to them.

That it definitely had been. “Thank you so much for letting us use it today,” Jen said. “It was a lovely surprise.”

“It was nothing,” Rick said.

“I thought the minimoon was a really cute idea, personally,” Hana chipped in.

“I just hope we can have an *actual* honeymoon soon,” Jen said, wistfully.

“Obviously, with everything that happened yesterday evening, we need to ensure that Anton’s trial and sentencing are carried out urgently,” Rick said. “And tomorrow morning’s briefing will fill everyone in on the plans for that.”

“Yeah. I get that..”

“But once the process is complete,” Rick went on, his eyes smiling, “How would you two like to spend a fortnight on the Crown’s private tropical island?”

Maxwell’s eyes almost popped out of his head. “What.. *really?*”

Rick laughed. “It sits there empty most of the year. It really isn’t too much of an inconvenience.”

Maxwell suddenly hugged Rick forcefully. “I do not deserve a friend like you.”

“You do,” Rick said, hugging him back. “You deserve all that you have. And you need to believe that you do.”

Jen was so touched by this exchange that she almost thought she might cry, although she was pretty much out of tears after the last forty-eight hours. “Rick, to hear you say that means so much. Thank you. And thank you for the offer of the island. It sounds perfect.”

“Eugh,” came a voice from behind her, as the two friends parted. “All this unnecessary affection.”

“No-one asked you, Olivia,” Drake moaned.

“But you were thinking it, weren’t you?”

Drake raised an eyebrow at Olivia. Jen suppressed a giggle, as she knew Olivia was probably right.

“Please, help yourselves to food,” Rick said, pointing to a lavish spread at the back of the room.

“We’re all tired after last night’s events, so I won’t be expecting anyone to stay up too late. I thought the more informal, the better.”

“I did manage to come up with a perfect *informal post wedding buffet* playlist when I was chillaxing on the beach with my *hot wife* earlier,” Maxwell pointed out, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

“Marriage hasn’t changed you, has it,” Leo said, clapping Maxwell on the shoulder.

“No it hasn’t,” Jen agreed, her eyes lingering on her husband. “And it better not.”

The breakfast briefing

“You know, I’ll miss this room,” Jen said, looking around it as she packed her last few things into her case. “I’ve probably slept here more than anywhere else in the last year. I know that doesn’t say a lot, as we’ve slept in a *lot* of rooms over that time..”

He couldn’t argue with that. “I’ve probably knocked on that door more times than I’ve changed my underwear in that time...”

“Eww. Although, thinking about it actually.. yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Well, by the time we pass out tonight, we’ll be in our new home...” He couldn’t keep the excitement he felt over this in, and put one hand on her waist, the other on her shoulder and pulled her into an elegant dance. He was rewarded with an infectious giggle. “Hey, when does my statue arrive?”

“Good question. Obviously, now Gladys isn’t there anymore..” She looked a little sad for a moment, perhaps not relishing the memory of why. “I’m not sure who’s meant to be in charge of things at Valtoria when we’re not about.”

“Gladys must have had a second in command,” he suggested. “I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

They placed their bags in the corridor, ready for them to be packed into their limo for later, and wandered downstairs to the briefing room.

“At least it’s a *breakfast* briefing,” Jen said. “Slightly more tolerable.”

“Yep, pastries always enhance tales of great victory...”

Mara greeted them at the door. “Good morning, Duchess Jen. Duke Maxwell.”

Maxwell threw her a relaxed salute as he sauntered past her in search of something to eat. Looked like there was a good spread on this morning. Loading himself up with a croissant and a few blueberry muffins, he went to sit down next to Rick. Things seemed to be fully back to normal between them now, which was a massive relief.

“Who else is coming this morning?” he asked him.

“Just us, for now,” Rick explained. “Drake, Hana, Olivia, Mara and Bastien. The ones who were actually there.”

“Yesssss, no Madeleine,” Maxwell said, holding up a hand to Rick, who happily high-fived it.

“I got here before Olivia?” Jen said, as she joined them, passing him a welcome glass of orange juice.

“No,” came a voice from the other side of the room. “As if you could ever arrive anywhere on time.” Olivia slunk into sight from where she had been lurking.

“Well, I’ve been packing my bag,” Jen said proudly. “We’re going *home* today!” She exchanged an excited glance with Maxwell.

“Right,” Olivia sighed. “So, where are Drake and Hana?”

“Drake just went to get Bastien, I’m not sure about Hana...”

Hana came running in with a tray. “Oh, I’m so sorry, I thought I’d bring hot chocolate for you all!”

“Sweet!” Jen rubbed her hands together. “You really look after us all, Hana. Maxwell, you *have* tried Hana’s hot chocolate, right?”

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure...” He grabbed a paper cup, and took a sip, expecting it to be hot, but it was at optimum temperature. “Woah, this is... perfection!”

Hana smiled shyly. “It might be a little on the cool side..”

He took another sumptuous mouthful. “Hana, it’s *awesome*. I get why Jen’s always going on about it now. Think I’ll have to come visit you like every day just in case you ever feel like making me one.”

Jen shook her head. “Well, Hana is hopefully going to be pretty close by..”

Drake and Bastien arrived, and Bastien shut the door behind him. “If we’re all here..”

“Thanks, Bastien,” Rick said, as everyone sat around him. “We felt a debrief would be helpful, just so that everyone understands exactly what happened, learns from it, and we can all go through what happens next...”

Maxwell felt Jen’s hand on his knee under the table, and felt her leg jostle against his other leg. No surprises what would be happening next for them, they were going to their new home and they weren’t coming out of it for as long as possible. Well, they were having lunch with his college friends first. An uneasy feeling hit his stomach as he recalled that prospect.

Rick was still talking. “...lulled us all into a false sense of security, and as Olivia, Maxwell and Jen were enjoying the wedding reception, they were not expecting what happened next.”

Understatement. “I got told by Gladys that Jen had ordered for me to meet her out at the hedge maze. Sounded... *entirely plausible*.”

Jen sighed. “Yeah, Gladys came to get me too, to tell me that Maxwell wanted to meet me outside. After everything that had happened earlier, we hadn’t really had a moment to ourselves, and it sounded too good to question.”

He nodded. “Yeah, so we’re both out there together, thinking we’re gonna finally get some alone time. Next thing, there’s sacks thrown over our heads, and I’m shoved in the back of a van...” He looked sadly at Jen.

“I wish they’d thrown me in there with you,” she sighed. “I didn’t know if I was ever going to see you again...”

He winked, trying to keep her spirits up. “Hey, you don’t get rid of me that easily.”

Jen looked around the table. “So I got pulled into a car, someone had a knife to my throat. I watched the van drive off at speed... and then we set off. They put the sack back over my head so I couldn’t see where I was going.”

“I’m getting thrown around all over the place,” Maxwell commented, glancing at Olivia.

Olivia sighed. “And screaming like a big girl.”

Rick’s expression changed. “You were already in the van?”

She nodded. “Oh yeah. They got to me first.”

“How did they..”

She shook her head. “A moment of weakness. Anyway, just thank your stars I was there. Not sure the bride and groom would’ve made it to the end of their wedding reception without me.”

She had a point. “So, anyway, we get there, they drag us two out of the van, I’m trying my best to channel angry Bertrand, but it doesn’t seem to work.”

Jen laughed. “Don’t tell me you gave it the old ‘Do you know who I am?’”

“I am, as of about..” He pretended to check his watch. “Five hours ago, the Duke of Valtoria!”

“It was pathetic,” Olivia sighed, rolling her eyes.

“So then we’re tied up to chairs, and they finally pull the sacks off our faces.. god, I was so relieved to see you were there and unharmed, Jen.”

She squeezed his knee tightly, and bit her lip, a little too seductively.

“Ahem, so at this point I’m informed that Anton has taken the three of you,” Rick said, gravely.

“And that I’ve to come alone and unarmed if I want you to live.”

Olivia nodded. “Yeah. Anton told us all about his little plan. Thought he was really clever. Surprised you fell for it.” She looked sadly at Rick; Maxwell knew enough about Olivia by now to understand that she was secretly over the moon that he’d come running.

“What else could I do? I couldn’t have lived on with your deaths on my conscience. I’ve seen too many people hurt and killed in these attacks..” He sighed. “If it wasn’t for me, none of you would have been in danger. I *had* to go.”

“Your Majesty, I can’t condone your actions,” Bastien reminded him. “It was not appropriate for you to go with them.”

“I know, Bastien. Appropriate or not, I had to go. It wasn’t a choice I made as a King. It was a choice I made as a *friend*. Olivia – although I hoped you could handle yourself; we have been like family for most of our lives. And..” He looked at Jen. “You had so much to live for, your first day of your new life..” He looked at Maxwell next. “We go back such a long way. I know only too well how much happiness you two had found in each other. I knew I had to help you.”

Maxwell nodded, a little choked.

“So we eventually got left to our own devices...” Olivia commented, “And we managed to free ourselves, although *some of us* continued to be useless..”

“Hey, it wasn’t my fault Claudius had knocked me out cold..”

“If you hadn’t annoyed him so much with your ceaseless twaddle..”

“Hey, I have a particular set of skills..”

“Anyway,” said Jen, waving her arms to dilute the bickering. “Long story short, we freed ourselves and got out of the room. We found Gladys first.”

Hana and Drake’s eyes widened.

“She was locked in a room, we let her go. She wasn’t really in on it. She just got pulled into it, made to feel like she had no choice. I feel quite sorry for her, actually. Has anyone seen her?”

Mara nodded. “She was arrested, and has been released on bail. On condition that she doesn’t come anywhere near you again.”

Jen nodded. “I understand. What about her flat at Valtoria?”

“It’ll be cleared today and her possessions returned to her,” Mara advised.

“Right.” Jen looked thoughtful, but carried on speaking. “We then headed to the armory, and made our way through the building.. where we found..”

“Us!” Hana chirped, resting her head on Drake’s shoulder.

“I still don’t get how you found us?” Maxwell asked.

“We were with Rick when the messenger came. We couldn’t hear what he said to him, but we didn’t like the look of it,” Hana explained. “I told Drake we should get Bastien..”

“We saw Rick getting into the car,” Drake explained. “We didn’t have time to get Bastien. We just got in my car and drove after them.”

“I did tell Drake it wasn’t a good idea after those champagne toasts..”

“Hana, I had to do it. You tried to call Bastien from my phone, but the signal was down. We did get a text through from Rick though. Goodness knows how he managed to send it without them knowing.”

Hana sighed. “It was awful.”

“What did it say?” Maxwell asked her.

Hana took a deep breath. “Cover for me. A has J, M and O. I’m going to make a bargain. Alone.”

“Oh..” Jen said, shaking a little. Maxwell put his arm around her reassuringly.

“So we kept on their trail, and watched as he went in. We figured we had to find you first, to buy you all some time.”

“And you did,” Jen said, a thankful smile in Hana’s direction. “You two were so brave. You didn’t need to..”

“We did, Jones,” Drake insisted. “We did.”

“So, we all know what happened from there,” Rick said. “I confronted them, you all ambushed them, and..” He smiled. “The best team won.”

Bastien shook his head. “I still don’t know exactly how you all pulled it off...”

“Well, it was about 50% Olivia and about 50% Typhoon Manoeuvre,” Maxwell shrugged.

Olivia sighed. “You two give yourselves far too much credit. Although, it *was* thanks to you two that Anton eventually ended up in a broken heap on the floor.”

Jen giggled. “And pelted with puns.”

“You all did admirably, and will be suitably commended for your part in saving Cordonian in due course,” Rick said, a glint in his eye. “So, that brings us up to date with what we all know. We were all checked over and escorted back to the palace for the end of Jen and Maxwell’s reception, but what happened next, and where are things currently? I appreciate I have had some updates from you, Bastien, but I want to make sure everyone is fully aware of the situation.”

Bastien stood up. “We detained Anton Severus, and he is currently under the watchful eye of the Cordonian Police, along with his second in command Claudius De Novre, and three other men, one of whom we believe to be the individual who convinced both Olivia and Rick to go with them. Most of the assassins that evening were hired by Anton. We detained them all, but found they hadn’t known what they were letting themselves in for. Thought it was a security job. Many had bottled it as soon as they realised what was actually happening, those who didn’t feared for their own lives if they didn’t fight you.”

“So Anton and his immediate circle didn’t have a large network?” Rick clarified.

“Not that we are aware of, no. A significant number of his supporters had already been injured and detained earlier in the day.”

Jen looked across at Olivia. “That one was about 50% Olivia and 50% the wrath of the Duke of Ramsford.”

Olivia scowled. “You’d never have made it to the altar without me, Jen, and you know it..”

“The point is,” Mara said, “We’re confident that we’ve isolated the whole network and that they’re all detained. They’re not hiding anyone else. We’ve continued to interview Lucretia Nevraakis, who has been somewhat more helpful since Anton’s arrest, and she has confirmed this.”

“So he’s going to go on trial?” Jen asked, shakily. “And that’s going to happen soon?”

“As soon as it can be organised, yes,” Mara went on. “He needs to be securely detained for a long period of time.”

Olivia put her hand up.

“Yes, Olivia?”

“Can I get an annulment now?”

Rick smiled at her. “I’ll do everything in my power, Olivia. There must be a way around it. I’m going to consult Rashad, see if he has any contacts in that area.”

“The trial will be held in the next few weeks, you’ll all be required to give evidence. You’ll be asked about your relationships with Anton, or Justin..”

“*Evil* Justin,” Maxwell piped up.

Mara continued. “As well as the two attacks on the day of the wedding, and probably anything else you know that may be pertinent to the investigation.”

“Will he be there in person?” Olivia asked. “Because I can’t wait to sneer at his sad little face.”

“Yes,” Bastien confirmed. “The trial’s likely to start in about a fortnight, and last about ten days. I appreciate some of you might wish to get back to your duchies in the meantime, and we will keep you up to date from there.”

Maxwell looked in Jen’s direction, but she was exchanging a glance with Hana, who looked anxious.

“Your security remains paramount, Duchess Jen,” Mara said. “I will be accompanying you to Valtoria along with a couple of other security staff from the Kings’ Guard.”

Jen laughed. “Where are we going to put you all up?”

Maxwell chuckled. “How many spare bedrooms do we have, remind me?”

“Duchess Olivia, the question of your security has been raised,” Bastien went on.

“Pff,” Olivia groaned. “I *am* my security. No need to send reinforcements to Lythikos, please.”

Rick looked across at her with concern. “I would feel better if you..”

“I can handle myself, Rick.”

“I could send Drake to stay with you for a few weeks?”

There was a tangible silence as both Olivia and Drake’s faces contorted into something resembling disgust. It was all Maxwell could do not to laugh. He didn’t dare look at Jen to see her reaction.

“It’s not a bad suggestion, Your Majesty,” Bastien said. “Drake could just help to provide an additional line of defence, should it be needed.”

“Oh, please...” Olivia scoffed, as Drake glared at Bastien.

“Just give it some thought, Olivia..”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Drake moaned. “Do I get a say in this?”

“We’ll talk later,” Rick said, looking at both Olivia and Drake sternly. “For now, I think we are ready to close the meeting. Any questions?”

Maxwell raised his hand, grinning to himself. “If you could give a wedgie to any historical character, who would..”

“Any relevant questions?” Jen had already collapsed into giggles, and even Rick was struggling not to laugh.

“Erm, nope.”

“Then let’s adjourn,” Rick said. “I think we could all benefit from some down time between now and the trial. It will be demanding on us all.”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “I’m kinda used to life being demanding these days. But downtime sounds perfect.” She rested her head on his shoulder, and he leant down to kiss her head. He had to agree.

Your version of events

After the security briefing, they'd firstly packed up their belongings for their journey to Valtoria in the afternoon, and had then headed into the capital to meet up with Maxwell's college friends for lunch, before their flight back to London. As Jen had fully expected, the meal quickly turned into An Audience With Maxwell Beaumont, and he had delighted in recounting stories of their various escapades over the last few months.

After lunch was over, Jen came back from the bathroom to find Laura, the girl who she'd exchanged a few awkward words with at the wedding, sitting on another table on her own. They had been told that Laura hadn't been feeling too well, so was giving lunch a miss. But, here she now was. How funny.

Not being one to shy away from awkwardness, Jen decided to take a seat next to her. Time to get to the bottom of something that had been niggling at her since the wedding reception, although to be honest she'd not really had time to think too much about it until now.

"So, Laura..."

She could just see Laura tensing up in her presence, hardly even looking at her.

"You feeling better? Your friends said you weren't feeling up to joining us for lunch..."

"No I wasn't," Laura said, curtly.

Jen smiled, and glanced around to make sure no-one was listening. "Hey. I'm not an idiot. I'm guessing you and Maxwell have.. *previous*."

Laura looked up, hurt. "What's he said?"

"It's what he *hasn't* said," Jen said with a sigh. She'd obviously been right on the money. "I've heard stories about all of you on the way here. With *one* exception. And then you didn't turn up for lunch... and *now* you have?"

"Alright, yeah," Laura held her hands up briefly.

A satisfied smirk crossed Jen's face. "Hey, don't worry, I just have a good radar for these things."

"It was a long time ago," Laura said, fidgeting with her hands. "I shouldn't have come to the wedding. I wasn't going to come for lunch, but..."

"No, you should," Jen said, leaning in close to her. "Because I'm quite curious to know just why my husband had such a bad case of serious-relationship-phobia before we got together. So, any light you can shed on that would be just great."

Laura looked straight at Jen, her expression unfriendly. "Maybe you should talk to *him* about that."

"Oh, I will. Just wanted your take on things first. While I can get it."

Laura sighed, and looked under the table again. "We were always best friends. For nearly three years. We should have stayed that way. Now... well, obviously I haven't seen him for seven

years...” Jen noticed as Laura’s gaze flicked across the room to where Maxwell was obviously regaling the rest of his group of friends with the somewhat unbelievable tale of Anton’s final defeat. “But, I don’t know *what* we are now.”

“What happened?”

Laura looked at her again, a little more cordially. “Like I said, we were best friends. I never.. I don’t think either of us ever thought any more than that. One night, we both got really drunk.”

Jen nodded, getting her gist. “And after that..?”

“After that, we had fun for a few weeks.” She grinned. “A *lot* of fun.”

Jen giggled. “Yep. I can imagine.”

“But.. it all got too intense too quick for me. He wanted us to move in together when we graduated. We’d only been together about six weeks. In the end, I put a stop to it.”

Jen looked on, waiting for Laura to continue.

“I naively thought we’d go back to being friends. Maybe even.. friends with *benefits*, or something. But, he went back home, and his plans changed. He was going to come back to England, but he never did. He never invited any of us over to Cordonina again, like he used to in the holidays before. It’s all my fault that he and these guys all drifted apart.”

“No, it wasn’t your fault,” Jen assured her.

“How could you know that?”

Jen sighed. “Hey, Maxwell hasn’t really told me much about you guys. But I get the sense you were all pretty important to him, and that he felt he really belonged somewhere with you all. He had to go home after graduation for financial reasons. He wouldn’t have been able to invite you all back again because the House Beaumont finances wouldn’t allow.”

Laura looked confused. “But I thought his family were rolling in it?”

“They *were*,” Jen explained. “But not anymore.” She looked across at him, and they exchanged a brief glance; she detected an expression of disguised panic on his face. He would no doubt be over here in a moment. “Had it not been for that, he would have stayed in England, I’m pretty sure.”

“And he’d never have met you,” Laura said, a philosophical look in her eye. “How *did* you two meet, anyway? At one of those posh palace parties that his Prince friends hosted?”

Jen smiled, and shook her head. “You missed the full story over lunch. But you definitely need to Google me sometime and find out. It’s a good story.”

Her face changed. “People like you just have no idea,” she spat.

“People like me?”

“People born into money. You live in your own little world. Maxwell was the same. We thought we’d managed to convince him to come and live in the real world with us..” She cut off, suddenly, and Jen felt hands on her shoulder.

“Laura! Hey!! I didn’t think you were coming? Amy said you weren’t feeling too good..”

“I’m feeling a bit better now, it would seem,” Laura said, her voice careful and her expression guarded.

“So.. Are you two... getting on well??”

“Oh yes,” Jen said, with a careful smile in Laura’s direction. “I was just about to tell Laura the story of the night we met for the first time. Seeing as she missed your version of events earlier.”

Laura was looking straight at Maxwell, a hurt expression on her face.

“Well, don’t let me stop you two from.. *bonding*..” He kissed Jen on the cheek. “I’ll be.. right over there..” He scuttled off, nervously.

Jen turned to look at Laura. “So here’s the thing. I wasn’t born into the nobility. And as you can probably tell from my accent, I’m no Cordonian. I’m no different to you. Maxwell and I met by chance, only seven months ago. We quickly became friends. Then we became *best* friends. And then, as soon as complicated circumstances which I won’t go into right now allowed, we became more than friends. And then about a week later, something truly awful happened, and afterwards he asked me to marry him and I said yes. Because that man over there is the sweetest, funniest, kindest, most caring person I have ever met, and will ever meet. And there was no way I was letting him slip away. And I’m sorry that you couldn’t see that back then. I really am.”

Laura was speechless for a moment, but eventually spoke. “Wow. But.. you’re a Duchess, aren’t you?”

Jen laughed. “Like I said, Google me. It’s a long story. This time last year, I was waiting tables. And I still would be if it hadn’t been for Maxwell.” She smiled. “Hey, I know you probably think I’m looking down on you right now, but I’m not. I couldn’t do that. I just want to know what he did wrong back then.”

Laura sighed. “He didn’t do anything wrong. I guess it was all just too much too soon. I was.. scared? I was only twenty-one. I just figured that maybe we’d pick things up again a few years down the line..” She looked across the room again. “I broke his heart, didn’t I?”

“I’m not sure,” Jen said. “But I’m going to find out.”

Maxwell Beaumont I

The limo pulled up outside the mansion house, just over the bridge, and they looked at each other expectantly for a few seconds.

“Okay...” Maxwell said to Jen. “Ready for this?”

“I think so..” She looked a little concerned, and rightfully so.

He leapt out of the limo and, before she could gracefully emerge after him, he scooped her up in his arms.

“Maxwell, what the...” She kicked her legs playfully, he could feel her quiet giggles vibrating through her body where he held her.

“You just relax there while I carry you over the threshold, Mrs Beaumont..”

She squealed in elation as he ran with her towards the doors. Fortunately, they were opened from within just as he approached them, allowing him to keep going until they were in the entrance hall. He then lifted her up a little higher, spun her around in his arms, and delicately placed her back onto her feet. “There.”

“Maxwell, that was lovely, but a little warning would’ve been nice..”

“Where’s the fun in that?” He kissed her gently. “Welcome to our new home.”

There was a cough from behind him, and he span to see a tall, thin man standing by the doors, which were now closed. “Whoa!”

“Good evening, Your Graces.”

Jen’s face lit up. “Ah – you must be Gladys’s replacement?”

“My name is Christopher,” the man said. “And yes, I will be taking over Gladys’s duties temporarily, should Your Graces be in agreement. I have already met with Mara and her team, who are established in the North Wing.”

Maxwell exchanged an impressed glance with Jen. All very slick.

“Thank you, Christopher,” Jen said to him. “I’m sure we would be really grateful of your help. So, are you moving into Gladys’s apartment? Mara was saying it was being cleared today.”

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary,” Christopher said. “I already live in one of the cottages just off the estate. I’ve been second in command to Gladys for a number of years, so am used to being called upon from there.”

Maxwell inspected Christopher suspiciously. “So, you knew Gladys was working with Anton and his cronies?”

“I had no idea, Your Grace. We were colleagues, not confidantes. Personally, I have always found it an honour to serve this estate, as did my mother and father before me. I have to confess, I was a

little shocked to hear of the Duchess's appointment.." He looked at Jen with a straight face. "But on discovering that she was to marry a representative of one of Cordonia's Great Houses, I was suitably enthused." He looked back at Maxwell.

"I think we're going to get along just fine, Christopher," Maxwell said with a smirk in Jen's direction, revelling in her unimpressed scowl.

"Ahem. Well, Gladys obviously showed us around when we were here last, but if you would be so kind tomorrow as to run us through how everything works round here, that would be brilliant," Jen said. "And it would be good to see Gladys' apartment, as I have some thoughts as to how we could use that."

This was news to Maxwell, and he looked at her with interest.

"But for tonight, we thought we might just get a light meal and then.. *retire*?" She looked back at him, seduction in her eyes. Sounded like a plan.

"Of course, Your Grace. Leave it with me." He headed off.

Jen looked at Maxwell contemplatively. "As much as I like being waited on hand and foot, I think we need to consider how this is all going to work."

"I don't follow.."

She sighed. "I just want to feel like this is my home. When we're at the palace and we're waited on hand and foot, that's fine. But when you're at home, you just want to do things your own way, don't you? I want us to make this place *our* home, doing things ourselves, so we can get it how we want it."

He laughed. "I never got to do that at Ramsford. It was Bertrand's way or the highway."

She giggled. "Well, I'm not Bertrand. Thankfully for all concerned."

They heard Christopher heading back in their direction. "Your Graces?" He glanced towards the grand staircase. "There is one other thing. There was a... delivery... this morning..."

"Ohmygosh!" Jen's eyes lit up and she started to jump up and down. "Maxwell, you know what that will be!"

"Oh! Well, you know what this means!" He turned back to Christopher. "A bottle of the finest champagne you have in the cellar, too..."

"Coming right up, Your Grace."

They both rushed over to where the large box stood by the stairwell, in the exact position he had pictured it.

"And now, for the grand unveiling!"

"Could do with a knife to get into this box," she admitted. "My nails are still too pretty to risk getting damaged.."

He laughed, seeing the irony of the situation. “Well, why don’t you use *my* wedding present to *you*, to get into *your* wedding present to *me*!”

“Have I ever told you that you’re a freaking genius, Maxwell Beaumont?”

“On a number of occasions, but I’m not keeping a tab...”

It took them a few minutes, and some assistance from the house staff who were standing on chairs, to finally unbox the splendour of Maxwell Beaumont I. Once he had been completely freed from all his packaging, Maxwell stood back to admire him.

“I did say thank you, didn’t I?”

“Three times in very quick succession, yep.”

“By god, he’s fierce, isn’t he?”

“Olivia certainly thought so,” she sighed, resting her head against his shoulder. “She was quite overwhelmed by his brilliance.”

“Yesss. You happy for him to live here?”

“Absolutely. You really think I’d have been stupid enough to buy you a lifesize statue of your ancestor as a wedding gift if I didn’t want it in our house?”

“True, that..”

At that, Christopher arrived with the bottle of champagne, already opened and poured into two glasses.

Maxwell looked at Jen. “This guy has a *lot* to learn, doesn’t he?”

Everything

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

It was a cooler evening than usual, and Jen gazed from their balcony into the darkening landscape below. The last few days, she'd noticed some tell-tale signs of autumn creep into what had seemed to her to be a perpetual Cordonian summer; it was yet another sign in her mind that things had started to move on, and that it was time for their new life to start.

It was hard to believe, but she'd only been here for seven months, and she reflected on the massive changes that had taken place in her life in that time. Somehow she'd gone from a single broke waitress living in a tiny shared New York apartment to a married affluent Duchess living in a huge Cordonian mansion. And if she thought about it, her favourite transformation out of all of those components of change, was the single to married one. She smiled to herself. She was so, so lucky.

She heard the bedroom door close gently, followed by footsteps behind her, and waited patiently.

"There you are.."

She turned to face him with a smile. "Where did you think I'd be?"

He shrugged. "I had wondered if you'd vanished down one of those secret passages that I *still* haven't found.."

She put her arms around his waist, giggling. "I might have found one of them last time we were here, but as this is technically *my* house I'm going to enjoy keeping it secret from you for a *little* bit longer."

"No fair!" He dropped his lip. "What's mine is yours..."

"And what's mine is *technically* the property of the Duchy of Valtoria," she teased. "But, don't worry. You found me. No need to go looking for secret passages tonight after all."

"You're right. I've found what I was looking for." He put his hands on her shoulders, running them down her side. "The only thing I really need. And we're finally here. In our new home. In our new bedroom..."

"Mmhmm?" She glanced across in the direction of the bed. "You know, we never did make it as far as the bed last time..."

"And I only have your say-so for how comfortable it is," he sighed. "And, you know what, I could just do with sinking into a comfortable bed right now.. it's been a looong day.."

“Well.” She began to unbutton his shirt. “If that’s the case, you are *seriously* overdressed.” She held his gaze as she completed her task, and moved her hands up to his shoulders to nudge the shirt onto the balcony floor. “There.”

“You know, I’m still wondering if anyone can see us from here.”

She giggled. “There’s probably a dirty old man in a cottage over the hill with his binoculars out hoping for a repeat of last time.”

“In that case, I must defend your honour and *insist* you accompany me this way immediately.”

She chuckled. “I like that. You sound like, I don’t know, such an old fashioned gentleman.”

He laughed. “That’s the Percival in me, I suppose.”

She threw him a look of confusion. “Oh, don’t tell me after seven months you’re finally revealing to me you’ve got a split personality..”

He laughed. “Yeah. Autumn comes and I’m a different person until the Spring..”

“I hope not..” She giggled, and went to kiss him, touching his cheek as she did so.

“No pulling my beard,” he said, flamboyantly.

“What?”

He laughed, and shook his head. “Next time we’re at Ramsford, I’ll show you what I’m talking about. There’s a painting in the study of one of our ancestors, Percival Beaumont. Bertrand always tells me he thinks he was my double, except he’s got this massive beard..”

Her face lit up. “That is a-mazing! Why didn’t you ever show me?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know what my middle name was back then,” he admitted. “It’s not exactly cool, is it?”

“It’s better than Archibald,” she said, raising an eyebrow, and seeing the resulting amusement in his eyes. “Well, I look forward to a sneak peek of your middle-namesake very soon. But for now..” She took his hand and let him lead her back into the bedroom, closing the balcony door behind her. “There’s only one Beaumont I’m interested in.”

He paused by the bed, looking a little uncertain. “I know. And I still have to pinch myself that you are.”

“Why?” She ran her hands down his soft chest adoringly, taking time to brush his tattoo with her fingers. Looking back up at his face, she saw a vulnerability in his expression.

“Is this about earlier?” she asked him. She hadn’t wanted to bring the whole Laura thing up tonight, but something was bothering him, and if it was that then it needed to be addressed.

He looked puzzled. “Earlier?”

Oh, okay. It wasn't that. Good. Well, that or he really didn't want to talk about it tonight. "Maxwell, you know you can tell me anything. What's up?"

"Ah, it's silly really," he said, sitting down on the bed. "It's just, with what Christopher was saying earlier, about how excited he was to meet me and all that, it just made me think and.. I don't really feel I deserve all this, really. I'm.." He looked as if he was arguing with himself about what to say. "I'm nobody special. I've had it easy all my life, and I've just been so lucky recently. But Jen.. I'm *nothing* without you."

She sat down next to him. "What's brought this on?"

He laughed. "I don't know."

She sighed. "Maxwell, you are not *nothing*. Look at me. You are *everything*." She ran her fingers along the hair on the back of his neck. "You have just been surrounded by people who can't see how amazing you are."

He met her eyes for a little while, then looked downwards again.

She sighed. He was allowed to have the odd wobble. He was always so effervescent, so joyful. But behind closed doors, there had to come a point where he just couldn't keep going any more. Jen had seen glimpses of it before, after the shooting, and then the discovery of Anton's betrayal, and she knew she'd see it again and again. She didn't mind one bit. It was part of what made him who he was, and she regarded it as an honour that he let her see this side of him.

She nudged his chin upwards with her finger. "Hey, we've been through a lot in the last few days. And with the wedding being over, it's a bit of an anti-climax. This is to be expected. You'll feel more yourself tomorrow, I know you will."

He sighed. "Myself? Huh. What even is myself from now on? Just coming here, starting a life with you.. it's daunting."

"Daunting? How?"

He shook his head. "It's everything I've wanted, everything I've dreamed of.. but I don't know where to start. I never thought I'd be a Duke. I don't know what sort of contribution I can make to Valtoria.."

"You have your talents," she teased.

"Do I?" His blue eyes gazed stoically into hers. "I honestly don't know why you chose me."

"Because I love you," she said without thinking about it. "And it wasn't a choice. It was *always* you. And, like I said, you are *everything* to me. Let me show you."

She kissed him, gently at first, drawing his chest closer to her own. Eventually his hands found their way underneath her top, pulling impatiently at her lingerie, and she pulled her top over her head to assist him. They soon found themselves unfastening the other's jeans, and it wasn't long before they were both in minimal clothing.

He looked at her, some of the sparkle returning to his eyes. “Best we dim these lights a little..”

She giggled. “There’s two settings only, on and off.”

“Well, that’s going to have to change.”

“Let me,” she said, standing up and going to switch out the lights. She returned, her eyes adjusting, unsure as to whereabouts he was. She got into the bed and soon found him, lying on his back, seemingly more relaxed. She lay next to him for a moment, then slowly and carefully ran her hand down his chest and beyond.

He shuddered. “Oh..”

She giggled. “I said I was going to show you what you mean to me..” She toyed with his boxers for a few more seconds, then pulled them away, and began to lavish kisses from his neck further and further downwards, until she was rewarded with a series of satisfied groans. She continued her work, enjoying the reactions she was getting, until she felt his hand grab hold of her curly hair.

“God, Jen.. I can’t stand that any more..”

She looked up at him mischievously, licked her lips, and made out as if she was going to resume what she had just been doing.

“Jen... oh god..”

Giggling, she pulled herself up and kissed his cheek. “I thought you were enjoying that.”

His heart was pounding and his breath short. “I need you now.”

She rolled onto her back and raised her arms. “Here I am. I’m yours, Maxwell.”

He sat up slightly, and ran his hands underneath her back to unfasten her bra. Throwing it aside, he showered kisses first on her cheek, then on her neck, and, using his fingers, he explored her right breast where it was most sensitive. She felt a buzz in all the right places as he did so, and closing her eyes, rocked her hips in anticipation. She wasn’t sure at which point his fingers left and his tongue replaced them, but she squealed in pleasure as she felt a nibble, while his other hand made its way further down her body, dancing around where it made the most difference.

“Maxwell...” Her hands still above her body, she grabbed hold of the headboard to steady herself. As his hand worked its way back up to her left breast, she moaned as his tongue travelled in the opposite direction. It swirled and bumped and she felt his breath against her, her whole body surrendering to him as she cried out, a little louder than she had meant to.

His response was to travel back up her body so that she could see his face, and he lowered himself desperately into her, sighing as she wrapped her legs around his to tighten the hold she had on him. He reached for her hands, still above her head, and held on to one of them; the other played with her hair, gently at first, then more urgently, until his hands gripped her as if he was holding on to life itself, and she felt his whole body release.

“Whoo,” she said, as he collapsed onto her, his mouth panting against her neck. Eventually, she felt his gasps turn to giggles. “What?”

“Whoo? Is that all you’ve got?”

“That’s what you’ve reduced me to. I have no words. Oh..” She kissed him deeply. “See? *Everything.*”

He pulled his arms around her body, and she did the same to his.

“Jen.. that was.. so good.”

“A taste of things to come,” she assured him. “It’s what you deserve.”

He ran a finger down her face and along her neck. “I could get used to this.”

“That’s the idea.”

He kissed her on the cheek, and pulled her closer. “I might just...”

Jen hadn’t even counted to twenty in her head when she felt his breathing pattern change. She knew he’d been tired, and that was half the problem. “Night, Maxwell,” she whispered in contentment, feeling lulled into sleep herself by the dreamy, post-coital haze.

Welcome to Tuesday

The next morning, Jen awoke to a familiar knock at the door. *That's my Maxwell.* She smiled fondly, looking forward to seeing him, and then it hit her. *Isn't he..?*

She opened her eyes and reached out an arm. He wasn't there. *Ah. Okay.*

"Come in, Maxwell," she called.

The door opened and he bundled into the room, wearing his white robe. "Goooooooood morning little blossom.."

She giggled, sitting up in bed. "I know you threatened to do this, but.."

"This is your wake up call, I have brought you a cup of tea, a pastry, and.. a corgi!" Chance ran into the room after him, and pounced onto the bed, giving her nose a lick before curling up on the pillow next to her.

"Well, wake up calls don't come much better than that..." she admitted, pulling the covers around her bare chest as he handed her a tray, which was also littered with apple blossom. "Aww, look at this."

He nudged Chance further down the bed and sat down next to her. "Welcome to Tuesday." He leant in for a sweet kiss, which she was happy to return.

"Why thank you. Have you been awake long?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Her Grace was still completely out for the count when I woke up this morning. So, I'm all showered, breakfasted and organised, ready for the day ahead! Just got to get dressed, and I'm good to go."

"I imagine our laundry that we brought from the palace is ready by now," Jen said. "One of my jobs for today is to sort out my wardrobe. I'm sure I've left some of my outfits at the palace boutique.. I'll have to get them sent over."

He raised his eyebrows. "I think the squid suit is still there.."

"Which is clearly unacceptable. It needs to live here, with you, now." She rustled his hair. "You seem more yourself this morning."

"Yep! It's amazing what a good night's sleep in a man's own bed can do for him.."

"Nothing to do with what happened just before you went to sleep at all then.."

"Well, that was pretty amazing too, coincidentally.."

She smiled, taking a sip of her tea. "Ahh. I could get used to this. I suppose our job for today is to familiarise ourselves with this place, and find out how everything works. Who does what, what we need to do, what our diaries will look like, and so on."

“As long as you’re not going to summon Madeleine over to organise your diary, I’m game.”

Jen laughed, channelling her inner Madeleine. “Ugh. Please.”

He hopped into bed beside her, and grabbed her pastry, sneaking a bite.

“Hey..”

“It’s my commission for delivering it to you.”

“Is that so?” She wasn’t having that. Firstly she moved the tray to the bedside table on the other side of her. Then she slipped a hand around his neck, pulling him close for a kiss, but she stealthily reached behind her to grab a pillow, which she then whacked him over the head with.

“Hey!” He’d not been expecting that, but his expression soon changed. “Oh.. it’s on!” He grabbed his own pillow and hit her in the shoulder with it.

She laughed, and retaliated, but now *he* surprised *her*, knocking her pillow away and grabbing her wrist.

“Wha..”

Tossing his own pillow aside, he grasped her other wrist and pinned her to the bed. Before she knew it, he was kissing her breathlessly, hovering inches above her, his whole body tense as he braced himself against the mattress.

She sighed happily, pulling his robe apart and arching her back, bringing her hips up to meet his.

Place to call a home

“You’ve got me real curious,” he said to her as they wandered around the edge of the mansion house in the direction that Christopher had indicated. “What’s this going to be? A gym, or a pool hall – y’know, Drake would love a pool hall..”

She just raised her eyebrows at him, and looked ahead.

“Hey, what about a music studio? Cause that would really come in handy..”

“Nothing like that,” she insisted. “And we can have all of those things, Maxwell. But we need to get the really important things sorted first.”

They reached the door, which was unlocked as they had been advised. Jen opened the door, and they walked into a neutrally-decorated open area, with large windows overlooking the lake. Jen smiled.

“Woah. Who knew Gladys’s digs were so...”

“Spacious?” Jen said, turning to him.

“..I was gonna say poky..”

She laughed. “Not all of us have lived in a manor or a mansion all our lives. I think this is perfect. I’m just gonna check out the kitchen...” She wandered through, and he stood looking at the view out of the window. It wasn’t the worst, although nothing could beat the view from their balcony. Especially when Jen was standing on it.

“Ooh, yes, this is great..” he heard her call through. “There’s room for a table in here too, and..”

“Are you gonna tell me what this is all about?” He had an idea, but didn’t want to say the wrong thing.

She looked at him a little awkwardly. “Well. You know.. back before we were a thing.. well actually when we’d just started being a thing but before you asked me to marry you?”

He laughed. “Oh yes, I remember that six days very well.”

She giggled. “Well. I kinda said to Hana that... she could come and live here.”

He nodded. “Yeah, I know. Hana told me.”

“Oh..” She looked thrown.

“And I think it’s a *great* idea. We’ve got all this space, after all.. and I’m guessing you had this place in mind for her? It’s perfect, Jen.”

She suddenly threw her arms around him, taking him by surprise. “Oh, I’m so happy! I was worried about telling you..”

“Why?” He looked at her with some confusion as she drew away.

“Hana said she didn’t want to get in our way. She thought you might not be too keen on the idea. And it made me think, did she have a point? I wanted her to come and live here more than anything, that’s why I said it in the first place. But.. I should’ve discussed it with you.”

He shook his head. “There was nothing to discuss back then, Jen. You weren’t to know I was about to propose to you. Even I had no idea about that. You mustn’t go back on your word. But, if you had discussed it with me sooner, I would have told you that it was an a-MAZ-ing idea and that you were such a fantastic, kind and generous person..” He wrapped his arms around her. “It’s kind of why you’re my favourite one.”

“So you really don’t mind?”

“Do I look as if I mind? Hey, I love Hana as much as you do. You should call her! She could be moved in here by tomorrow!”

“Well, she’s gonna need some furniture first, although I’m sure we can find some from the main house.. but do you think she’ll like it? If she comes here she’ll have her own space, her own place to call a home, and she won’t feel like she’s getting under our feet.”

He wandered into the kitchen. “A place to make her famous hot chocolate..”

“Exactly! We can pop in for one whenever we’re bored..”

“And a big enough living room to practice for all those forthcoming dance-off defeats..” He started to bust some moves to some music he’d conjured up in his head.

Jen giggled. “Hey, we’ve still got the wondrous Beaumont-Jones disco to set up in the main house, so I don’t think she needs to worry about that..”

He continued his dance, throwing her a playful smirk. She put her hands on his shoulders, and joined in, winding her sexy body in what he knew was an attempt to throw him off his groove. It wasn’t gonna work though. Not today. No chance. Oh. Wait.

She creased with laughter, noticing his reaction. “Something wrong, Maxwell?”

Nothing was wrong. Nothing would ever be wrong again.

Secret number 2

Wednesday was a warm, dry day, and on getting up, Jen suggested to Maxwell that they took Chance for a long walk, and afterwards they were going to have brunch. Hana was going to be arriving this afternoon, so Jen wanted to make the most of having Maxwell to herself this morning; there was something she needed to talk to him about, after all.

He was whistling cheerfully as they went, every now and then throwing a stick for Chance to retrieve, the two of them working resourcefully together to entertain her. Eventually Chance slowed down to trot alongside Jen, and Maxwell did the same.

“Tired out?”

He nodded, then stopped. “Who me? No. I could go on and on. But Chance is pooped.”

“Course,” she said disbelievingly, and reached out her hand to hold his. “It’s pretty round here, isn’t it? Our own little forest. Reminds me of the day you made me this.” She was wearing her twig ring today, she didn’t wear it every day but had thought it would be nice to wear it for their first few days here.

“I can make you a matching bracelet if you like?” He suddenly jumped up and swung from a branch of a nearby tree, pulling it down in the process. “Oops..”

She giggled. “How big do you think my wrists are, Maxwell Beaumont?”

He sighed, and watched as Chance looked at his bounty with great interest. “And... it’s an even bigger stick! FETCH!!” He threw it and Chance went galloping after it. “Well, I can, I just need to source my materials a little longer, I guess..”

She kissed him on the cheek. “Well, you’ve got all the time in the world to roam this forest and do just that... or whatever else you fancy doing in the forest..”

His eyes lit up. “No stopping you, is there?”

She raised her eyebrows playfully. “What? I thought you might like to climb some trees, or do some bark rubbings or something....”

As she leant in to kiss him, his phone rang.

He pulled away, and answered it excitedly. “Go for the Duke of Valtoria.”

She giggled, squeezing his hand.

His face changed. “Yyyyeah... oh! Yes, that’s... *doable*...” He looked a little cagey. “Tomorrow, you say?”

She looked curiously at him, wondering what this was about.

“I can probably get there for nine... how long do you need me for? Uh-huh, okay... yeah, I get your point...”

She mouthed the words “what’s this about?” at him, but he just shook his head.

“Okie dokie... see you tomorrow morning at nine then!” He put his phone back in his pocket. “Sooo... mind if I disappear out for the day tomorrow?”

“No, that’s fine, babe,” she said, watching his face light up. It was something she’d only just taken to calling him, and he seemed quite content with his new pet name. “This to do with secret number two?”

He nodded, proudly. “If I told you, it would ruin the beautiful look of surprise on your face when you discover my...” His expression changed as the penny dropped. “Wait.. you said secret number *two*..”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, straight faced.

“So.. you think there’s another secret.”

She took a deep breath. “I *know* there’s another secret, Maxwell. I spoke to Laura on Monday, didn’t I?”

He gulped. “Yyyeahhh...”

“Listen, you don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to.”

She watched as he bit his lip, his expression fraught.

“It’s just.. she’s under the impression that she broke your heart, and I was only wondering if she was right.”

He stopped walking, and she stopped beside him.

“Can we not do this right now?” he asked, not meeting her eyes.

“We can do this whenever you’re ready,” she said reassuringly. “But, I think we need to.”

He sighed. “I’m not the same person I was back then. So much has changed. I don’t want you to.. well..” He looked back up at her. “You might not like what I have to say, Jen.”

“Hey. I love the person you are now. And the person you were back then.. he doesn’t matter to me. I didn’t know him. I love you now, and I will always love you from now forward. Whatever you have to say.”

He nodded. “I know.”

She giggled. “All these skeletons that are tumbling out of your cupboard...”

He looked upset for a second, then laughed. “They’re not skeletons, they’re ghosts. Remember? And I just need to protect you from them.”

She giggled. “I’m practically a ghostbuster. Put me in that old estate car and give me one of those ectoplasm guns. I’ll save you, Maxwell!”

With that she grabbed him and tickled him underneath his arms, revelling in the resulting shriek. Chance barked in response, defending his master's honour.

“Yes Chance! You tell her to stop attacking me! Domestic abuse is never okay!”

She shook her head, and kissed him, feeling his tension melt away in her embrace. Whatever this was, he was not looking forward to telling her, so she wasn't going to force it out of him. She knew he'd confide in her when he was ready.

No decorum

They'd got back from their walk a little while ago, and despite the initial excitement of his telephone call, the subsequent trickiness of Jen's revelation had dampened his mood somewhat. It wasn't Jen's fault; he owed her an explanation, but how best to explain the whole sorry awkward situation was eluding him.

They were just having brunch, and he was quietly pondering his options when Christopher approached them.

"Your Graces, sorry to interrupt your meal, but Lady Hana Lee has arrived."

"Ooh, brilliant!" he said, looking across at the smile that had appeared on Jen's face.

"Where is she?" Jen stood up.

"In the entrance hall. I can show her to the drawing room until you have finished your lunch, Your Grace.."

"No need," Jen said, rushing out of the dining room. "C'mon, Maxwell."

Christopher sighed, and looked at Maxwell with a weary expression. "No decorum. I do hope your influence will rub off on her eventually, Your Grace."

Maxwell laughed, amused by Christopher's attitude. He and Bertrand would get along just fine. "Despite my brother's best efforts to train her in courtly ways, my wife remains a free spirit, Christopher."

"Quite. Enjoy the rest of your meal, Your Grace." He nodded, and followed Jen out of the room.

Maxwell grabbed his bacon sandwich (who needed decorum anyway, he usually managed just fine without it) and headed to the entrance hall where he found Jen and Hana hugging happily.

"Maxwell! Hey!" Hana soon spotted him, and he joined them in a group hug.

"Good to see you Hana," he said. "Welcome to Valtoria!"

Hana nodded in the direction of the statue. "Oh my word... look at him! He is quite something. So this is the warrior Beaumont you were named after?"

He nodded. "Yup. And I'm just wishing I could thank Mom and Dad now I've seen how cool he was."

Hana made her way over to inspect the statue. "I studied the history of House Beaumont, but I'm not sure I got that far back. I learned about Percival and Emery Beaumont, the history books indicate they were quite influential. Who was the founder of your house, that came from France to settle at Ramsford?"

"You ask me like I can remember all this stuff," Maxwell laughed. "I'd like to think it was this guy."

Jen giggled, prodding him in the ribs. “He couldn’t even remember his House motto the first time I asked him what it was.”

“Hey, my brain has finite storage space. It’s full of funny comebacks and reminders of how not to screw things up. And most importantly of all, all the precious memories since the day I met you.” He kissed her on the cheek, wrapping his non-sandwich-holding arm around her. “Some of that trivial stuff had to make way.”

“You two,” Hana giggled. “So, how are you settling in? I know it’s still early days.”

“It’s good,” Jen said. “Really good.” She raised an eyebrow mischievously at him. He smiled in response, in full agreement with her statement.

Hana blushed. “You know I really don’t want to intrude, I’ll keep out of your way as much as possible...”

“Don’t be silly,” Jen said. “Nothing’s changed just because we’re married now. We’re all best friends and you know you’re welcome here. Now, where’s all your stuff?”

“Still in the car,” she admitted. “I hope there’s a good size wardrobe in my room?”

Jen grinned. “Actually, I have a surprise for you. Come this way!” She led Hana back out towards the main door.

He took a bite of his sandwich.

“You coming, Maxwell?”

“I’ll catch you up,” he eventually said. “Just got.. something I need to do first.”

“What, like finish your lunch?”

“That too.” He high-fived Hana, and kissed Jen. “Be quick as I can.”

He watched as they left the house, and ran up the stairs and into the room that he’d unofficially claimed as a secret study. Here, he’d stashed all of his stuff that Jen still didn’t know about. Obviously he needed to get everything ready for tomorrow, so leaving the girls to catch up would give him an opportunity to do that.

Yet there was something more important he needed to do, after his little chat with Jen this morning. He still wasn’t sure if it was something he could easily talk about with her. Which was stupid, because they should be able to talk about anything. But, he knew there was a way that he could communicate with her on his terms, tell her everything at once so that the air was completely clear.

He turned on his laptop, and opened Word. Once the screen came up, he began to furiously type.

“Okay. Picture the scene....”

A beautiful ornate garden

Hana had slept a very comfortable first night in her new home. Today, she and Jen were spending the day together, getting her flat how she wanted it. This morning, the house staff had provided a selection of furniture from the main house, and the two of them were now going through it and getting it where they wanted it.

Jen had just been relaying to Hana everything she knew about Maxwell's mysterious absence as they'd moved a table from the living room to the kitchen area.

"What do you think he's up to?" Hana pondered, as they placed the table down.

"I don't know," Jen said with a smile. "I think it's something good, though. I think it's something he's had up his sleeve for a while. When we were on the Unity Tour, I used to struggle to get him to stay with me at night. He always said he had stuff to do and didn't want to wake me up or keep me awake."

"Hmm, that's odd," Hana pondered, leaning on the kitchen worktop. "So whatever it is, he's been working on it through the nights. Is he doing some sort of qualification, do you think? Home study?"

Jen pulled a face. "Dunno. He finished his degree course, so in what, I'm not sure..."

Hana smiled. "I never knew he had a degree!"

"I only found out a little while ago," sighed Jen.

It was Jen's tone of voice that alerted Hana. "Hey, I sense something's bothering you. Is everything okay with you two?"

Jen leant against the worktop next to her. "I think so, Hana."

"Want to talk about it?"

Jen pondered on that silently for a moment.

"Over a hot chocolate?"

"Now you're talking," she giggled.

Hana clapped her hands and rummaged through cupboards. "All the ingredients are here and waiting to go.. I just need a kettle and some milk!"

"I'll pop to the house and get them for you now," Jen said with a beam. "Be right back!"

Hana took the opportunity to locate all the other bits required for her signature drink; cocoa, mint, marshmallows, chocolate sprinkles, and laid them all out on the worktop. She smiled to herself, and wandered back through to the front room. It was still a little bare, but felt a lot more homely now she and Jen had spent some time arranging it and unpacking things. She pictured some more chairs in the corner, perhaps an upright piano one day. A desk for writing and designing. The view from her window over Valtoria was inspiring. She couldn't believe her luck.

When Jen had first offered her a place to live here after everything had settled, she'd felt flattered and excited. At that time, although Hana was aware of the buds of romance starting to flower between her two closest friends, she'd not realised just how quickly they would grow into a beautiful ornate garden to rival any Hana had ever seen.

When they'd visited Valtoria for the first time, just a few weeks ago, Hana had obviously had a lot on her plate, confronting her parents. Afterwards, she'd felt quite insecure, as she'd known she no longer wished to call Shanghai her home, yet she'd begun to see that even a house as big as this would feel crowded if a third wheel was rolling around it. And she didn't quite know how to proceed.

Had Jen been with anyone else, she would've been okay with Maxwell, she could have felt quite at home at Ramsford with him. But Drake and Rick lived at the palace; and she felt she had overstayed her welcome there, and wanted somewhere homely where she could feel at ease. She wasn't close enough to Olivia to consider staying with her. So she'd felt a little in limbo for a few weeks. And after the wedding, when the newlyweds headed back here, she worried that Jen had forgotten her promise.

Of course, that hadn't been the case. And what Jen had found here was more than Hana deserved, but ideal so that she didn't feel she was intruding on what was still, of course, a new relationship, despite how quickly Jen and Maxwell had gone from friends to life partners. She didn't want to put any pressure on them. And, she could tell from Jen's little comment earlier, that something wasn't quite right. Hopefully, it was something they could easily resolve. But it was a worry.

She heard the door of the cottage open, and a flash of fur ran at her and yapped.

"Chance!" Hana was pleased to see him as he lapped around her ankles. "Are you having lots of fun in your new home with your mum and dad?"

"He's missed you all," Jen acknowledged, as she followed Chance into the front room.

"He's always been *your* dog though," Hana said. "I knew it straight away. Oh if we can't be together let's at least have a pretend child to make us feel like we are.."

Jen laughed. "Hana Lee, how could you have known that I was thinking that?"

"Oh Jen. I knew how you two felt about each other a long time before you both did."

Jen sighed. "I guess you had a bit of a vested interest in my feelings.." She looked guiltily at Hana.

Hana sighed. She didn't want Jen to continue to feel guilty. "Maybe I did back then. But, I've seen how mad about each other you two are. There are no two people in this world who are as right for each other as you two. We all know it."

Jen giggled.

"Seeing you two in the early days, it frustrated me so much. But how could I say anything? It wasn't my place to interfere."

"Yeah, it took me far too long to say something. I should have been more upfront. It just kept on growing and growing until I couldn't live without saying something."

“Well, you had my blessing from the start. Although, I’m not so sure about Rick and Drake. But they’re coming round.” Generally, over the last couple of days, they had both been very quiet. Although, her little chat with Drake on Tuesday had been.. something of an insight.

At that, there was a knock on the front door, and Hana went to answer it. At the door stood Jen’s new housekeeper with a kettle, a bottle of milk, and an envelope. “Lady Hana. Welcome to your new home.”

“Thank you,” Hana said politely. “And thank you for bringing these over. What’s this?”

She went to take the envelope, but it was snatched back. “This is for Her Grace.”

Jen, who had been standing just behind, took the envelope. “Thanks, Christopher.”

He departed, and Jen looked at the envelope, holding it up to the light. There was nothing on the front of it, and it seemed to contain typed text inside. “Looks like a letter. I’ll read it later.” She put it in her jeans pocket. “Who sends letters these days anyway?”

“You’ll find out if you open it,” said Hana curiously, as she approached the kitchen with the kettle and the milk.

“It can wait,” Jen said. “I was more interested in what you were just saying about Rick and Drake...”

Hana busied herself with making the drinks. “Well, you know Rick. He handles everything like the diplomat. He accepts what’s happened and would never speak his emotions openly. I think he’s getting there. But Drake...”

“Drake was the first person I told,” Jen admitted.

“I know,” Hana informed her. “We’ve spoken at length.”

Jen didn’t respond to that comment. The kettle boiled, and Hana poured the water.

Eventually, Jen broke the awkward silence. “Are you upset that I confided in him and not you? It was only because I was spending more time with him when I was really getting to my wits end with it all. When we were in Paris. That was when I realised I couldn’t carry on. And Drake was just there as a sounding board, I guess.”

“It’s not that,” Hana sighed. “I’m sorry, Jen. This isn’t your fault. I shouldn’t get so...” She turned to Jen. “It’s just that, I’ve been spending a lot of time with Drake recently. And...” She looked philosophically at Jen. “I don’t like seeing him in all that pain.”

Jen looked back at Hana suspiciously. “You don’t want to know how guilty I feel about the fact that all four of you fell for me. But, it wasn’t a choice I made. There was only ever one person in my heart. But Drake knows that, and... I thought he was fine with us now.”

“You know what he’s like,” Hana said, sprinkling on the mini-marshmallows to the hot chocolate.

Jen laughed. “I do. He’s like one of those.”

Hana giggled. "Yeah." She handed Jen her hot chocolate. "On the inside, he's still finding it hard. On the outside, he's being strong for you and Maxwell, and Rick.. and me."

"Figures," Jen sighed, sipping her hot chocolate. "Mmm, Hana, this is fabulous as always."

"Cheers," Hana said with a weak smile, chinking her hot chocolate cup against Jen's.

Jen sat down on one of the chairs that had made it as far as the kitchen area, and Hana sat opposite.

"So what has Drake said to you?"

Hana sighed. "Nothing really. We just spoke about what happened in Italy, and France, and Shanghai, and New York... and it was obvious to me that he was hurting."

"I'm surprised he let you see that."

Hana looked sadly at Jen. "I might've prised it out of him."

"Why?"

She looked away. "Just, I don't know, testing the water."

"Hana?"

She giggled. "Hey, as I said, we've got closer. And..."

Jen raised her eyebrows. "Hana Lee. What is going on with you and Drake Walker?"

"Nothing!" Hana was mortified. "Absolutely nothing."

"But.. you'd like there to be, am I right?"

Yes, she was. Hana nodded, slowly.

"But I thought you were into girls!"

"I'm bisexual, Jen. I thought you understood that."

"Yes, but does Drake understand that? You have to tell him!" Jen urged.

"Oh, he knows," Hana said, looking at her hot chocolate. "He's good at reading these things. He was the one who confronted me."

"Woah, Hana..."

"Yeah. It did throw me a bit."

"So, how have you guys left things?"

She sighed. Not in a good way. "He went off to Lythikos yesterday. I guess I'll see him again at the trial."

“So he knows how you feel about him? What did he say?”

“He thinks we need to just see how we both feel a bit further down the line. We’ve been living in each other’s pockets for such a long time, after all.”

“Sorry Hana, but that sounds like a brush off to me. I don’t know why, though. You should have guys falling at your feet, and you know it.”

“It comes back to what I said earlier though. He’s still hurting over you.”

“Give him some time, then. You never know. He might ponder over it when he’s in Lythikos.”

Hana bit her lip. “Or he might end up in Olivia’s bed.”

Jen laughed. “God, no. They’d kill each other.”

Hana laughed too. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“I still hope Rick and Olivia can work something out. I think they’d be amazing together.”

Hana smiled wryly. “I can’t say I disagree with your suggestion..”

“Who’d have thought it, hey? When we all first met. The two of us actually rooting for Rick and Olivia?”

Hana giggled. “It’s been an eventful year. Especially for you! From waitress, to Duchess..”

Jen beamed. “I’d quite happily go back to being a broke waitress if I could take Maxwell back with me.”

Hana melted at the happiness in her friend’s eyes as she spoke about Maxwell. “Aww, that’s too cute.”

They both drank some more of their hot chocolate, and Hana took the opportunity to move the conversation back to where it had originally been headed. “Anyway, not to change the subject, but you said you wanted to talk about something...”

“Yeah.” Jen sighed. The twinkle disappeared from her eyes, and she looked a little fraught. “You know Maxwell’s friends that came to our wedding reception..”

Hana was interested. “I spoke to them. They seemed like a nice bunch.”

Jen cocked her head. “Did you speak to Laura?”

“Which one was she?”

Jen put her head in her hands. “The brunette...”

“Oh, the really pretty one?”

“Yes, the really pretty one...” Jen sighed. “Who has a *history* with Maxwell.”

Hana let out a gasp. “No!” She had *not* seen this coming.

“Yup.”

“And you found this out *how*? Did he tell you?”

“I worked it out. I confronted her. She admitted it.”

“I can’t believe she’d have the nerve to come to your wedding...” Hana couldn’t hide the shock from her face, and seemingly this cheered Jen up somewhat. “Wait.. I can’t believe *he* didn’t tell you..”

“I think there’s more he’s not telling me,” Jen said. “I confronted him about it yesterday morning, and he really didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, he’s not the best at opening up,” Hana acknowledged. “But to you?”

Jen nodded. “I don’t know what he’s hiding, but I don’t like it.”

“Do you think it’s something to do with what he’s doing today?” Hana was genuinely intrigued as to what he was up to.

“No,” Jen said confidently. “I know whatever it is, it’s something in his past. And whatever it is, I think it will make a lot of sense when he tells me. Because I still don’t understand why it took so long to get our relationship.. moving...”

Hana laughed. “But when you did..”

Jen blushed. “Yeah. But something wasn’t right. And I think it’s something to do with a bad experience in the past. I just hope he opens up to me eventually. I love him for who he is now. I’m not going to judge.”

Hana took her by the hand. “He will. I’m surprised he hasn’t already. You’re his everything, Jen.”

Jen blushed again. “Oh, he’s mine, too.”

“That’s better,” Hana said, letting her hand go and rubbing her cheek affectionately. She stood up. “You two will be fine. I’m sure he’ll talk to you when he’s ready.”

“Thanks, Hana. I didn’t realise how much I’d missed you these last few days. I’m so glad you’re going to be here, so we can catch up whenever we need to.”

“And I still can’t thank you enough for granting me all this space! I feel so lucky. I only expected a room. This is better than I could ever have imagined. Now, if you’ve finished your drink, shall we carry on?”

“Of course,” Jen said. “So are you happy with this room?”

“For now. Eventually, I’d like to decorate through. But I want to get my bedroom sorted next,” Hana said. “I’ve made room for my telescope by the window, so we need to get that set up. But mainly, I need to sort out my clothes. Is there a walk in wardrobe?”

Jen giggled. “I think that’s what your spare bedroom will have to be for.”

#NewNormal

The morning had gone by in a bit of a blur. He'd arrived in the capital at about nine, then there had been interviews with various publications (they'd come to *him!*) a cover photo shoot (although he knew this wasn't going to go down well) and next there had been some editorial meetings. Everything was looking good; given last week's unexpected developments he was going to need a bit more time than anticipated to work on the final chapters, so it wasn't going to get the Christmas release the publishers had originally hoped for. Still they wanted to ride on the momentum of the public interest, and get it out early in the New Year. Fine by him.

This afternoon they were going to be talking business; advances and predicted sales and promotion opportunities and advertising deals. But, he now had a couple of hours to himself and nothing to do. He thought about calling Jen, as he was missing her like crazy (today was probably equal to the longest time they'd ever been apart, just before the wedding, and he'd been asleep for some of that time) but he knew that she and Hana would be having fun getting Hana's cottage sorted and he didn't really want to disrupt that.

He was also wondering if she'd read the note yet, which made him a little nervous. He thought she'd probably let him know if she had, but no messages had come through. He sent her a message. Well, it was mainly emojis, but the following words were in there. *Hope you're having a good day, missing you x*

He sat drinking a cup of tea, twitching a little, not really knowing what to do with himself. Then he had an idea. *Rick!*

He called Rick's private number, and wasn't surprised to hear it go to voicemail. He was probably in some meeting. "Rick, hey! I'm in the capital today. Got a couple of hours free... can I pop over or are you busy? Bell me back."

He hung up and sighed. If Drake was about, he'd have been free. Obviously. But he was in Lythikos. Maxwell shuddered.

A text came back from Jen. *Hey babe. Hana's cottage is starting to take shape. How's your secret mission going? Xx*

He replied straight away. *It is going very secretly thank you very much. Anything else to report?* He didn't think she could have read the note yet, which was probably a good thing; although he had given Christopher strict instructions to make sure she got it.

Good to hear it. No all good here. Apart from that you're not here and I don't like it. What time do you think you'll be home? Xx

He tried to work that out based on the time it had taken him to get here. *Might be quite late. Don't wait up.*

A response came quickly. *You know I will xxx*

He sent a few emojis back and closed the message screen, grinning smugly to himself. He was just getting his head around the fact that time apart, even a few hours, was not always a bad thing if it meant a sweet reunion. Sure, they'd lived in each other's pockets for the last nine months,

that was probably part of the reason why they'd got so close and he had a lot to thank for that fact, but space wasn't always a bad thing. That was what he told himself when he missed her so much that it hurt.

His phone rang.

"Yo. Cordonia's newest Duke speaking."

There was a tut, followed by the unmistakeable tones of Madeleine. "Duke Maxwell. How lovely to hear from you."

"Um, *you* called *me*?"

"And you called King Rick. Who is currently in a meeting. However he has an hour free afterwards, and for some strange reason, he tells me he would love the pleasure of your company. Is Duchess Jen with you?"

"Nah. Just me. Sorry to disappoint you."

"Very well. He'll see you in twenty minutes."

Maxwell hung up and jumped to action, debating whether it would be easier to walk or get a car. He'd spent most of the morning at the hotel where they'd stayed only a few nights ago on their wedding night, which strangely seemed like quite a long time ago already. It wasn't far from the palace. But then, he'd probably need shades to hide from his adoring fans as he strutted down the street. He'd get a car. And then, it could take him straight on to the publishing office for his important meeting this afternoon.

Twenty minutes later, the car pulled up at the palace and he meandered inside, met by Rick in the hall.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" Rick said with a genuine smile as he first shook his hand, then gave him a friendly hug.

"Oh, trust me. You're doing me the favour today," Maxwell said with a wink. "I have time to kill, and I don't really know anyone else in the capital."

Rick shook his head. "You really are one of a kind, aren't you. Can I get you something to eat?"

"Nah, I'm good. Had a quick sandwich earlier. Unless you're eating?"

"I was due to. Join me?"

"Always room for a bit more," Maxwell rubbed his stomach for comedic effect.

They strolled through to the dining room.

"So.... bit quiet here now, I imagine?"

"Yes," Rick said contemplatively. "With Drake and Hana both departing yesterday, I have to confess I'm feeling at a loss. Since my ascension, I've been lucky enough to be surrounded by

my closest friends at all times. But life has to return to normality, whatever normality is for a King of course.”

“Hashtag new normal,” Maxwell said with a grin.

“Quite,” Rick said, as they reached the dining room. “So. How is life in Valtoria?”

Maxwell did his best to play it cool. “Okay, yeah, not bad really...”

“I’m surprised that you’ve been allowed out so soon into your tenure, to be quite honest with you,” Rick said with a knowing look.

Maxwell hummed nervously. “Oh, well, I had an appointment here that I couldn’t rearrange.”

“Oh?” Rick looked at him expectantly.

“Yes. And that is all you’re getting. All will become clear.”

Rick looked curious, but let it go. “So, back to your new home this evening?”

“Yup. It’s all a bit crazy though. There’s so much to fit in, and we’ve got that trial coming up, you know when that’s likely to be yet?”

Rick nodded. “Indications are that it will be the third week of November.”

“Phew. Correct answer.” Maxwell wiped his brow. “Because, you know what happens in the second week of November, don’t you?”

Rick looked blankly at him.

“Jen’s birthday!” he grinned. He’d thought Rick would have known that Jen’s birthday was November the ninth, but it seemed he had one over on him.

“Of course,” Rick acknowledged. “Were you planning anything for her?”

Maxwell nodded, slyly. “I have something up my sleeve. I did think that perhaps we could all do something together when we all get together, perhaps a night out in the capital?”

Rick sighed. “I’m not so sure that would be a good idea during such a high profile trial. But why don’t we arrange something here? It doesn’t have to be anything formal..”

Maxwell stood up and did a little dance. “I was hoping you’d suggest that! I have a few ideas. I could DJ, or we could hire a karaoke machine, or a giant bouncy castle, or we could have cocktail making lessons.. something fun! Ooh, what about wine and cheese? No.. I’ve got it... murder mystery!”

Rick nodded. “I’ll get Madeleine to do some brainstorming. But I rather like your last suggestion. Ah, our meal is here. Looks like.. steak.”

“Ooh,” Maxwell said happily. “Steaks for the table.”

They ate in silence for a little while.

“I’m glad you’re here actually,” Rick said eventually. “It felt very odd eating alone yesterday.”

“Regina not around?”

Rick shook his head. “She keeps to her own quarters, mostly.”

Maxwell looked sadly at Rick. “Does Drake normally eat with you then?”

“He never used to,” Rick explained. “But before all of this, I used to eat with my father and Regina. Since then, there have always been people around me. Now, like you said.... hashtag new normal?”

Maxwell gulped. He didn’t like to think of Rick living a lonely existence, it gave him a twang of guilt. “Drake will be back though, right?”

Rick nodded, chewing his steak. Eventually he spoke. “I haven’t heard a report as to how things are going at Lythikos yet. I fear it may not have been one of my better ideas.”

Maxwell sniggered. He personally thought it was a brilliant idea. He only wished he could be a fly on the wall.

“In any event, they will both travel back for the trial in a few weeks, as will you and the rest of the Valtorian contingent.”

“Yep. You can count on us. We’re gonna send that scum down.”

Rick nodded. “How is Lady Hana settling in?”

“Good, I think. She seems to like her accommodation.”

“And... how is Jen?”

They made awkward eye contact for a few seconds.

“She’s, uh, good.”

Rick looked away from him and across the room. “Is she happy?”

“I really hope so, Rick.”

Rick turned back to him, with a smile that Maxwell wasn’t sure how to read. “You know, if there’s anything I can ever do for the two of you, either of you, just name it.”

Maxwell sighed. “You know you’ve done more than enough for us. And that’s without taking the honeymoon into consideration.”

Rick put his cutlery down, and continued to look Maxwell in the eye. “I will find the right person eventually, won’t I?”

“Of course you will. You’re practically the world’s most eligible bachelor.”

He nodded. “As you know, when we met Jen, we met her as equals. Do you think I need to explore other options, try to find someone else who doesn’t know I’m a King?”

Maxwell wasn't so sure. "I don't think so. You told her who you were that night in New York. And, and I'm so, so sorry for pointing this out... but she never felt the same way for you as you did for her."

Rick didn't look impressed. "I hope you're not suggesting that your new wife is some sort of crown chaser?"

Ouch. Cutting. "No. Her intentions were genuine. It was me that got all excitable about your connection. And I pushed it, and pushed it, so much that I didn't see what was right in front of me. That it was me she was falling for, not you."

Rick glared at him. Oof. Perhaps he'd crossed a line.

"What I'm trying to say is, you're holding up Jen as the love of your life, but if you look at the bigger picture, you know she can't be. And whoever the love of your life does turn out to be, they're out there, and they're going to love you regardless of whether you're a King or a bartender. So, just take it one day at a time. It'll happen when you least expect it."

Rick still said nothing. Maxwell finished his last few mouthfuls, and considered his escape route.

He stood up. "Well, it's been lovely eating with y.."

"Sit down, Maxwell."

He sat down, nervously.

Rick looked down at the table. "I do appreciate your honesty. And I'm sorry for making this awkward. Some days are easier. Some are tough. But as I said to you back then, we've been friends for a long time."

Maxwell raised his eyebrows. "Some would say too long. Not me."

"Glad to hear it. But, as I've said to you before, I'd be a fool to let a woman come between us, even one so...." He sighed, clearly not knowing what to say.

".....American?" proposed Maxwell.

Rick laughed. "Good suggestion. Yes." He smiled at Maxwell again, and this time Maxwell knew he was genuine.

Going very secretly

It was getting dark when Jen returned to the main house. She and Hana had just taken Chance for an evening walk and said their goodnights. By now they had completely transformed the cottage into a perfect living space, fit for an accomplished lady. Jen had a few ideas for how she could improve it further, but Hana was delighted with it, and after months of living out of guest rooms, Jen understood that totally. Had the roles been reversed, she would have been just as happy.

It had been so nice just to talk to Hana like in the old days, when they were both simply suitors for the Prince, getting to know one another without any further complications. And it was probably the only way she'd have been able to confide in Hana about the whole Laura thing, and for Hana to open up to her about her new feelings, which Jen found very intriguing. Jen knew that having Hana living so close by could only be a good thing for their friendship.

She made her way up to the bedroom and switched on the light. She noticed straight away that today, while she'd been with Hana, someone had changed the light switch to a dimmer, as per her request yesterday. Handy. She wandered over to the bed, and spotted another dimmer switch there. Perfect. She played with it, nodding with satisfaction. Hopefully Christopher hadn't seen through her excuse that it was because she liked to read in bed. When she lived in New York that had been true, but these days, there was only one bedtime activity she could think about. And now they had mood lighting.

She sighed as she plonked herself down onto the bed. Mood lighting wasn't much fun on your own. And while she'd enjoyed catching up with Hana, today had been a struggle. She was a little annoyed with herself; she was a strong independent woman; she shouldn't feel so lost when Maxwell wasn't there. As life went on, no doubt the two of them spending time apart would happen more often, and she would eventually get used to it. But right now, and with the trauma of what had happened last week still raw, she didn't feel right when they were apart.

She looked at her phone fondly, but there were no more messages since their lunchtime exchange. *It is going very secretly, thank you very much.* What was he up to? How long would she have to wonder? There was an irony in the fact that she felt that she knew less about her husband now that they were married than she had when they were just good friends.

She decided to get ready for bed, but as she was undressing, she placed her hand on her jeans pocket and felt a rustle. *Oh – that letter. I'd all but forgotten it.* She put it by her bedside, finished undressing, and perched on the side of the bed. She took it, and opened the envelope.

Hmm. I recognise that font. Oh. I know who this is from. Her jaw dropped and she chastised herself for not opening the letter earlier. *And I think I know what this is about.*

She got into bed, made herself comfortable, and began to read.

Twenty thousand Lauras

Okay, picture the scene. Guy turns up in a foreign country, just about to start his first year studying Estate Management and Business Studies, because that's what Bertrand had started to study before he'd had to quit to come back to look after his thirteen year old brother in his hour of need - while actually managing an estate and studying some business. Real world lessons for Bertrand, not such real world lessons for Maxwell. But I digress.

I'm lucky enough to be in a large shared house with six other students. I've got my own bathroom - not for me an accommodation block with toilets and showers off corridors, I do witness such monstrous places on my travels, but that's another story. Immediately, we all get along. Confusingly, the first guy I meet is called.. Max. So we then go and introduce ourselves to everyone else. Max and Maxwell, yeah. How do they tell us apart. Well, I'm not about to drop the bombshell that I'm a member of the Cordonian nobility. But, after a couple of nights, and a drunken game of truth or dare, Jack, Amy, Greg, Harry, Laura and Max all know I'm a Lord, and have abandoned my forename in favour of His Lordship. Brilliant.

But it does have its advantages. Heading into those first student parties with a group of friends who are telling everyone that their friend is a Cordonian Lord who needs to get laid did the trick. Within a week I've not only got off the mark but notched a fair few more marks - who knew life could be so good away from Bertrand's watchful gaze? This goes on for some time, thanks to a grapevine of appreciative lovers, the copious amounts of alcohol in the vicinity and the never ending generosity of the sexual health clinic.

As you can imagine, my hedonistic lifestyle is not only a source of amusement for my close friends (we now collectively call ourselves the Sexy Seven) but a distraction from my studies. I somehow manage to scrape through that first year without dropping out. I come home for the annual Beaumont Bash, and bring my friends with me. House Beaumont can still afford that sort of thing right now! They have a ball and get into the spirit of things. They meet Rick, and Drake, and Leo, and they all get on fine. I seem to think Amy and Drake got on very well once, although whether either of them remembered it afterwards, I'm not so sure.

So yeah, life is good. In the second year, I hit a happy medium, still having fun with the ladies, but trying to keep my head above water so I didn't flunk the whole course. I join StreetDanceSoc, and BreakDanceSoc, and make more friends that way, doing what I really love best. And this carries on into the third year. Can I tell you now anything I learned, studies wise? Don't be silly. But I learn how to really write, I guess. Which may well come in useful, somewhere down the line..

I get on with everyone. But in the third year, I particularly bond with Laura. She'd been going out with Max on and off for most of the first two years, but over the second summer, they split up, quite amicably actually. They remain friends. They'd never been that serious really. Laura and I have always been good friends, but now she becomes my best friend, my sidekick, my sounding board, my dance partner, my truest defender. Let's face it, she becomes my Jen. Just.. maybe like a lesser Jen. Maybe Jen version 1, the beta version before all the bugs have been ironed out. Jen lite? Whatever, you get what I mean. She isn't you.

She's also my wingwoman. We'll both go out on the pull together. Legend tells of the night that we managed to seduce a couple apart. I cannot confirm or deny that rumour, but it was

convenient as we both ended up in the same flat the next morning so could share a taxi home.

But, one night, we have a house party. I've made my signature drink, the Pineapple Paradise Punch. And rather a lot of it. Laura and I are the last ones standing, we drink and talk together late into that night, but then I get the shock of my life when she kisses me. And things immediately go further that night. And the next morning. And most of the next day. We can't get enough of each other.

Life is good for a few weeks. Our housemates soon wise up to what is going on – there isn't much point in trying to hide it. I realise that if there is one thing better than having a best friend it's having a best friend who you can jump any time you like. We're inseparable and we have a *lot* of fun.

I get thinking, though. It's now coming up to the end of my college course. I have to make a decision as to what I am going to do. Bertrand wants me to come back to Cordonia. That's never been my plan. I am *alive* in London. Yeah, I miss my friends back home, especially Rick, but my new ones, especially Laura, are everything to me now. Laura fills my thoughts all day every day. When we're not together, I hate it. I just feel like I've lost a limb.

One night Laura and I are lying together and I keep thinking about how it would feel having to leave her behind. I know I have to do something. I shake her awake, and I tell her that I love her and I want to stay with her after graduation, whether that's here or whether she comes back to Cordonia with me. I don't care which, but I can't imagine life without her. I guess I think I do love her at this point. She just looks at me, and tells me to go back to sleep. The next morning, she's gone.

Obviously she hasn't gone far. Just back to her own bedroom, where I soon find her. She lets me in eventually, and tells me that she thinks things have moved too fast between us, and she wasn't ready for any of this talk about love and living together after graduation, and that she thought it was just about the sex for me, as that was apparently the way our relationship had been defined - so when I'd told her I loved her it had terrified her.

And, well, that's it. I try to talk her round, but it doesn't work. Things are super awkward between us from then on. A couple weeks later, I go home for the summer. I never come back. Bertrand tells me that he needs my help more, that we can't afford for me to keep travelling back and forward to London anymore. I say I'll get a job after graduation, but he says the whole point of me getting that degree (and I do scrape it, believe it or not) was to give me the skills to help him run our estate. And I think, given what has just happened, it might be for the best. So, I decide to skip my graduation ceremony.

I soon realise, after I've been back home for a few months, that I probably hadn't been in love with Laura, because although thinking about what had happened still hurts, it's more because I'm disappointed with myself over messing everything up than the fact that I miss her. I do miss her, but it's the friendship I miss more than anything. And that's gone. We communicate by text for a bit, but that soon starts to fade out, and I know it's my own fault. I messed it up. Big style.

I eventually tell Bertrand what had happened with Laura. And he just frowns and says, "Good. I hope that taught you a lesson." And, it did. It taught me a few lessons, actually.

It taught me that a good friendship is more important than anything and it might not always be worth risking.

It taught me that whilst I might be good at some aspects of relationships I wasn't very good at others. And it probably wasn't worth bothering.

It taught me that jumping into bed with someone straight away isn't always the best strategy if you think they're gonna really mean something to you.

It taught me to be careful before I let anyone get too close.

And I was fine. I just got on with life. Single and ready to mingle, that was my mantra from then on. It was definitely for the best that I couldn't go on the way I had at college, due in part to living with Bertrand, due in part to things being very different in Cordonia. Everyone knows everyone here. As I've said to you before, the dating pool for a Cordonian Lord is pretty empty. Sure, there *were* people who drifted in and out of my life (and my bed). But I guess I had my defences up, and I was probably as much to blame for them not sticking around as they were. There was no pressure on me to find anyone, and I always said I'd wait until Bertrand settled down. Or until the right person came along.

And, eventually, *you* came along,

Jen, I know our situation was complicated. I fell for you so hard, so quickly, but obviously I had to hide it. Same as you did. But when we went up to that rooftop lounge on that starry night, and you said what you said.. I panicked. I know you saw it, though I tried my best to hide it. I guess I had always felt safe with you, even feeling the way I felt about you, because I *never* thought you would feel the same, I assumed you would marry Rick, and the voices in my head (hey, even the voices around me!) told me not to be ridiculous, that you would never look twice at a screwup like me.

But, you did. And, on that rooftop, everything that happened back then just came back to haunt me. Because you were worth twenty thousand Lauras to me, and the thought of things going that way with you just terrified me more than you'll ever know.

So, that's why it took me a little while to get my head around things. And that's why I didn't want to rush into anything physical with you because I didn't want you to think our relationship was defined by that. I wanted you to know I loved you for all of you. Okay, maybe proposing to you after six days was a liiittle rash. It was a spur of the moment decision. But, after what had just happened I knew I had to let you know how much I loved you and wanted you in my life permanently, and I just had a funny feeling in my stomach that you would say yes. Because even in those few precious days between the rooftop and the safehouse, you made me feel like a different person. Knowing how you felt about me just made me feel braver, stronger. Like I could do anything. And it still does.

I'm sorry I never told you all this before. I'm sorry if things between us didn't get off to the smoothest start as a result. And, I'm *reeeeallly* sorry that Laura turned up to the wedding, I honestly didn't think she would. (Yeah, yeah, I know we said no more secrets.. but it was so long ago I didn't even think it was relevant, and you know it *all* now.) Finally, I'm sorry I couldn't talk about all of this earlier. I just thought getting it down on paper would be a better way of explaining myself. I'm getting a bit good at this writing thing, you know. Watch this space..

Anyway, Jen, I love you, and you're the best thing that ever happened to me. There's not a second goes by that I'm not eternally grateful to you for having the courage to tell me how you felt in such difficult circumstances. It's not like I ever did or said anything (knowingly!) to encourage you because I was so busy trying to hide my own feelings for you. You really had to take

a gamble – things really could have got awkward for you if I hadn't felt like I do. I knew in that moment that I loved you, and I always will.

I leave you, my dear wife, with a poem –

Though my travels take me far and wide,

Across the Cordonian countryside,

I will return to my new home,

Valtoria and House Beaumont-Jones!

I will be back before it's dark,

I'll creep in so Chance doesn't bark,

I'll knock on the door for old times sake,

And serve you up a slice of cake*

I'll put on some music, and we can dance,

And you can be my Royal Romance.

My little blossom, this is true,

No-one's ever loved anyone like I love you.

(*I won't, I just couldn't think of anything else that rhymed with sake! But I can guarantee that you won't be disappointed with what I serve you up tonight. Bow chicka wow wow.. laaaterrzzz!)

Emergency spoons

An hour or so later, the bedroom door slowly opened, and she peered across the dimly lit room from her oh too comfortable position underneath the sumptuous layers of quilts and covers.

“It is I! Your devoted husband, back from his travels, to furnish you with this gift...”

She giggled as he closed the door behind him and held up what looked like a tub of ice-cream as if it were some grand trophy.

“It better be cookie dough...” she commented.

He put on his dramatically-wounded expression. “I can’t believe you would even question that.”

She watched as he wandered over to the bed and sat down next to her, putting the tub of ice-cream down on the dresser. “And, I seem to think we have emergency spoons in one of these drawers.... Ah! Yes! Here we are...”

She looked curiously at him. “Babe, we moved in what, three days ago, and you’ve already got a stash of *emergency spoons* in our bedroom?”

“Yeeeahhh..”

“Firstly, when? And secondly, why?” She couldn’t keep a straight face. “And, thirdly, are there not more important things for you to have at your disposal here? Like...” She giggled. “A month’s supply of black Gucci shirts?”

“Yesterday. Because ice-cream. And yes, but they’re all still in laundry. Or at h...” He stopped himself. “Or at Beaumont Manor.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“Hey, it’s going to take me a while to get my head around the fact that this amazing place is my home now, Jen...”

“We need to go get all your stuff, then. That will help. We should do that this weekend. Road trip?”

“I’ll make a playlist. Ooh!” He shot up. “That reminds me! I promised you a playlist for our reunion this evening...”

“Maxwell, it’s been, what, fourteen hours..?”

“Yeah, yeah, but I don’t like it when you’re not there,” he said, straight faced. “I’m not used to it. And the last time we were apart for that long..”

She caught his gaze, recognising the fear in his eyes.

“Hey,” she said, reaching an arm out to him. “I’m safe now. And, you’re here to keep me safe.”

He took her hand. "Through the power of my music! Hey, you getting out of bed to dance?"

"That depends on how good the music is," she teased.

Maxwell pulled out his phone. "I see they sorted out the mood lighting. The next thing we need in here is a Bluetooth speaker.. but for now this will do..." Upbeat music began to play from his phone. "Good enough for you, Your Grace?"

"Ah, I might stay here and dance," she purred. "Getting up seems like a lot of effort."

"Oh, hell no, Jen, you're.." He whipped the duvet off. "...*naked*?"

"Mm-hmm.."

His face was a picture. "That, I was *not* expecting. But.. I *do* endorse it."

She patted the mattress beside her, suggestively. "Why don't you come and dance with me?"

"Well, now that you come to mention it... perhaps some horizontal dancing doesn't seem such a bad idea.." He knelt over her, still fully dressed, and grinned. "After all, the view's pretty nice.."

She giggled, and hooked her arms around his neck to bring him down towards her. She sighed as he peppered her neck with kisses. Just as she thought about liberating his chest from his signature Gucci, he pulled himself upright, and looked to his right with a wicked grin.

"Oh, look what we have here..."

He reached for the tub of ice-cream and placed it on her stomach.

"Oh!" She hardly had the chance to react. "Wow. That's cold..."

"You fancy some?"

There was only one answer to that question, and she nodded, eagerly.

He reached in the drawer for a spoon, and opened the container, taking a generous spoonful. "One for me..." He took a large mouthful. "Mmmm. Derish. Mmmmm." He placed the spoon back in the tub. "Now. One for you..." But he didn't place the spoonful in her mouth.

She squealed with a tortured pleasure. "Maxwell!!!"

"Oops! Dropped it. Hey, I guess those beautiful bouncy things are so big, they're always getting in the way..."

She giggled. "Those what now?"

"It's okay, don't worry. I know how to clean this mess up. But, we don't want to be wasting this lovely ice cream. So, I'm afraid there's only one thing for it." He unbuttoned his shirt carefully. "It's a difficult job, but someone's got to do it..."

Her giggles continued as he threw his shirt to one side, but soon turned into sighs as he drew his lips down to her chest and began to lick the ice-cream, along with all of her cares, away.

The playlist was still going sometime later as they both lay in the bed together, an empty tub of ice-cream lying by the side of the bed and flushed smiles on their sleepy faces.

“I just realised something,” she said to him as she gazed into his blue eyes.

“That you prefer mint choc chip? Cause I can get you mint choc chip next time..”

“Not that. You didn’t knock on the door, like you said you would,” she giggled.

His face fell. “*Oh*. So you got my note.”

“Yep.”

“And.. you read it?”

She sat up. “Aha. Every word of it.”

He gulped. “Even *notched*?”

She nodded.

He shuddered, and blushed. “And, we’re okay?”

She sighed, and tousled his hair. “Of *course* we’re okay. I love that you wanted to share all that with me. I think I already had a good understanding of why you are who you are.. but it all makes perfect sense now.”

She could see him visibly relax.

“It’s all part of what makes you the confident, sweet guy that I fell in love with. I love that you trust me enough to bare your soul like that to me. And, for the record, having got both sides of the story, I think you were both equally at fault for the breakdown of your friendship. Although, if you’d stayed friends, I’m not so sure we’d have been here now. You might have moved back to London. You might not have been able to join Rick in New York. Just remember, things happen for a reason.”

“You think?”

“I do,” she said, snuggling closer to him. “Like, the reason you were such a bed-hopper back then was obviously to perfect your skills for my benefit.”

He laughed. “Perfect, huh?”

She nodded. “Did you not hear me expressing my appreciation for your perfection just now?”

“I think Hana probably heard it from her cottage..”

She threw a pillow at him. “Right, Beaumont.. let’s hear *you* scream.”

You don't know me

Hell, why was it always so cold here in Lythikos? By rights at this time of year he should be gently acclimatising to the Cordonian winter, but here he was, layering up on a daily basis.

Drake had just come up to his room to grab another sweater, and pondered putting on the Henley one that Jones had convinced him to buy in New York. He laughed to himself, fondly, thinking about their little shopping trip. That day had ended up being quite eventful for Jones. She just hadn't known it then.

But that day, even without the added complexity of Jones finally beginning her seemingly doomed love affair with Maxwell, everything had already seemed so complicated. Sure, at that point they'd identified who was responsible for the Tariq incident, and were getting closer to bringing Tariq in, but it had still all been a little daunting. If they'd only known what was in front of them all then, in particular Anton Severus, they'd have realised how simple their lives actually were at that point.

Still, all was quiet on the western front. For now. Drake had a feeling that it wasn't as straightforward as that, though. And that was why, despite being outwardly critical of Rick's decision to post him here until the trial, he'd accepted it. He threw the Henley on, put his coat back on over the top of it, and headed back downstairs, immediately coming face to face with his charge. Or, should he say, his nemesis.

She was standing at the bottom of the stairs, glaring up at him. "I'm pretty sure Rick expected you to put more hours in than this."

"Calm yourself, Olivia. I went up to get an extra sweater." He gestured to it as he reached the bottom of the stairs. "I'd been wondering where *you* had got to this morning, actually."

She huffed. "What I do is none of your business, Drake. Your business is to protect me. Even though I don't need protecting."

"Yeah, but I need to know where you are in order to do that."

"Like I said. I don't need protecting."

She strutted off, and Drake rolled his eyes in frustration. *The things he did for these people.*

He slumped down on a nearby sofa, and got out his phone to check his messages. There was one from Hana. A photo of her standing outside her new house at Valtoria, presumably taken by Jones. *I can't wait for you to come and visit!*

He sighed, and tapped out a message. *I'm happy for you, Hana. Can't wait to see it either.*

He threw his phone down and put his head in his hands. Handling Hana had been tricky the last few weeks. They'd grown close over the Unity tour, both finding a sympathetic ear in the other over their mutual unrequited affections for a certain person, and the endless trial of seeing her so happy with someone else. It wasn't that they weren't happy for Jones, or Maxwell. Far from that. They were both really happy for them. It just felt.. complicated.

And it got more complicated when Drake realised, on that crazy night in Vegas, that Hana was starting to look at him differently. At first he'd thought he was imagining it, as he'd been convinced she played for the other side, a fact that had always put him at ease with her. But Drake wasn't stupid. He soon got to know when a woman was into him. And seemingly Hana's sexuality was more complex than he'd previously thought.

The frustrating thing was that he did find her attractive. She hadn't knocked him off his feet like her friend had; but she had over the course of a few weeks been a safe diversion. But it didn't feel so safe now. And he didn't know where to go from here. He didn't want to encourage anything. She'd already had her heart broken once this year. So had he. There was no sense in them being each other's consolation prize. And he'd spoken to her about this last week, before they'd gone their separate ways.

He heard the sound of heels tapping in his direction, and sat up to attention.

"Why are you always so miserable?"

He glared at her. "Wouldn't you be if you were in my situation? Forced to be a redundant bodyguard to a woman who loathes me?"

She laughed. "Oh, come on Drake. I might not like you, but I don't *loathe* you. Lighten up a little. Here." She produced a flask from somewhere on her person, and passed it to him.

He looked at her suspiciously, but took the flask. "If this is that horrible nog stuff.."

"Try it."

Hell, what did he have to lose. It smelt like whisky. He took a swig. It was. "Hey, thanks. But not sure I should be drinking on the job."

Olivia looked distant for a moment. "You really do think of this as a job, don't you."

"That's what it is. I'm only doing this as a favour to Rick. I don't really care what happens to you."

She glared at him. "What you don't realise is that I'm getting to know you better. And I know you don't mean that."

He sighed, as she sat down next to him, and crossed her legs carefully.

"You don't know me, Olivia Nevraakis."

"No? I wouldn't be so sure about that. I know that you're bound by a sense of duty to do anything that Rick asks of you, even if it's something you're not comfortable with. I know that you're dealing with a lot of guilt over what happened to Savannah. And I know that you're in love with Jen."

He stood up, furious. "You don't know me!"

Olivia laughed. "Ouch. That last one hit a nerve."

He turned to go, but she stood up and pulled him back. "Sit down and drink your whisky."

Ah, what was the point? He sat down, glaring at her. "Go on then. Tell me your theory as to what's going on in my head."

She sat down again. "It's obvious. You've been a lovesick puppy since day one. I knew that you'd never make a move though. You'd never do that to Rick."

Drake sighed, asking himself the hypothetical question he had asked himself countless times. *Would he have? If things had been different?* "Never."

Olivia raised her eyebrows. "Yeah. I figured. Not *all* of Rick's friends have that level of loyalty. As we have learned."

Drake knew that Olivia wasn't particularly a fan of Maxwell's, but her tone was surprisingly icy. "I'm guessing you didn't see that one coming."

"I didn't. Worked it out pretty quickly once she told me she'd said no to Rick. They were both hopeless when it came to hiding it from that point. But until then, it was simply too bizarre to imagine. You?"

He nodded. "Only because Jones confided in me as to how she felt, before anything happened."

"Ouch. I just don't get the appeal. You know, we'd have all been a lot better off without your little jester friend and his scheming."

Drake glared at Olivia. "Explain."

"If he hadn't had his bright idea of bringing her over, Rick wouldn't have fallen in love with her either. I'd be Queen now. You'd be blissfully unaware that you missed out, and everything would have been as it should be." She grimaced. "Ironical really, given how things ended up. He should've just stayed in New York with her, instead of dragging us all through this stupid mess."

Drake laughed. Olivia had a very valid point. But this wasn't a conversation he was willing to continue. The pain was still too raw, and he wasn't comfortable with her venom levels towards Maxwell. He wasn't solely to blame for her predicament. "You're forgetting something. You couldn't have married Rick. You were already married. This whole Anton mess would still have kicked off." He passed the flask back to her.

"Agreed," Olivia said, taking a drag herself. "Hey, how much of this have you.."

"Hey, you didn't set a limit.."

"I didn't think I needed to." She scowled, and put the flask away wherever it had been in the first place. "I guess I would have been Anton's sole captive. On my wedding night. Rick would've come for me. You would've come for Rick. Hana.... Well, Hana would have been irrelevant.."

This wasn't on. "Hey. I won't have you talk about Hana like that. She'd have been there. We'd have helped you. I fully believe that."

Olivia's eyes narrowed. "Interesting."

"But with two fewer people, would we have been able to fend them all off? I'm not so sure. You claim you did all the hard work, but I saw how determined Jones was, that night. Without her, things might not have gone the same way."

“Who knows. Possibly not,” Olivia said, her expression fond. Drake knew that although Olivia still had complex emotions swimming around her head, she was more fond of Jones than she would ever admit.

“Anyway, never mind the what ifs. What happened happened. We deal with it.”

Olivia smiled smugly. “I knew I was right.”

He shook his head. “You think what you want to think, Olivia.”

“Don’t worry. I will.”

And with that, she stood up and strutted away, without a look back at him. He let out an audible groan.

True Beaumonts

“Ahhh,” said Maxwell as their car pulled up outside Beaumont Manor. “Home sweet.... No. Wait. Stop. I mean, *former* home sweet *former* home?”

Jen shook her head, and ruffled his hair. “Hey, this place will always be a home to you, and I don’t have a problem with that.”

“Phew,” he said with a nervous laugh. “I actually thought you might kill me there. Right, come on. Let’s see what Chance makes of the place.”

She frowned. “You did tell Bertrand we were bringing Chance with us, didn’t you?”

“Busted. Well, it’s too late to take him home now. Come on, let’s go!”

He burst out of the car and ran around to open Jen’s door before their driver got there. “Your Grace. Welcome back to Ramsford.”

“Why thank you, Your Grace.” She took his hand and got out of the car as elegantly as she could, given the two hour drive. “Come on Chance.” Chance, who had been curled up between them, hopped out after her.

At that, the door was opened, to reveal a beaming Savannah. “Hey, you two!”

“Hey,” Jen said, greeting her future sister-in-law with a warm hug. “Thanks for having us this weekend.”

“It’s an honour,” Savannah said. “Your first weekend as Mr and Mrs and you choose to spend it with us?”

Jen looked at Maxwell, an evil glint in her eye. “I’m just sick of seeing him in the same three outfits..”

He laughed. “Yeah. Living out of a bag for eight months has taken its toll on these shirts.”

Savannah laughed. “Well, hopefully you’ll get the chance to rediscover your wardrobe, *and* the contents of your room, while you’re here. Bertrand is... *keen* to re-establish it as a nice guest room. You know, for when you both come and stay?”

Jen completely got that Bertrand would be impatient for Maxwell to clear out all his worldly goods. She was herself curious to see the contents of his bedroom, it had been forbidden territory to her thus far.

Maxwell nodded. “Ah, how brotherly of him. Where is he, anyway?”

A loud groan of disgust was heard from beyond Savannah.

Savannah looked at Maxwell in amusement. “He’s in the drawing room, changing Bartie.”

Maxwell strode past Savannah. “This, I need to see.”

Savannah smiled widely at Jen. "So, how is married life?"

Jen couldn't lie. "It's the *best*."

Savannah raised an eyebrow. "Been enjoying getting to know each other better?"

"Well, yes and no," Jen said. "I feel that we already knew each other inside-out before the I dos..."

"Or the hell yeahs, even," Savannah commented.

Jen giggled. "Those too. But yeah. I know me and Maxwell were practically already living together, but there was always so much going on, so many other people around, that quality time was like gold dust. Now we've made those promises to each other, and we actually have a home together.. I really don't know how I could be happier right now."

At that they heard what sounded like Maxwell screeching from behind them, followed by Bertrand's raised tones. "Barthelemy Jackson Walker, please refrain from urinating in the direction of your uncle Maxwell."

Jen and Savannah looked at each other and laughed.

"Yeah. It's been special so far," Jen eventually continued, toying with her wedding ring. "I'm a lucky lady."

Savannah nodded. "I have to say, the last few weeks have been special for me too." She glanced at the ring on her finger. "I feel like I finally belong here now."

"So you should," said Jen as they walked into the manor, Chance trotting alongside them. She glanced around, noticing some subtle differences in the arrangement of furniture and décor. "I can see you're putting your mark on the place already.."

Savannah laughed. "Well, my mother might have helped me with that. She took one look at the place and said something along the lines of, hell, how long has it been since a woman lived here? She got straight to work."

Jen giggled. "I can just imagine Bertrand's reaction.."

Savannah smiled. "Yeah. I think by the end of her visit they'd just about learned how to tolerate each other's presence."

The two of them headed into the drawing room where they found Bertrand showering wet wipes in Maxwell's direction, and Maxwell frantically scrubbing his black shirt. Bartie was lying quite happily on the floor, kicking and giggling.

"Our nephew did *not* respect the Gucci," Maxwell groaned as he looked in Jen's direction.

Savannah giggled. "Aw, I'm guessing you learned the hard way the number one danger of changing a baby boy. Always put a wet wipe over the dinky when locating a fresh diaper..."

Bertrand was holding his hands out. "At least he didn't have to process the excrement that I discovered on removing the original one."

“I was only trying to help,” Maxwell said in mock outrage. “And he fires his little pistol at my chest.” He gestured to the damp patch on his shirt. “Point blank range!”

Jen and Savannah were by this point overcome with laughter, and Jen could only shake her head as Bertrand headed in the direction of the bathroom to wash his hands.

“Well,” Savannah eventually said. “At least you know now, Maxwell. For future reference.” She looked at Jen pointedly when she spoke, and Jen couldn’t help but beam at the thought, but when she caught Maxwell’s eye, she was met by a look of horror. *Oh snap. Is he ever going to want kids? He wasn’t keen on the idea the last time we spoke about it. Still, it’s far too soon to bring the subject up again.*

Perhaps noticing the tension, Savannah picked up Bartie. “Are you going to show Auntie Jen how you walk with your walker now?”

“He’s walking?” Maxwell said, his smile returning.

“Well, nearly,” Savannah explained. “He’s still only nine months old. He’s pulling himself up and kind of shuffling along though.”

Bertrand came back into the room. “True Beaumonts walk before their first birthday, and Bartie will be no exception.”

Savannah smiled. “He still won’t technically be a Beaumont at that point..”

“Nonsense,” Bertrand said, throwing his arms around Savannah and Bartie. “He’s always been a Beaumont. As have we all here.”

Jen smiled fondly at Bertrand. “So, have you two set a date?”

“April,” said Savannah in excitement. “And, get this! We’re getting married on Mom’s ranch in Texas!”

Jen looked first at Maxwell in puzzlement, and they both turned to Bertrand, who was grimacing as he spoke. “Yes, it’s going to be... marvellous.”

At this, Chance trotted into the room, to Bartie’s excited coos.

Bertrand sighed, and glared at Maxwell. “Did I give you permission to bring that mutt with you?”

Maxwell folded his arms. “Listen up. Your son just pissed all over me. I think a few dog hairs on the furniture is fair compensation.”

Jen looked at her husband, impressed with his new-found assertiveness towards his brother. “I’ll make sure Chance is on his best behaviour, Bertrand, don’t worry. I can’t speak for Maxwell, though.”

Percival

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After lunch and a little more socialising with Bertrand and Savannah, it was finally time for Maxwell to tackle his bedroom. He was hoping he could keep Jen downstairs for a little while when he began his task, as he hadn't stepped into it since the day before the engagement tour began at Fydelia, and even at that point it was in an ungodly mess. Now, four months later, it was probably going to smell like someone had died in there. But, amongst the muddle, he knew that there were treasures to be found and transported to his new home.

He stood up from the table. "Right. If you'll excuse me."

He dashed out of the dining room and headed towards the staircase, but was distracted by the open study door as he passed it. Yes, that was right. He was going to show Jen something. He crept in, and glanced at the old oil painting on the back wall. At least Mrs Walker hadn't moved this beauty anywhere. He crept towards it, and grabbed his phone from his pocket to take a quick selfie of himself next to the painting. He looked at the result, and laughed.

"What are you doing, babe?"

He turned to see Jen leaning against the study door, a curious expression on her face. "I thought you were going upstairs to start packing? Savannah was saying she found you some boxes.."

"Oh... just... hey... remember I told you about this painting?"

Jen's eyes widened and she approached it. "Percival Beaumont." She studied it for a few moment. "My goodness, Maxwell. I can definitely see what Bertrand means."

"You can?"

She nodded, biting her lip. "He's like a sexy renaissance version of you."

He pondered on that for a moment. "Wait, are you saying I'm not.."

"That beard, though." She stood back a little. "I'd get him to shave that off straight away."

"I'm guessing you wouldn't be too keen on the idea of me growing one then.."

"I'm pulling rank if you ever consider it," she said playfully, touching his chin. "As Duchess of Valtoria, I forbid you to cover those cute dimples with facial fuzz."

"You have no such jurisdiction here in Ramsford," he retorted. "I'm staying here and locking myself in my room without a razor for a month."

"You couldn't live without me for a week, let alone a month," she said smugly, and the annoying thing was that he knew that she was right.

He drew her in for a kiss, which felt a little bit like breaking the rules here in the study. Mind you, Bertrand clearly didn't follow those rules, given that his nephew had apparently been conceived in

here. *Eww, don't think about that Maxwell. Just keep kissing your hot wife.*

Afterwards, she turned and leant into him, looking out at the painting again. "Do you know much about him?"

"I remember a few things from my family history studies. He had a younger brother called Emery, we don't know what he looked like but I'm willing to wager that he was Bertrand's double.."

Jen giggled. "I guess we'll never know."

"Back to Percival, though. Legend has it that Queen Genevieve of Cordonía was madly in love with him, and he with her. But as he had already made an advance on her sister Annalisa, his principles would not allow him to follow his heart."

Jen tutted. "Oh, you Beaumont men. You're all the same."

"Hey, I followed my heart eventually."

"After some persuasion." She kissed him on the cheek.

"Yeah, so anyway, she went on to marry Rick's ancestor King Fabian in the end." He had a thought. "But think about it Jen, if Percival had married Queen Genevieve, he'd have ended up a King... and I'd have been *royalty*!"

"Oh, I'm loving the irony.." Jen giggled. "*Rick* would have brought me over to Cordonía to compete for *your* hand.."

He laughed with her for a moment, but then stopped suddenly. "Wait, what about Bertrand?"

"Oh, good point. Well, maybe he'd abdicated like Leo did or something.."

"Nah. Can't see that. He'd never shirk on his responsibilities..."

"To be fair, he'd make a great King," Jen mused. "But, just for the purposes of this exercise, say something had happened.."

"Well, he had a child out of wedlock..." Maxwell pointed out. "And the shame he felt compelled him to abdicate the throne..."

"YES!" Jen giggled, turning to place her hands on his shoulders. "And you were suddenly thrown into being King, and needed a bride ASAP.."

"So the question is," said Maxwell, pulling her close. "Would you have gradually fallen for your handsome sponsor, Lord Rick of House Rys, while he made fruitless attempts to get the two of us together?"

"Hell no. I'd have been, get that crown on me already. I'm gonna be King Maxwell's possession."

She kissed him, long and sweet, and for a minute, he felt kind of sorry for Percival.

"Oh. And the other thing I know about Percival Beaumont is that he had a tattoo on his..."

"Chest?"

Maxwell winked. “Backside.”

Jen’s expression was thoughtful. “Where’s the portrait of that?”

Chapter End Notes

If you're intrigued as to how the alternative universe they're discussing might have panned out, please check out my fic "The Queen Maxwell Needs"

How perfection can be improved upon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You can come in now!”

Jen had been standing patiently outside in the corridor, reminiscing by herself a little about the happy days she’d spent here, just prior to the engagement tour. Although she’d stayed here with Bertrand and Maxwell for three weeks all told, she’d never once been allowed in Maxwell’s room. Now it seemed her curiosity was finally about to be indulged.

She stepped inside, and looked around. Maxwell was standing somewhat proudly in front of her, surrounded by three black sacks. Despite this, the room still seemed a little untidy and cluttered.

“You’ve binned all your mucky magazines then,” she giggled.

He put on an expression of sheer innocence. “Me? As if I would possess such things..”

She nodded slyly, and glanced around the room inquisitively.

“I found these though. Have a look.” He showed her a box full of goodies.

“Ooh, diaries, I’ll have to have a read of those later... photo albums, they should be funny... *poetry*, good job I already know about the calibre of your poetry... what’s this? A mixtape?”

He took it from her, and posed dramatically. “That is no mixtape. That is my work of art, my debut album.. DJ Beau-Music’s Neat Beats. Featuring R-Dogg on backing vocals.”

“R-Dogg? Who’s that?”

“If you listen, you will learn.”

“Got a tape deck?”

“Over there,” he said, gesturing towards an ancient looking music system. “Not sure it still works, though.” He threw the tape back into the box. “I bet we can find something at Valtoria that will play it. If not, you now know what to get me for Christmas.”

“I somehow thought your room would be bigger than this,” she said, looking around.

“It used to seem quite big before all this stuff built up,” he admitted, still picking things up and putting them in a black sack. “Big wardrobe over there takes up space, for all my Gucci shirts..”

She opened the wardrobe door curiously, and laughed. “Why am I not surprised. They’re all *black*..”

“And obviously, the turntables take up a lot of space..”

Jen turned her attention to the corner of the room where he pointed, to see the afore-mentioned music system. Beyond it lay DJ turntables and a mixing deck, recording equipment, and... what was that?

“Oh my god, Maxwell, you have a *guitar*?”

He nodded, as she went over to investigate.

She looked back at him. “Now you’re gonna tell me that you don’t play it and you just have it because it used to belong to one of your parents, aren’t you?”

He threw her a defiant look, wandered in her direction and took hold of the guitar. Next he sat down on the bed, and, pausing for a few seconds, began to strum.

Jen felt a funny feeling form in her tummy as she listened to the soft, seductive music which was now filling the room. She’d always had a weakness for men who played the guitar, she’d just never realised it was another of her husband’s talents. He kept eye contact with her as he began to sing – a beautiful folk-style song that she vaguely recognised.

“There’s still a little bit of your taste, in my mouth... still a little bit of you laced with my doubt... still a little hard to say what’s going on...”

She bit her lip, remembering back almost exactly a week to their first dance on their wedding day. Now she knew where she recognised it from. It had been the song that Maxwell had requested.

“There’s still a little bit of your ghost, your witness... still a little bit of your face I haven’t kissed... you step a little closer each day, so close that I can’t see what’s going on..”

She felt a tear fall from her eye, and wiped it away. It was a happy, emotional tear.

“Stones taught me to fly... love taught me to lie... life taught me to die... so it’s not hard to fall, when you float like a cannonball...”

She just gazed at him, entranced. “Maxwell... that’s beautiful.”

He put the guitar down. “I thought it was the perfect song for our first dance. I’ve always loved it. I just never had anyone to sing it to before, and the lyrics just... well, they fit us, don’t they?”

“They do,” she said.

He picked up the guitar again and started playing, presumably a little later in the song. “It’s not hard to fall, and I don’t want to scare her, it’s not hard to fall, and I don’t want to lose, it’s not hard to grow, when you know that you just don’t know...” He stopped again, resting the guitar on his lap.

“Well, you have my permission to serenade me any time you like,” she said with a sigh, sitting next to him and putting her arms around him.

“Okay, how about this one.” A cheeky grin lit up his face, and, grabbing the guitar again, he began playing a faster, R&B style tune with a sexy beat. She giggled.

“You must get tired from running through my mind.. I’m a helpless fool for thinking you could be mine..”

She stood up and danced seductively, watching his expression carefully, but he didn’t seem distracted.

“I want to make love to you love to you.. all night.. and when the sun comes up we can make love mmhmm love mmhmm.. just right.”

She raised her eyebrows, giggling at the cheesiness of the lyrics as he rounded off the song.

“All I can do is try.. because I’m a fool for you.”

She applauded him eagerly. “I like that. What’s that one?”

He shook his head. “That one may be a recent self-composition.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I wrote it back in the summer? When we were here.”

Her mouth fell open. “You wrote it about *me*, didn’t you?”

He looked around. “Don’t think there was anyone else staying here that I wanted to, well, do *that* to at the time...”

She leapt at him, pushing the guitar out of the way, and kissed him passionately. This was such a turn on.

He laughed afterwards. “Maybe I should’ve shared it with you at the time..”

“Oh my god Maxwell. You should’ve.” She kissed him again gently. “I can’t believe that all this time, I never knew you played guitar. I mean, how did I never hear you playing it even?”

“Well, your room was a way along the corridor...”

“You know, I find men who play the guitar so *hot*..”

“Yeesh, I just wish you’d said so earlier,” he said with a slight blush.

“I’m just trying to get my head around how perfection can be improved upon..”

He moved his hand from her waist to her thighs, and whispered in her ear. “You already knew these fingers were good for strumming.”

She gasped. “I dunno. I might need a quick reminder. And being as we’re in your bedroom and all... and lying on your bed...”

“Agreed,” he said with a grin. “Almost seems rude not to.”

“Right, I think we’re all done,” Maxwell said as he carried the last box downstairs and placed it in the hallway.

“Good,” said Savannah. “You two have clearly been working hard..” She winked in his direction.

“I have to say I thought we’d have seen you both at some point yesterday evening,” Bertrand said in that disappointed tone that Maxwell knew so well.

Jen was following him downstairs and caught this remark. “There was, um, a lot to pack.”

“Yeah,” said Maxwell, guiltily. “We’ve been extremely busy.” It had been fun finally christening his bedroom, somewhat ironically on the occasion of him finally moving out of it. Although, to be fair, he and Jen had worked diligently in-between their bouts of lovemaking, getting all his useful stuff into boxes and binning years’ worth of clutter.

Savannah nodded. “Well, I’m not sure how you’re gonna get all those boxes in your car... maybe you could leave some here and get them another time?”

“Nonsense,” Bertrand boomed. “We’ll make sure we get them to Valtoria as soon as practicable.” He glared at Maxwell. “That is, after all, your home from now on.”

Maxwell pulled a face. “Well, if you ever need any help with any House Beaumont business, you know where I am.”

Jen smiled. “Same, Bertrand. I know technically House Beaumont-Jones is a separate house. But we both consider it to be an extension of House Beaumont. And we always will.”

Bertrand nodded, looking touched. “Thank you.”

Savannah put her arm around Bertrand’s waist. “Well, if you’re happy, I’ll tidy up what’s left in the room so that you two can stay in it when you come to visit in future. Hopefully, you’ll come back and see us often.”

“Definitely,” Jen said. “And you know you’re always welcome at Valtoria, too.”

Savannah’s eyes lit up. “I’ve not seen Valtoria yet. Bertrand tells me it’s fantastic.”

“It’s our fairytale palace, isn’t it?” Jen commented, looking up at him.

She’d pretty much hit the nail on the head there. “It’s incredible, Savannah. You guys should come and visit. Maybe around Christmas time or something.”

“Ooh, we’d love that, wouldn’t we Bertrand?” Savannah smiled, letting go of Bertrand and wandering up the stairs.

Maxwell turned to Bertrand. “I was thinking I might throw a New Year’s Eve party, actually...”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “You were?”

“Umm... if you like the idea?”

She beamed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I love it! Well, we definitely need to make sure we’ve got the disco installed by then.”

Bertrand looked horrified. “Disco?”

“Oh yeah, brother. We’ve got a whole room set aside for it. Gonna be epic.”

Bertrand shook his head. “That house is full of Cordonian tradition and historic wonder and you’re turning it into a *disco*?”

“Not the whole house, Bertrand,” said Jen reassuringly. “Don’t worry. There’s plenty of room.”

“It’s gonna be just off the ballroom. It’ll be tasteful.”

“I struggle to see how a disco can be tasteful in any way,” Bertrand moaned. “But, should you hold a party for New Year’s Eve, I’m sure I speak for my fiancée in saying that the three of us would be happy to attend.”

“It’ll be Bartie’s first new year,” Jen commented, looking to the top of the staircase. Maxwell followed her gaze to see Savannah bringing their nephew downstairs.

“Alright my man?” Maxwell offered Bartie his fist. “Ready for a NYE party at Uncle Maxwell and Auntie Jen’s?”

Bartie chuckled, and Savannah offered him to Maxwell. “Oof. You’re getting heavy, mister.” He lifted him up in the air. “I expect to see you in your dancing shoes by then. I have some moves to show you.” He span Bartie around, and laughed at the resulting gurgles. “Oh yes. He has the Beaumont party gene, I know it.”

“I was afraid that would be the case,” Bertrand sighed. “It does not bode well for his teenage years. My memories of yours are still rather... *frightening*.”

“Ha. And you didn’t see me at my worst, trust me,” Maxwell said. “I saved that for when I was in London.”

Bertrand’s face fell. “I shudder to think. Anything I should know about?”

Jen smiled awkwardly at Bertrand. “Probably best for all concerned that you don’t.”

“But *this* one?” Maxwell said, balancing Bartie in his arms. “Nah. He’s going to be an angel. Just a party angel. His halo will stay intact. Won’t it pal?” He caught Jen smiling fondly at their interaction. “Do you want him, Auntie Jen?”

“Ooh, yes please, Uncle Maxwell..” Jen held her arms out and took Bartie from him, and Maxwell noticed Bartie’s eyes light up when he saw Jen’s smile. “Hello, remember me? Your Auntie Jen?”

Maxwell stood back and watched them, entranced. He knew that Jen was keen to have a family of her own, and the delight in her face as she played peek-a-boo with their nephew was unmistakable. He felt Bertrand and Savannah’s gaze fall on him, but he continued to focus on his beautiful wife, and sighed. Being a parent wasn’t anything he’d ever foreseen for himself, but then at the start of this year he could never have foreseen that he’d end up married to a Duchess before the year was out.

As he continued to watch the two of them interact, he thought back to what Jen had said to him yesterday. *I’m just trying to get my head around how perfection can be improved upon*. And he decided in that moment that, while playing the guitar for her had definitely made her smile, there was something far greater they could do together which had the potential to make both of their lives even more perfect.

Song lyrics from "Cannonball" by Damien Rice

This is a rental

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

“It was good of Bertrand to let us borrow the limo and his driver to get all your stuff home,” Jen said as they left Ramsford. They’d loaded their own car up completely so that there had been nowhere left for them and Chance to sit, and they even had a few boxes in the limo with them now, one of which was only half full; but Chance had decided to fill it up by falling asleep in it.

“I think he’s just so glad to finally see the back of me and all my clutter,” Maxwell said. “I think he thought he’d never get rid of me. I would’ve really been cramping his style though now that Savannah’s moved in. So it all kinda fell into place, I guess.”

She nodded, kicking off her heels, then putting her feet up on the seat. “This takes me back.”

He giggled. “Lady Jen, please desist from putting your feet up on the seat. This is a rental and we need to get our deposit back at the end of the lease.”

She laughed. “Sorry, *Bertrand*.” She put her feet down. “Oh, how many times did we hear that?”

“We spent a *lot* of time in this limo, didn’t we?”

“Yeah.” She edged a little closer. “And I don’t know about you, but I spent a *lot* of time wishing I could do this.” She touched his face, and moved in for a gentle kiss.

His face was glowing when she drew back. “Ha. Same.”

“But obviously, we usually had company, be it Bertrand, or... *Justin*...” She bit her lip, still repulsed by the fact that their enemy had got so close.

He pulled her closer again and kissed her on the cheek. “Well, it all worked out in the end. We’re here now.” He looked at her with yearning eyes and a mischievous smile.

“What?”

“Did you ever, you know, think about what else we could have got up to in this limo?”

Oh, did she. Daydreams like that had got her through some long lonely nights. “Might’ve..”

He giggled. “Glad it wasn’t just me.”

“Do you remember the evening we travelled from Fydelia to Applewood?”

He nodded. "That was the night we offered Drake a lift, and he declined our offer."

She laughed. "I seem to think his exact words to me were, *I couldn't cope with spending three hours in a car with that one.*"

He looked back at her with wide eyes. "I am *wounded*.."

She giggled. "I remember thinking, not a problem for me. I was actually looking forward to sitting next to you for three hours. I didn't tell Drake that, though. Obviously."

"But you weren't so keen on the lectures from Bertrand."

"They were worth it," she said with a shy smile. "Just to be close to you."

"So let's pretend Bertrand wasn't there that evening, and it was just you and me in the back of the limo. Just like now."

She giggled. "Okay."

"I remember. You were really sleepy."

She nodded. "I was. I just wanted to lean my head on your shoulder."

"So I was sitting here...." He moved up the seat slightly, pulling her with him. "And you were there.... And you leant your head on my shoulder... and *then*, I did this with my arm.." He lifted it above her head, and placed it around her, his fingers brushing her waist.

"Mm. What happened then?"

"Then you said, *oh, Lord Maxwell, finally we are alone, and I must confess my undying love for you right here right now in this limo...*"

"I don't think I would have said.."

"Shh. You did. And I replied as follows, *oh Lady Jen, you are the light of my life and the brightest star in my sky. I love you, and will always love you until the day I die.*"

She looked at him, impressed. "And I was impressed."

He laughed. "You were so impressed that you said, *oh Lord Maxwell, take me now!*"

She raised her eyebrows. "And you said, *no Lady Jen, for this is a rental. And Bertrand wants us to get our deposit back at the end of the lease.*"

He shook his head, placing his hand just underneath the skirt of her dress. "I said nothing of the sort."

She giggled, and kissed him desperately, and he leant down into her until they were lying together on the limo seat. She raised her arms allowing him to remove her dress easily, and he did this, throwing it to the floor, and then showering her body with kisses where she lay.

Something was bothering her. "Wait Maxwell, can the driver see us?"

He laughed. "Good point. One second." He stood up to check the screen between them and the front of the limo, pulling it across. "Not now." He returned and resumed his efforts, kissing her waist and hips around the band of her underwear. "Oh... I remember this one, this was a *great* limo ride fantasy.."

"It wa....."

Words escaped her as he pulled back the band and his tongue explored further, pausing briefly to allow his teeth to remove her underwear fully. The feeling as he resumed coupled with the rhythm of the moving vehicle was almost too much to bear, and she writhed desperately against the seat. "Oh god.."

Just when she thought she couldn't take any more, she felt him laugh, and he sat up. "Having fun?"

She spent a few seconds gathering herself together, then sat up and straddled him where he sat. He soon got to work on removing her bra, and she leant back in ecstasy as he next applied his tongue to her breasts in turn. She wrapped her legs around him and pushed him back into the seat so that she could grab the waistband of his jeans to release his zipper. She kissed his neck as she did this and she felt the resultant rumble in his throat as their bodies clumsily connected on the limo seat, her feet now parted either side of him, her arms pushing in and out of him, reality fading away as she concentrated on him and him alone.

He nibbled into her left shoulder as he approached the edge, and knowing he was close she led the fingers of his right hand downwards where they soon did what she needed them to do. A minute later, they were both breathless, still and holding onto each other for dear life.

She broke the silence. "Don't let go of me, babe, or I'm gonna fall..."

That had been the wrong thing to say, as his eyes twinkled and he released his grip for a split second. She squealed and grabbed out for anything to stop her naked behind toppling onto the floor of the limo, and found his hands. "You..."

"As if I'd let you fall on the floor like that," he said lovingly. "Remember, this is a rental. Damp marks on the carpet are not going to look good."

She glared at him, but couldn't hide a grin. "In that case, I just hope the seats are wipe clean."

The break

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little bit NSFW.

“I trust you had an enjoyable weekend in Ramsford, Your Graces,” Christopher said to them in the entrance hall of the house as a team of workers collected the boxes from the car and the limo.

“We did, thank you,” Maxwell said cheerily.

“I want those boxes all stacked up in bedroom fifteen,” Jen said sternly. “We need to find the time to go through them properly and we’re not likely to use that bedroom for a while.”

Maxwell muttered in her ear. “Did we already break that one in?”

“Yes,” she whispered back. “That was the one with the bay window..”

“Say no more,” he said with a grin, and turned his attention back to Christopher, who was eyeing them both suspiciously.

“That will be done, Your Grace,” Christopher said. “I have an official communication for you both from the palace.” He produced a folded memo from his pocket, and passed it to Jen.

She opened it up. “Oh. Anton’s trial is starting next Monday.”

Maxwell nodded. “Rick did say he thought that would be when it would be. I still can’t believe he’s pleading not guilty.”

Jen sighed, passing the note to him. “It just doesn’t make sense, does it? All the other conspirators are pleading guilty. So it’s all their words, and our words, against his. And I’m sure there must be hard evidence against him too.”

“He’s going down,” Maxwell said reassuringly. “There’s no way he’s getting off. This trial is a formality. The Crown have raised the charges and because he’s pleading not guilty, they need a jury. But what jury is going to believe he had nothing to do with it and just got mixed up in it innocently? He plotted to bring down the monarchy!”

She sighed, and rested her head on his shoulder. “I just hope you’re right, Maxwell.” She turned to Christopher. “See to it that plans are ready for us to travel back to the capital, perhaps on Saturday to give us a day to discuss our strategy with Rick and the others. Hana can travel with us.”

Maxwell exchanged a panicked glance with Christopher, but Christopher didn’t bat an eyelid. “Of course, Your Grace. We will organise all of your travel needs.”

“Thanks, Christopher. Just a light meal and an early night for us tonight. I really want to get on with making some rounds tomorrow. I’ve been here almost a week and not met any of our people yet.”

Christopher nodded. “Very well, Your Grace. But I don’t think the people expect you to tour just yet. They understand your new.. marital status.”

Maxwell couldn’t help but chuckle. “Hey, Christopher, I never thought I’d say this, but... a break would be really nice.”

Jen turned red and shot a murderous look in his direction. “What Maxwell means is a break from being inside. He’d *obviously* like to accompany me on my tour. Wouldn’t you, babe?”

“Perhaps for some of it,” he said with a grin. “I have my own project to finalise, remember? This week would provide the perfect opportunity. Why don’t you get Lady Hana involved too?”

She sighed. “I’ll speak to her. But see to it that something is organised for this week. I want to be visible here, not just the Duchess who keeps herself to herself in the big house. I want to connect with my people as soon as I can.” She took Maxwell’s hand, and squeezed it. “With *our* people.” He squeezed back.

“Right you are, Your Grace.” Christopher headed away.

Jen looked at Maxwell. “*You...*” He knew he wasn’t in serious trouble, because of her grin.

“Hey, what can I say. You’ve worked me hard this weekend, Your Grace.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “My poor little plaything. Well. If you need a break, that can be arranged.” With a sly grin, she strutted off in the opposite direction to Christopher.

He took the opportunity to catch Christopher up. “Hey... one second..”

“Ah, Your Grace. How can I assist?”

“Those travel plans...” He looked around to make sure Jen wasn’t in the vicinity. “What we talked about last week, we obviously need to..”

“It’s fine, Your Grace. We’ll arrange for the car to collect you from the airport on Sunday afternoon on your return, and take you to the Royal Palace, as I imagine you will be staying there?”

“Yep. And don’t go organising anything for Jen for Thursday or Friday either, will you?”

Christopher nodded. “Don’t worry, Your Grace. I understand who is *really* in charge here. And rightfully so.” He smiled, and continued on his way.

Maxwell smiled to himself, and headed back to find Jen, a spring in his step as he thought about the surprise break he had planned for her.

The book was taking shape. He needed a day this week to sort through all the photographs and scrapbook entries that were going to form part of it. That evening, he'd spent an hour or so working on the wedding chapter, in particular the abduction section. He wanted to get everything finished while it was all fresh in his mind, and although what happened had been quite the ordeal for them all, man did it make a great finale to the book!

He'd been assured it was going to make a *lot* of money. People were going to be rushing to buy it. His advance had been increased by an extra zero! And while ideas of how he could spend it were bubbling around his head, he knew that most of it would be going in Bertrand's direction. It was about time he contributed to House Beaumont in a way that mattered. He also still had to apologise somehow for the way his masterplan to restore their finances had spectacularly backfired. And he had everything he needed here anyway.

As his thoughts roamed in that direction, he knew it was time to shut down his laptop. He'd spent too many nights over the last few months working on his book. Now that he was a married man, he had made a conscious decision not to do that anymore. He headed along the corridor to the bedroom, expecting to find Jen there. But, she wasn't. *Oh*.

He wandered downstairs and looked in all the main rooms, but there was no sign of her. He pulled out his phone and sent her a text.

Good lady wife, wherefore art thou?

There wasn't any response. He wondered if she'd gone over to Hana's. Oh well. She'd be back.

He headed back upstairs and began to get ready for bed, first brushing his teeth (sparkly!) and then getting undressed (it had been *days* since he'd done this without assistance). He got into bed, and waited.

And.. waited.

Just as he was contemplating getting up again to write another couple of paragraphs, the bedroom door opened, and Jen sauntered in.

"There you are," he said. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, you know, just.. thought you needed a bit of a *break*.. so I went to see Hana."

"Thought you might've," he said, sitting up in bed. "She okay?"

"Yeah," Jen said, leaning over super sexily to take off her heels. "I was just telling her about Bertrand and Savannah's wedding plans, and the little music and history lessons you gave me at Ramsford.."

He gulped. "You didn't tell her about the drive home did you?"

She maintained a straight face. "I told her we took the limo home." She pulled her dress over her head and threw it on the floor, seductively.

He was frozen to the spot, in a trance. "Okay, good job you stopped there."

She was standing just in her underwear in front of him, and bit her lip alluringly.

He got out of bed and walked towards her, but she shot him a look.

“Ah-ah, Maxwell.” She walked away and slunk into bed. “You need a *break*, remember?”

He laughed. “*Oh*. This is how we’re going to play it, is it?”

“I don’t understand,” she said, looking at him with wide eyes as he got into bed beside her. “I’m not playing anything. I’m just getting into my bed, and going to sleep...”

Mischief filled her face as she yawned, and stretched one hand up in the air, but the other hand in the opposite direction so it touched a certain part of his anatomy, giving him shivers all over. Then she removed it. “Oh, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to do that. Just stretching, before I go to sleep.”

This was downright evil, and she knew it.

Next, she sat up, and removed her bra with all the allure she could presumably muster. “I don’t like to sleep so... restricted...” She was obviously trying her best to keep a straight face, but he noticed the corner of a smirk on her lips as she dropped the bra onto the floor. “That okay with you? I don’t want to... distract you.”

“That is totally fine,” he said in contentment. If she really wasn’t going to give up on this little charade, he might as well savour the sight of her.

She took another playful glance in his direction, and rolled so she had her back to him. “Good night, Maxwell.”

He put his hands on her shoulders, massaging them lovingly. “Good night, sexy little blossom..”

She moaned, and curled her legs and ran her feet up his thighs slowly, causing him to groan softly. Her toes began to tickle him in unmentionable places, and then stopped. She turned to face him.

“Oh, I’m sorry, that was an accident...”

“Huh. That was about as accidental as the time you accidentally kissed me at the fireworks display..”

“I still maintain *that* was an accident. But hey, maybe what I just did wasn’t..” She raised her arms above her head, and posed temptingly, pushing her chest out so that her nipples brushed against his fleetingly. “Hey, maybe this is hard for me. But, I get that you need a break...”

Two can play at this game.

“You are so understanding. Best wife ever.” He rolled onto his side away from her. “Night, then.”

According to the clock by the bedside, five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen.

Twenty.

He rolled back to face her, expecting her to be asleep, but was met by wide green eyes.

“Hello,” he said, cheerily.

“Dammit, Maxwell.”

He laughed, and kissed her softly, as her hands wrapped around him and her legs twined with his.

As their lips parted, she giggled. “Okay, you win. I can’t resist you any longer.”

“You know it. Besides, I think I’ve had a sufficient break now. C’mere.”

Small doses

“You were brilliant today,” Maxwell said to Jen, as they headed up the stairs to their bedroom late on Wednesday evening. “I knew the people would love you whatever. But I just love how you listened to them all, took their ideas on board. It’s obvious to everyone that you’re not just going through the motions. You really want to be their friend.”

“Of course I do,” Jen said, a little irritated. “You didn’t think that I was just going through the motions, did you?”

“Oh no no no. I didn’t think that at all. I know you better than that. But to them, if they were a bit cynical about it, they might have thought that. I reckon you nailed it in winning their trust and support today.”

“Good to hear,” she said, as they headed into the bedroom. She was tired and feeling a little grumpy, and ready for an early night. “That was the intention, after all.”

“It’s just all very different to what I’m used to. You’d never catch Bertrand out and about meeting people like that. It’s not something my father ever did either.” He pulled a face. “I’m not sure if Mom ever did that sort of thing?”

“I just want them to know that I’m like them,” she sighed. “I wasn’t born with a silver spoon in my mouth, y’know? I want them to know that I appreciate how lucky I am to be their Duchess.”

As she started to get ready for bed, she noticed that the conversation between them had stopped. Maybe that hadn’t been the right thing to say. She’d not meant it as a dig. But she couldn’t be bothered to backtrack now. It wasn’t like he was likely to call her out on it. He always agreed with everything she said, which could be irritating.

“I was thinking,” she eventually said, breaking the awkward silence. “With it being my birthday this weekend and all, maybe we could do something with the guys at the weekend before the trial starts? What do you think?” She turned to face him.

“Um... er... yeah! Great idea, Jen. I’ll... see what Rick says!”

There was no mistaking his panicked expression and his *crap what am I going to do now* tone of voice. She huffed, impatiently. “*Maxwell*. I really hope you haven’t forgotten my birthday..”

“I would *never*.” He strode towards her. “But, let’s just say if we were already planning a get together with the gang *after* the trial to celebrate your birthday? How would that work for you?”

She nodded. “So, that means you’re planning something for *this* weekend.”

He looked at her with a dopey grin. He was so busted.

“So, what do I need to pack, Maxwell? Because the last time you did this to me, I had about half an hour to pack for Vegas..”

He just raised his eyebrows.

“Ugghhhhh!” She knew she wasn’t going to get anywhere. “When did you become so *annoying!*”

He looked at her sadly. “I warned you. I’m better in small doses.”

She mellowed, now worried she had upset him, and put her arms around him. “Babe, pleeeeeeeeeease tell me where we’re going for my birthday.. pleeeeeeeeeease....”

All she got was a smile and a nervous laugh.

“Does Hana know?”

“Nope,” he said smugly. “I’ve planned this all by myself.”

She had a brainwave. “Does *Christopher* know?”

His face changed. “No..”

“YES!” She laughed triumphantly. “And, he’s still on duty!”

She let go of Maxwell and turned to run out of the bedroom, not caring that she was wearing her pyjamas. She made it to the top of the stairs when she spotted Christopher bustling about in the hallway. “Christopher?”

He stood to attention. “Your Grace? What can I do for you?”

She beckoned him up the stairs, and by the time he got there, Maxwell was standing with them, an awkward look on his face.

“Christopher, I was wondering if you could tell me where I’m going on my surprise birthday trip, and when we’re leaving.” She smiled smugly at Maxwell, who was shaking his head.

Christopher cleared his throat. “Well, ah, to satisfy your curiosity, Your Grace.. *I could* tell you.”

Jen looked at him expectantly.

“But I also understand the concept of a *surprise*. ”

She groaned. “Well, thanks a lot, Christopher. Now I know where *your* loyalties lie.”

With a huff, she headed back in the direction of the bedroom. Time for some contingency packing. Just when she’d thought she no longer had to live out of a case. Honestly. She found her case and started going through her wardrobe, picking out dresses and accessories and throwing them in. She wasn’t sure how long he had been watching her for when he spoke.

“Are you okay?”

She turned to see him leaning against the bedroom doorframe, and then turned back to her packing. “*I would* be, if you’d just *tell me where we’re going*..”

“New York. Just for a couple of days. We go tomorrow evening. We’ll be back by Sunday for the start of the trial.”

She looked over at him in amazement. “Oh. Wow, Maxwell..”

He was looking beyond her, rather than at her, a serious look in his usually playful eyes. “I got the idea at the weekend when we were at Ramsford. I thought you might wanna swing by the storage place while we’re there and get some of *your* little treasures you were telling me about. Or.. do whatever you want, really.”

Her eyes welled up with emotion. “I mean, it wasn’t that long since we were last there..”

“I know. But our lives weren’t our own when we were last there. Yeah, I know we got to go to Coney Island. But the rest of the time we were pretty much timetabled to the quarter hour. Hey, we even had to shirk our responsibilities to find the time to tell each other how we felt.” He looked directly at her now.

She sighed. Remembering that precious night, she suddenly appreciated how lucky she was. “Oh, Maxwell. I’m sorry I’ve been such a bitch.” She stood up and walked towards him. “I should’ve gone with it; let you surprise me.”

“And I should’ve thought about it from your point of view. I mean, you’re still getting your feet under the table here. It probably isn’t the best time for us to go away again.”

She took his hand. “No, Maxwell, I think it is. I think we need to take some time to remind ourselves what our lives were like before we made this massive decision to spend the rest of our lives together, just so we can appreciate how lucky we are.” She smiled. “You’re amazing. Thank you. I can’t *wait* to show you around my old stomping ground. I even know where we can go to eat. You’ll love it.” She whispered in his ear. “They even serve steak.”

“Sounds good to me! So.... good surprise?”

“The *best*. Well, if it *had* been a surprise. I’m just sorry I ruined it.”

He winked at her. “You couldn’t ruin anything if you tried. Not for me.”

She pulled him into a kiss, excitement and joy and pure love filling her heart. She silently promised herself that she was never going to let herself fall into the trap of taking this beautiful man for granted ever again.

The New York Duchess

“What d’you think?”

She peeked into the changing room of the clothing store, and giggled. “Well, *obviously* you look like a native New Yorker now, babe.”

“You know it.” The finger guns came out, along with her adorable husband clad in a stars and stripes baseball cap, sunglasses and a cheesy *I heart NY* t-shirt. “Now I’m ready to rock this city.”

She smiled affectionately at him. “What time did you make that appointment at the storage place?”

“Three o clock,” he said. “So, time for lunch?”

“Alright, let me just pay for these. I’ve had the perfect idea of where we can go for that, being as we’re just around the corner..”

After she settled the bill, she led him out onto the sidewalk. “So how are your bearings for where you are?”

“Oh, I haven’t a clue. I relied on Drake and his rugged navigation skills the first time we were here. Last time, I pretty much got cars everywhere. Although I do seem to remember walking back to our hotel one evening.”

“Mm?” She slipped her hand into his. “Like this?”

“Yeah. Wow. Just holding hands with you that night felt so... *invigorating*. Ooh. That’s a good word,” He whipped out his phone and, releasing her hand for a second, tapped something into it.

She giggled. “You said at the time it was *nice*. It *was* nice.”

He pocketed his phone, and took her hand back. “It was.”

“Thought you might be getting your phone out to find where we are, rather than to make notes congratulating yourself on your vocabulary.”

“You thought wrong. And today I’m totally relying on you. You’re a local. I have no clue where we are, or where we’re going..”

“Sure about that?” She stopped suddenly on the sidewalk, and looked mischievously at him.

“Uhh..”

“How about if you wait just here and I’ll just go stand over there...” She walked ten or so steps closer to the bar entrance, and turned to look at him with a triumphant smile.

“*Oh!*” She heard his shout and saw the irrepressible grin form on his face, as she waited for him to catch her up. “This is where I found you that morning.”

“Yep. *This* is where you made me that offer I couldn’t refuse..” She looked suspiciously at him. “You weren’t relying on Drake’s bearings that morning, were you?”

“Okay, you got me. I got a taxi to the bar. I’d been hanging around for a while.”

She giggled. “Looking for desperate ladies to abduct?”

“No! Looking for *you*.” He kissed her softly. “So. Where it all began, then. Lead the way.”

She giggled, heading into the bar. “I came here last time with Drake, you know. Did he ever tell you?”

“Oh?” He looked a little insecure for a moment.

“I bumped into him when I was picking up Madeleine’s ring. We hung out.” She drew him closer. “I bent his ear about you. A *lot*.”

“Er.. haha! So.. did he know you were going to.. ahh..”

“I didn’t tell him,” Jen said, leading him into the offending booth. “I think he did know though. Surprisingly intuitive, is our Mr Walker.”

“When it comes to you, maybe.”

She sighed, zoning in on his insecurity, as he sat in exactly the same place he’d been sitting the first time she’d ever laid eyes on him. “He was great, actually. He told me I should tell you straight. That you were never going to pick up on my hints.”

“Hints? What hints?”

Brilliant. She giggled. “Case in point.” She sat down next to him, twining her hand with his on the tabletop. “And when I told him that telling you how I felt could ruin my life, he came back by saying that *not* telling you could ruin my life too.”

He looked philosophical now. “Man. That’s... *beautiful*.”

She nodded. “Just think where we’d be now if I hadn’t.”

“You’d be Queen,” He looked sad. “And.. I guess I’d be back in Ramsford, trying not to get under Bertrand and Savannah’s feet too much..”

“Maybe you still wanted to take me away on a surprise New York birthday trip,” she teased. “As friends.”

His face was a picture. “Awww. I’d like to think we could’ve been friends like that. *Best* friends.”

“I know we would’ve, Maxwell. Queen or no, you would’ve still been the first man in my heart.” She had to wonder if she would have succeeded in suppressing her feelings for him.

Somehow, she doubted it.

“And you’d still have been my favourite person. Definitely my favourite Queen, to boot.”

She sighed, feeling so grateful for Drake’s wise words and her own courage that day. “And I would’ve still wanted to spend as much time as possible with you. Hey! Daniel!”

A familiar face approached the table. “Hey! You two! What.. Hey, are you on your honeymoon or something?”

Jen stood to embrace Daniel. “No, it’s my birthday on Saturday..”

“Ohmygod, I completely forgot to send you a card..”

She laughed, and sat back down. “That’s okay. But this trip was a little birthday surprise from my *amazing* husband here. And it’s also a chance for me to clear out my possessions in storage.”

“Still got our honeymoon to look forward to, after Christmas.” Maxwell said dreamily, looking straight at her. “A fortnight on a private tropical island.”

“Woah,” Daniel said. “That sounds amazing. So, all recovered from your wedding? That made the news over here, you know..”

“Really?” Jen was puzzled. “How come?”

“Just wait there..” Daniel dashed off. “Oh! What’re you having? It’s on the house. Kieran’s off today.”

“Cocktails,” Jen grinned. “We’ll just check the menu till you come back.”

She pulled out a cocktail menu and pushed it under Maxwell’s nose. “I thought you might like the Manhattan. No Sex on the Beach here....”

“Well, we did have plenty of that two weeks ago...”

“Shhh..” She blushed, and giggled. “Anyway, like you said, we still have our actual honeymoon to look forward to...”

“Lots more then,” he said, a seductive twinkle in his eye. “I’ve heard things about this island that you wouldn’t believe, Jen. It’s supposed to be like paradise. There’s empty secluded beaches, and beautiful tropical forests, and deserted rock formations.. We can have so many private adventures...” He walked his fingers along her forearm, sending her senses into a spin.

She raised her eyebrows. “I like the sound of that.”

Daniel rushed back over to their table. “Look.” He passed her a magazine. “I’ve been telling everyone that I was at this wedding! Nobody believes me!”

Jen was amazed to see herself on the front of the magazine. She recognised the picture as one that had been taken of her at Applewood after the fire. Her expression was defiant and serious. The headline screamed “THE NEW YORK DUCHESS.”

Jen read the small print. “*Who is Jen Jones and how did she singlehandedly stop a European monarchy from being overthrown on her wedding night?*”

“Hey,” piped up Maxwell. “I object to that on two counts.”

“Wow,” Jen said, flicking through the story. “I guess I probably should put my shades on too, Maxwell. Seemingly I’m a celebrity here now as well.”

“And me?” He looked hopefully across at the article.

“No pictures of you anywhere, babe..”

“Awww?”

“That’s good, isn’t it? You can stay incognito. One of me and Rick though...”

“Oh, it’s like that is it?”

“Okay, it says something about you here... *The general consensus amongst the Cordonian people was that Ms Jones was to become their Queen. However, despite her romantic connection to the newly single King Rick of Cordonia, coupled with the fact that she had competed with others to win his hand earlier in the year, there was some shock when her engagement to Maxwell Beaumont was announced. Her new fiancé was the brother of a Cordonian Duke, and a close friend of the King.*”

“Oooh, drama! Hey, they missed my title..”

“*Ms Jones was soon appointed to the rank of Duchess by King Rick, and within weeks the couple had a wedding as grand as any King or Queen could expect. It was this wedding that was targeted not once but twice by anti-monarchists, perhaps due to the unconventional nature of Ms Jones’s relationship with the King..*” She giggled. “Know what, Maxwell, they’re making this sound like there’s three people in our marriage...”

“Ohmygod, that is just.. wrong!”

“This is one of the trashier magazines,” Daniel said apologetically. “I didn’t believe that bit.”

“We *so* have to get a copy of this,” Maxwell said to Daniel. “Hana will *love* it.”

Jen was still reading. “It then goes on to outline what happened with Anton. Not in that much detail, mind..”

Maxwell’s eyes sparkled. “Wouldn’t it be amazing if someone wrote you an in depth account of how awesomely you kicked ass that night?”

She giggled. “Is that going to be my birthday present?”

“Well, as far as my birthday gift to you is concerned, I can run you off a photocopy,” Daniel said, as Jen passed the magazine back to him. “As far as drinks, what can I get you?”

“Two Manhattans, please,” Jen said. “Seems rude not to.”

Maxwell looked at her thoughtfully, as Daniel walked away. “Wow. I can’t believe the way they wrote that. Technically they didn’t say anything incorrect, but they made it sound like me and Rick are taking turns with you or something. Creepy or what?”

“Yeah,” she said, drawing closer to him. She knew only too well that Rick had offered her such an arrangement when she’d turned down his proposal, and it still unsettled her sometimes. She’d never told Maxwell about that conversation. “But it’s like we were saying earlier though. Where would we be now if we hadn’t had that chat on that roof?”

He laughed. “*We’d* probably be *here*, having a dirty weekend. Rick would be letting me have my turn with his Queen.”

“Ewww...” She hit him around the arm. “Well, in that case, I’m just glad we *did* have that chat.”

“So am I, Jen. So am I. But, just so we’re clear, I was joking. I could never share you with *anyone*.”

He kissed her on the forehead, and she took a deep breath, feeling free and happy.

Much more amenable

“You know what?” she said, as she perused the menu.

“What?”

She put the menu down, and looked up at him. “This is the first time we’ve eaten out, just the two of us.”

He looked as if he was pondering this for a moment. “Oh. *Oh crap*. It is, isn’t it?”

She giggled at his horror-struck expression. “Is that a problem? I mean, were you hoping to go through our entire married life without ever taking me out for dinner?”

He covered his face, clearly ashamed of himself. “Ouch,” she heard him mutter through his fingers. “That stings.”

“Babe, don’t worry.” She pulled one of his hands away from his face, revealing one staring blue eye. “It’s not like we’ve really had the opportunity, is it? We did squeeze that cinema date in, that one time...”

“Ahem, yeah... that was... fun...”

“Yeah. But remind me never to go to the cinema with a sex-starved date again. Could be embarrassing next time.”

“As if you’d ever allow that to happen now..”

“And think of all the other fun things we *have* done.”

He released his other hand, his expression gooey. “Hmm. I’m thinking.”

“So, here’s to our first romantic meal at a fancy restaurant!” She leaned over to kiss him gently, then turned her attention back to the menu. “So, decided what you’re having?”

He was grinning. “Oh, yeah. I’ve decided.”

At that, the waitress came over. “Hello, I’ll be your waitress this evening, are you ready to order?”

Jen watched him look at her in amusement, then he turned his attention to their attendant.

“Waitress, steaks for the table!” He tapped the table vigorously afterwards.

Jen tried her hardest not to laugh for the sake of the confused waitress, who was looking a little bemused. “I’m so sorry. He always does this.”

“Okay.. what sort of steak would you like for the table, sir...?”

He leapt up. “Now we’re talking! Hey, this one is much more amenable than the last one....”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “I think you’ll find her tolerance levels for you flicking peas at her will be much less than mine was. Also, she’s 100% less likely to go back to Cordonia with you and then

marry you.”

He raised his hands, laughing. “Okay, okay. You got me. Well, I’m hoping you’ve got New York strip steaks here..”

“Of course, sir. And for you, madam?”

“Whatever he’s having,” Jen said with a giggle.

Me too

“Okay, now step to your left... I’ve got you.... now to the right...”

She was giggling infectiously as the elevator started to climb. “If this surprise ends up just being our hotel room, then you’re in for it, Beaumont..”

“Oh, sounds like I missed a trick there..” As her hands climbed to the blindfold he’d placed around her eyes, he took each of her hands in his and moved them to her sides. “Hey, I said no peeking.”

“I know we’re in an elevator, Maxwell. I won’t be able to tell where we are from being in the inside of an elevator will I...?”

“I’m not taking that risk,” he assured her. Especially since he *definitely* recognised this elevator from the last time they were in it. Perhaps his senses had been heightened at that time after the life-changing events that had just taken place. He clearly remembered the colour and texture on the walls, the flooring, the smell of the decor, the lettering on the buttons he’d been nervously tapping as he’d gazed at the woman he’d just kissed, desperate to kiss her again, but at the same time, frightened out of his skin at the implications of what had just happened.

“Hey, you still there? Maxwell?”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily. So, I really enjoyed that steak. Good recommendation.”

“Well, you know, I figured you’d been waiting a while to try a New York steak..”

“And it was totally worth the wait. But I think the birthday cake milkshakes stole the show at dessert...”

“Especially when you got them to put a sparkler in mine...”

“Mmm-mmm. I don’t remember everything tasting so good last time!”

“We should *so* go to Dominiques tomorrow and get some real authentic cronuts to take back to the others on Sunday,” Jen said. “Oh! And I just remembered! There’s a place just down from there where you can get a *gelato sandwich*...”

“Well that’s tomorrow’s lunch taken care of,” he said, impressed. “Wouldn’t it go soggy?”

“I think they use brioche. I’ve never had one, but they’re meant to be *awesome*!”

“Man, I love New York! And I love gelato..” He leant in to kiss her, revelling in her little gasp of surprise as their lips met. “And I love you.”

There was a ping and the elevator doors opened.

“Right... still no peeking... come this way.... Now, there’s some stairs about to start here..”

“I knew it!” Her dazzling smile looked quite out of place when her green eyes weren’t visible above them. “I know *exactly* where we are.”

Admitting defeat, he removed her blindfold. “Go on, then. Go on up.”

She skipped up the stairs and onto the roof, but as he followed her he got the impression he’d still managed to surprise her.

“Woah....”

The last time they had been here, there had been nothing up here really except the two of them, some seats, some railings, and some enormous confessions. Tonight, there were lit candles, balloons, and flower displays. Gentle music was playing, and along the unmanned bar, an array of her favourite drinks were laid. He had to hand it to himself, he’d done good here.

She looked around her, slowly as if in a dream, and then up at the stars. Good job it was a clear night. It was obviously a lot colder tonight than it had been in August, so they were wearing their jackets, and there were several patio heaters dotted around to warm the cool November air.

Eventually her gaze returned to him. “Oh Maxwell.. you’ve thought of everything..”

He reached underneath a nearby table, and pulled out a little cuddly toy. “Yup. I even brought the gorilla this time too.”

She took one look at what he was holding, and collapsed into laughter. “Oh, Maxwell. Only you.”

He looked up at the sky. “I even picked another starry night. Although I’m not so sure I can see the elephant tonight.” He put the toy gorilla down on the table. “What’dya reckon?”

“One thing’s for sure,” she sighed. “Looking up at the stars is so romantic...”

He laughed, “Yeah, I guess it kind of is..”

“And I’m glad I’m sharing it with you,” she said, touching his arm playfully.

With that, he took her in his arms and dipped her dramatically into an intense kiss. On releasing her, she was in fits of giggles.

“I don’t think you did *that* last time.”

“Nah. I was still clueless at that point. I just said *me too*.”

“I’ve always wondered,” she mused as he went to get two glasses of champagne from the bar. “Was it *me too* as in I’m glad we’re looking at the stars together? Or *me too* as in I’m glad we’re sharing a romantic experience together?”

He shook his head, passing her one of the glasses. “Neither. It was more of a *me too* as in I have no idea what you mean, but I’m just glad I’m here with you.”

She smiled sweetly. “Well, that’s one less question I can go to my grave wondering the answer to.” She sipped her champagne, looking at him as she did so.

“Just ask them all. You know I’ll tell you.” He sighed. If he hadn’t at the time, it was probably because he was scared of letting her get too close.

“Mmm,” she said, looking up at the stars again. “Okay. Why’d you dare me to strip off when we were playing Truth or Dare that time?”

Ohhhhh. “Ha ha ha. Well, err... *alcohol?*” He raised his glass. “What can you do?”

“It wasn’t even my go! And you then got all awkward and went to bed without saying goodnight? Whyyyyyy...”

“Because I was *mortified* at what I’d said. I’d lost my ability to filter and I thought it best I removed myself from your presence as soon as possible. Just in case.”

She pulled a face. “Yeah, that makes sense. I have another.”

“Do I really want to hear it?”

“When we caught the photographer in Italy, you looked at me like....”

He hid his head in his free hand. “Ahhhh...”

“Personally, I was all for jumping you there and then but...”

“Yeah. She might’ve got away if you’d done that. Or, taken more photographs and got some real scandalous ones. Imagine Constantine’s face when he’d seen those...”

She collapsed into laughter, and he couldn’t help but join in. “Oh my goodness. Yeah, I never thought of that at the time. It would’ve been her lucky day!”

“But not ours! Well, to be fair, I think I would’ve felt like the luckiest man in Italy at the time..”

“Really? I mean, I couldn’t be sure. I mean, you *looked* as if you were trying to undress me with your eyes..”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he said, hoping his face didn’t look too red in the starlight. “But I remember.. just in that instant of catching up with you.. I’d been so worried with you running into that car.. and all the adrenaline from what I’d just been saying for the benefit of the press..” No point in hiding it. “For a minute, it all just seemed real. It wasn’t the gelato I loved. It was *you*.”

She sighed, taking his hand again. “We really needed our heads banging together. I just remember wishing you were proposing to me for real.”

“I hope the real thing lived up to the fake version,” he said. “Which brings me nicely on to something. The reason why I wanted to bring you back here.” He took a deep breath, and, putting his drink down, knelt down in front of her.

She giggled. “Most girls just get one proposal. I get three?”

“Jen. I haven’t got a twig ring tonight. Or a...”

“...*Spoon.*”

They said it together, and he couldn't help but chuckle.

"No. It's just me, on bended knee, in front of you. Listen, we both know our engagement was rushed. For good reasons, obviously. And as I said to you in Vegas, my life is a whirlwind. I can go with it. But now we're out the other side, I just keep questioning how we can be married when we've still not quite got to our six week *sexytime* anniversary. And... what?"

She had creased up with laughter again, so that she was perched down against the railing, almost low as he was. "I.. can't.. even..."

"Right. Yeah. Who even counts the weeks. Funny."

"Oh, babe. It was more your use of the word *sexytime*.." She pulled herself back up. "And whose fault was that anyway, huh? We could've been, what, *ten* weeks in by now?"

Touche. "In either scenario, though. Our timeline is *messed up*. Although that's not to say that *we're* messed up. I really don't think we are. But let's say I hadn't panic-proposed to you six days after our little rendezvous right here. Let's say we hadn't had the big, royal, assassin-inflicted wedding, and let's say we were still just kinda getting used to being together right now. I was wondering how I might have proposed to you. And this was the obvious place."

She looked down at him in realisation. "Oh, Maxwell.."

"So here I am. Just telling you in case you were in any doubt. You're more than a friend to me too. I'm in this with you forever, Jen Beaumont-Jones. You're amazing, and I know that together we can do *anything*."

Nooo, she was starting to cry.

"Hey.." He stood up, trailing a finger over one of her tears. "I didn't mean to make you cry.."

"Shut up and kiss me already," she ordered, and he complied. *Mmm. Sweet and salty.*

Afterwards, she leant against him as they looked up at the stars together for a few minutes, and words didn't seem so necessary for a little while. That was, until the music changed to an upbeat number.

She turned to him. "This is one of your playlists, isn't it?"

"Course. Gonna get our dance on now?"

She giggled. "It would be my *honour*."

He scooped her up and twirled her around several times, before depositing her back on her feet. "Then let's dance, partner."

The outcome was favourable

“I’m the king of the world!” he yelled out, standing up, all excitable.

“Maxwell, sit down!!” She pulled him back onto his seat, and the carriage jiggled precariously as it started to descend from the pinnacle.

He laughed, and kissed her on the cheek. “That’s what I wanted to do last time we were up here. That’s how it felt.”

From the top of the Coney Island Ferris wheel, Jen looked out across the city she’d once called home, definitely an inspiring sight. She hadn’t really taken that element of the experience in last time, as she’d been so wrapped up in her dilemma as to whether she should sneak a clandestine kiss with her co-passenger. “It is quite an impressive view from up here...”

She felt a finger pointing into her, and looked back into his smiling eyes. “Hey. It’s the view right here I’m talking about.” He gazed at her lovingly. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, nestling back into him. “I knew it then. I knew it long before then.”

“I know. I felt like I’d won the lottery when you wanted to ride with me that day.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Hey, you don’t think any of the others thought...”

She put her head in her hands. “Let’s just say, we probably could have been more discreet.” She looked back up at him. “It was worth it though. I wouldn’t have changed a thing.”

“Me neither. It was perfect. For example. It wasn’t as cold that day,” he pointed out, his eyes searching hers. “It was August then. Now, it’s November.”

“Oh really? Hey, you told me you were cold that day..”

He raised his eyebrows. “Because, I was hoping you’d offer to warm me up. Which, you did.”

She giggled. “Ah, now I understand. Manipulating me into kissing you again. The shame, Maxwell..”

“Anyway, what I’m trying to say is, I’m cold *now*.”

She sighed, in jest. “It’s so much more of a chore these days, kissing you.” She closed the distance between them again, and they shared a gentle, lingering kiss.

Afterwards, his giddy grin was stuck to his face. “So, what’s next on the Jen’s birthday NYC trip day two agenda?”

She smiled. “Well, I have a real treat lined up for you tonight after dinner. But I’m happy to do whatever you want for the rest of the day. Any more rides you want to go on? Want your fortune telling again? Get another casual outfit to match the one you’re wearing?”

“Hmm, as exciting as all that sounds, I can think of something even more thrilling....”

He waggled his eyebrows at her, and she giggled. This was going to go one of two ways, depending on his mood. And she couldn't be totally sure what sort of mood he was in right now. "Go on then. Surprise me."

"Let's go to Central Park! We could check out the zoo!"

She nodded. Seemingly he was in *that* sort of mood. "Well, I'm game for that."

The carriage reached the floor, and they hopped out.

"We could swing past my old apartment on the way? Just for a laugh?"

"Do I get to go in this time? Or would I have to wait awkwardly outside again? Just like old times?"

She had a thought. "Unless..." She pulled out her phone and debated with herself. "I guess I should let Anita know that I collected my stuff from the storage place really.."

She tapped out a message. *Hey, I'm in NYC with my husband! How are you? I picked up my boxes from the storage place yesterday, let me know if I owe you anything more. Jen x*

She looked at Maxwell. "Last time we spoke she was a bit pissed about my sudden disappearance. I know she found a new roommate pretty quick though, and I wired her a chunk of money over to cover the ongoing storage costs once I got access to the Duchy account.."

"Ooh, you good egg you." He patted her on the head. "Did she even say thanks for that?"

"Briefly, but..." Jen's phone rang. "Oh wait..." She answered. "Hey Anita.."

"*Jen!!!* Oh it's so lovely to hear from you! You *have* to come over! I *need* to meet the man who's knocked you off your feet and swept you away!"

Jen could feel her grin growing. "It would be great to see you, Neet! Are you not working today though?"

"I'm on lunch now, but I finish early today. I'll be home by four. Can you fit me in? Or I can meet you two somewhere?"

"We'll come to you," Jen said. "Maxwell wants to see where I used to live, anyway. We'll be there by four."

"Make it four-thirty. After all, I gotta tidy up for foreign royalty.."

"Hey, no need for that, we're not royalty. We're just nobles," Jen giggled.

"Ugh. Same difference!"

"Anyway, I'll fill you in. You never got the full story. I wish you could've made the wedding." She sighed. She'd invited Daniel, Anita and her best friend Amy, but only one out of the three of them had made it.

"Whatever. See you four-thirty. We can get take-out.. if you're not too good for take-out these days.."

“Ohhhhhh!” Jen’s face lit up. “Yes! I’ve missed those pizzas from Emily’s.” She turned to Maxwell. “You’ll love them,” she whispered.

“Who’s Emily?” he whispered back, confused, and she laughed.

“What’s funny?” Anita asked, seemingly just as confused as Maxwell.

“Oh, sorry, two way conversation.. yes. That’s a brilliant idea Neet. I’ll see you then.”

“See you then, Jen!”

She hung up. “So I may have been able to grant your wish to see inside my old apartment.. and, in the process, I can make all your pizza fantasies come true..”

“Mmm.” He pulled her close. “Tell me more!”

“Best take-out ever. Me, you, and my old roommate, in my old apartment. Sound good to you?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Sounds *very* good. Time to go to the zoo first?”

“You bet,” she giggled, taking him by the hand. “We can get the subway.”

“Really? I never got to ride the subway last time... Rick was never allowed to and Drake didn’t want to..”

She giggled. “It’ll be an education for you..”

“Hey. Don’t forget I lived in London for three years. I pretty much committed the tube map to memory.”

“Well, brace yourself anew to be squished with strangers...”

“Can’t I just squish with you?” he suggested, pulling her close.

She shook her head. “No. You do not want to be *that* couple on the subway. There’s always one couple and they just get on everyone else’s nerves so much...”

He looked at her, a twinkle in his eye, as they walked towards the station. “Well. We’ll see about that when we get there. So, what animals are there at this zoo?”

“Well, it’s famous for its snow leopards, and its penguins...” She turned to him, trying to mask her excitement. “But it also has red pandas and peacocks..”

“Ohh... kill me now, I am *dead*.” He kissed her on the cheek. “And I am breaking into heaven.”

This had already been the best day ever, but it was steadily improving. Lots of sweet hotel room shenanigans to start the day, next a return visit to Coney Island, some subway fun (and yes, they had been *that* couple), getting to feed the super-cute penguins at the zoo, and now Maxwell was eating the best pizza he had ever eaten. In. His. Life. “Mmmphhmm. Yummmmm.”

“Think he likes it?” Jen pondered aloud to Anita, her ex roommate.

“Honey, if you can’t tell then maybe you shouldn’t be married to him,” was Anita’s response.

This triggered an adorable giggle from Jen. Maxwell liked Anita already.

Another mouthful down. “Mmm mmm. Wow. Wow wow.”

“I never had you down as a pizza lover,” Jen said, looking at him curiously. “You’ve never mentioned pizza before. Not even when we were in Italy.”

“Well I pretty much lived on takeaway pizza when I was in London,” he explained. “I figured I’d probably had my fill of it. But this supreme delicacy has convinced me otherwise. Wow. That’s what we need in Valtoria. A pizza takeaway. Can we make it happen?”

“Um... we can try?”

“Yes. Make it so, Duchess!” He went back to his scrumptious doughy mouth-watering meal.

Anita shook her head. “So, going back to what we were talking about earlier, you hadn’t quite got to the bit where you explained to me why you didn’t marry *the prince that you were supposed to...*”

Jen put her arm out towards him, palms up. “That. That is why. I found my Mr Right. Well, my Lord Right. Who just happened to be the chancer whose idea it was for me to marry the Prince in the first place.”

“Yeah I got that bit. So your plan went as wrong as it possibly could’ve..”

He made a noise of disagreement. “I like to think the outcome was favourable..”

Jen smiled. “I realised just in time, I wouldn’t be happy as the Queen of Cordonia. I’d rather be Queen of *his* heart any day. I said no to Rick, and.. four days later, this one asked me to marry him.” She showed Anita her twig ring, which she was sporting proudly. “Hand made engagement ring and everything.”

Anita clapped her hands. “You couldn’t make it up. I love it. Someone should write a book about your story. I’d definitely read it.”

Ohhh. He looked at Anita nervously, and she looked back at him.

“Alright over there?” she quipped.

“Mmhmm, yeah..” Seemingly that was just a coincidence and he wasn’t walking around with a sign on his head saying *I’m writing a book but don’t tell Jen.*

“I figured you were marrying the prince, to be honest, when I got the invitation. Cathedral wedding, palace reception..”

“Well, Rick has been very generous to us,” Jen said modestly.

“So, presumably you’re a Duchess because you married a Duke?”

“Not exactly. Maxwell’s brother is a Duke. I was appointed to the rank of Duchess by Rick, so Maxwell became a Duke that way.”

“Riiighht...”

“We’ve both been lucky. Although the luckiest bit was finding each other.”

“And finding this pizza,” he commented, polishing off the last slice.

Jen giggled. “Such a shame you couldn’t make it to the wedding, Neet.”

“I couldn’t. I mean, I know you said you’d cover my travel costs, but.. getting the time off work was going to be impossible.”

“Daniel managed it,” Jen said. “I couldn’t believe it when he turned up.”

“Daniel? As in Daniel from work, that you used to have the hot....”

What? His ears pricked up as Jen gave Anita *that* look.

“Er...” Anita continued. “The hot dog eating contests with..?” She looked back at Jen, and they laughed.

“Thanks Anita,” Jen sighed, looking over at Maxwell guiltily.

Daniel? Really? Good job he could see the funny side. “Well, just lucky for me that he didn’t win that particular.. *contest*, and you still wanted to come with me to Cordonia.”

“Hey, I wasn’t exactly surrounded by cute guys in my life back then. Daniel was pretty much the only guy I saw on a regular basis. Anyway, *you* were the cutest guy I’d seen in the bar for years. I remember thinking it.”

“Yeah, yeah, and then thirty seconds later I became the *second cutest* when you saw Rick..”

“Yeah, yeah, but who did I marry?”

Anita held her hands up. “Hey, I’m sorry if I put my foot in it right there...”

“Don’t worry, Neet. Daniel was forgotten well before I stepped on that plane, and Maxwell knows it really.” She blew him a kiss. “So, what do you think of my old apartment, babe?”

“It’s bigger than I expected,” he said, glancing around. It wasn’t a bad little pad, to be honest.

“Is your new roommate in, Neet?”

“Nope, she’s not due back till quite a bit later on. Why?”

“Can I show Maxwell my old room?”

“Knock yourself out,” Anita said. “I’ll just tidy up these pizza boxes. Want another drink?”

“I’m good,” Jen said. “Maxwell?”

“Another one of those *a-maz-ing* authentic NYC *cw-affees* would be amazing..” he gushed. “Need to keep my caffeine levels topped up to keep up with my wife.”

“Sure it’s not the other way round?” Anita said with a smirk in Jen’s direction. *Ouch*.

“Come on,” Jen said, taking him by the hand and leading him into a side room. “So this was my room. Oh.. it’s very tidy in here.. ”

“Seems your replacement is a bit OCD...” Maxwell said, walking into what looked like a show bedroom in a furniture store. Then he caught sight of the view from the window. “Whoa.” *That view*. “I didn’t realise we were so high up.”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” She was already kneeling on the bed, nose to the window. “I’d sit here for hours and dream. So much possibility, so much life.”

He sat next to her and put his arms around her. “It almost rivals the view from our balcony.”

“It’s very different. I don’t need to dream now. But when I was here, I did. I needed to believe that my knight in shining armour was out there somewhere amongst those flashing lights. Especially when I first got here.” She sighed.

He didn’t know too much about what had happened to her to bring her here. They’d spoken about her New York life a handful of times, but not for a while, or in any great depth. “I’m guessing you moved here when you split up with.. uh..”

“Brad,” she sighed. “But, no. I actually moved here when Amy moved away from New York. My previous roommate.”

He was amused. “Can we just go back to how you were engaged to a guy called *Brad*? My goodness, Jen Jones, the things I’ve learned about you in the last ten minutes..” He threw her his best disapproving look.

She giggled, but then looked sullen. “Yeah yeah. Brad and Jen. I know. They split up too. This Brad didn’t go off with Angelina Jolie, though. But that’s another story. For another time.”

He wanted to know more about her past. Of course he did. But she was right, now wasn’t the time. Not when they had just popped into a stranger’s room for a minute.

“Anyway. When I broke up with Brad I moved in with Amy for a bit, but then she moved away not long after, so I came here. I felt a bit lost. And I got to know Neet eventually, but when I was first here, it felt like I was all on my own.” She looked so sad for a moment, clearly the memory was painful.

“Well, I made it to NYC eventually to find you. Did you not see me waving up at you the night before we met?”

She smiled. "Maybe I did, Maxwell." She took his hand and delicately kissed it. "I guess we better get back. I just wanted to share this with you. To share a little bit of my world, with my whole world."

All the feels. He kissed her gently, then stood up and offered her his hand. "Your Grace."

She got to her feet. "Your Grace. *Cw-affee?*"

"*Cw-affee.* And then...?"

She grinned at him. "*Then...* you're in for a real treat."

She walked out of the bedroom, and he danced a little happy dance behind her.

Anita, who was holding a mug of coffee, just shook her head. "I don't know where you found this one, Jen. But I reckon he's the only one of his kind."

"Oh, I know that, Neet. I know."

Liberty

Two hours after their pizza party with Anita, Jen and Maxwell were huddled up on a small boat, cruising towards the Statue of Liberty. Maxwell had been suitably awestruck when she had revealed their destination for this evening, almost a little choked. Although, as he was reading the signage while they waited to board their boat, he'd picked up on something that she'd never anticipated having to explain.

"Okay, yes," she said. "You got me. Yes, they do 24-hour boat trips from here. Just don't tell Rick. I told him I'd commissioned a boat especially for him."

Maxwell creased up in laughter. "Oh man. The times he gushed about how special he'd felt and how much he appreciated that you'd done that for him.... if only he'd known... I love it!"

"Don't tell him," she begged. "I told him I managed to call in a favour. But you know that I hardly knew anyone here in NYC. As if that would have been likely.."

"We had no idea where he'd gone you know. Drake was panicking. We thought Bastien was going to have our heads."

"Rick showed me your texts," she giggled. She remembered thinking how sweet they were. Maxwell hadn't been able to connect the fact that both Rick and Jen had disappeared.

"Oh... I hope they weren't too embarrassing.."

"Shepherd to lost sheep," she giggled.

"Oh, man. I'd forgotten that one. Well, your boat procurement methods will be our little secret," he assured her. "All the same, I'm still honoured that you wanted to bring me here."

"Well, obviously I went back here last time we were in New York, but most of the time I was here, I was thinking of you. So it seemed the obvious thing to do." She sighed. It hadn't been her favourite trip to Liberty Island for obvious reasons, and she wanted to replace it with a much more positive memory.

"This is gonna make for some awesome Pictagram fodder," he said, pulling his phone out of his pocket.

"I thought you'd pretty much filled up your phone memory with penguin pictures.."

"I have cloud backup, Jen. There are no limits. I don't keep many pictures on my phone these days. After what happened.." He frowned, a troubled look in his eyes. Jen knew exactly what he was referring to, and smiled supportively. "Other than this one, of course. And a couple others." He flashed her his background picture, which was a picture from their wedding.

"Now you got me curious. What are the couple others?"

He was usually very secretive when it came to his phone, and as she reached for it, he was hesitant at first, but reluctantly passed it to her. “Just look in the gallery. Don’t look at the notes..”

“Don’t want to spoil any surprises,” she sighed. “Oh..”

In the gallery there were about five photographs, all of her. Some black and white, some colour. They were truly beautiful. She’d never seen any of them before, but she could tell by the length of her hair that they were all from the early part of the summer; and while she couldn’t identify the backdrops, she had the feeling they’d been taken at Beaumont Manor. In none of them was she looking at the camera.

“Those ones were too beautiful to just go up into a cloud,” he said, blushing. “I like to keep those ones close.”

“I don’t remember you taking these...” she giggled.

“You weren’t supposed to,” he admitted. “They’re natural ones. I was.. experimenting. Pretending to scroll through my phone, but actually capturing the perfect image of the perfect girl. I’m sorry. I know they’re.. creepy..”

She beamed. “They’re not creepy. Because it’s you, it’s kind of flattering.”

“How come?”

“Because if I’d known you were taking them, I.. well, I don’t know what I’d have done. But I wouldn’t have got mad.” She passed his phone back to him. “Guessing they won’t ever go on your Pictagram.”

“Personal use only,” he assured her.

“Now it *is* starting to sound creepy...”

“Aaaaaanyway. Talking of Pictagram...” He held the phone up in front of her. “Selfie time! I think we’re now getting to the perfect spot..” He pressed a few buttons, and took the phone back to look at. “Yes! Look at that one. Stunning. Uploading that right now..”

The boat drew to a stop, and she watched as he put his phone back in his pocket. He jumped up and held out his hand. “My lady?”

She stood up. “Why, thank you my lord.”

“Shall we?”

After ten minutes or so of wandering around Liberty Island and taking some photographs, Maxwell had suggested they head up to the observation tower, and she had agreed to the idea. But climbing the stairs brought back some bittersweet memories, and as she emerged onto the platform, she felt quite uneasy. And while there were lots of people milling around them, all seemingly oblivious to who they were, she was transported back to that awful August night when there were only two people at the top of this tower.

“This view is awesome!!” Maxwell said, phone in hand as he snapped the skyline. “Although, I kinda prefer last night’s view. And *your* view from earlier. But... it’s a bit special, huh? Jen?”

She did her best to snap out of it. “Yeah. It’s a bit special.”

“You been up here before?”

She sighed. “Once or twice. Well, three times.”

“Recently?”

She nodded, slowly.

“Oh. With Rick?”

“Yeah. With Rick. The night he proposed to me.”

“Oh. I did not know that.” He put a hand on her arm comfortingly. “I’m sorry if it’s bringing back some bad memories..”

“I have to tell you something,” she decided out loud.

“Something.. bad?” He put his other hand on her other arm, and looked at her with wide eyes.

“Don’t know,” she admitted. “Depends what you make of it, really. I came up here with Rick after I said no to him. After I told him that I was in love with you. He asked me if I would join him up here, to thank me for inspiring him to set his own path, or something eloquent along those lines, anyway.”

“Huh. Sounds like our Rick.”

“Anyway. When we were up here, he...” She glanced at the window, and then back at him. “He basically told me that if I wanted to reconsider my decision, he’d be happy for me and him to have an.. open marriage.”

“Oh...”

“Yeah. Apparently it’s the norm in Cordonia.”

Maxwell sighed. “It does happen a lot, to be fair. But...” He walked away, head in hands. “Ah, man. This is a lot to take in.”

“I told him there was no way in the world. And what would be the point? He would just be going from one loveless engagement to the next. Even though it would have solved most of my dilemmas, I knew that it was definitely not going to be a possibility.”

“Agreed,” he said, pale faced and seemingly a little in shock. “Like I said to you yesterday. I couldn’t share you with anyone. Regardless of who, or why. It wouldn’t be right.”

She drew closer to him. “I should have told you at the time. But I didn’t want to make things more awkward between the two of you than they already were.”

He nodded. "I get that."

"Does it damage your opinion of him at all?"

He shook his head. "No. It doesn't surprise me really. I know how desperate he was to keep you in his life. If I were Rick, I'd have pulled every last rabbit out of my hat too, before I had to kiss goodbye to my dream of making you my queen."

She took his hand and squeezed it.

"It does make me wonder how things would've gone if Rick and I hadn't been such good friends," he continued.

She giggled. "There might have been a price on your head."

"*He* might've abducted us on our wedding day, rather than Anton."

"All joking aside though, I'm sorry, Maxwell."

"You've got nothing to be sorry about. You said the right thing in the circumstances. And I think you did the right thing not telling me back then. It's all water under the bridge now." He held out a hand to indicate what lay beneath them. "Or, maybe, water under the massive stone statue of a lady with a funny hat and a torch."

"How do you always know how to make me feel better about something?" she asked him.

"How do you?" was his response.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and they looked out at the skyline once more, its reflection sparkling on the black ocean.

Happy birthday little blossom

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

It was really warm, and oh so comfy, in their soft, silky, sumptuous hotel bed. Daylight had already broken by the time Jen stirred; she shrugged her shoulders and shimmied her hips a bit to gauge if she was alone in the bed, and she was, as ever, delighted to discover that she wasn't. It still seemed a little bit too good to be true, even now after two full weeks of marital bliss.

She'd not opened her eyes yet, but she felt a delicate kiss on her neck, which made her tingle all over and must have generated a drowsy smile.

"Happy birthday, little blossom."

She opened her eyes, to see his blue ones, soft and sleepy, gazing towards her.

"Thank you," she said. "Best birthday ever already."

"Well, it's about to get better..." He reached into the drawer at the side of the bed. "I have some presents for you!"

"I thought this trip was my present.."

"You thought wrong." He handed her a bag containing three small, individually wrapped gifts.

She sat up to open them, and he joined her. "Oh.. which should I open first?"

"Errrr... Go for that one."

She did as she was told, to reveal a cardboard box, which she opened to reveal something that she recognised immediately and made her squeal with excitement. "You did it!"

"I did it! Yay, me!"

It was a bracelet made out of twigs, to match her ring.

"Yay, you! It's gorgeous, Maxwell. You're so clever. Did this one take you any longer to make?"

"Yeah. Maybe about an hour or so. But that's made from genuine Valtorian twigs. The best that Sir Leafenwood Von Barksley could offer."

That gave her the first laugh of the day. "Aw..."

“But if you want to open your second present...” He passed another similar wrapped box to her, which she unwrapped eagerly. In it was a beautiful golden bracelet, in the same style as the twig bracelet.

“Oh..”

“A real one to go with your twig one. Like your rings. ‘Cos I know they scratch you a bit if you wear the twig ones too much..”

“You are the sweetest.” She grabbed his cheeks and kissed him. “I really don’t deserve this. And what’s this one?”

“Well. This one only cost me four euros plus P&P. But when I saw it, I just knew I had to get it for you..”

She unwrapped a tiny package, and a credit-card sized token slipped into her hand. “What does this say...” She read it and melted. “*You’re pretty much my favourite person of all time in the history of ever...*” She looked at him, choked. “Did you get this personalised?”

“Nope. It just came up on my Pictagram. And I thought it was fate. Because you are.”

Ohmygosh, too cute. “I’ll carry this in my phone case, so I have it everywhere I go,” she sighed, reaching for her phone. “Oh, I’ve got a message in the group chat from Hana to say happy birthday! I’ll just quickly message back..”

“Send them some pictures of what we’ve been up to,” he said. “They’ll all be together at the capital by now, right?”

“Yeah, okay,” Jen said, sending through some pictures from the zoo and their rooftop date. She didn’t want to rub it in with Rick too much with the Statue of Liberty photographs. She then tucked her token into a slot in her phone case, and put her phone back down. “I love it. It’s just perfect. And I love my bracelets. Thank you. I feel suitably spoilt.”

“Oh, you ain’t seen nothing yet, Jen. I fully intend to spoil you this morning.” He moved a little closer, a sexy smirk settling on his face.

“Oh? Are you going to be my sex slave for the day?”

“The day? No. Because there will come a time all too soon when we have to go and get our sweet selves and all those boxes over there on a plane back to Cordonia. But until that time arrives...” He flexed his fingers, and ran his tongue along his lips. “I’m at your command.”

She liked the sound of that. “Well. In that case, I want you to sing happy birthday to me in seven different languages....”

“Seven? Woah, Jen, I can probably stretch to three...”

She giggled. “That’s okay. One is fine. I only understand English anyway.”

He winked, and started to sing to her, Marilyn Monroe style. “Happy boith-day, to you...” He rolled onto her, straddling her, as she laughed. “Happy boith-day to you.... Happy boith-day, Mrs Beaumont...” He leaned down to place a teasing kiss on her lips. “Happy boith-day to you.”

“Why thank you,” she said, looking dreamily up at him. “Like I said, best birthday ever, so far.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I can make it better. Just say the word.”

She knew exactly which word she had in mind, and bit her lip playfully. “The word?”

He leaned in again to whisper in her ear, giving her electric shivers. “The magic word. Just say it...”

“Mouth.”

He gave her a gooey grin. “That’s all I am to you, huh? A walking mouth.”

This mental image was so amusing she couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “You, at my command, remember?”

He shook his head, laughing with her. “Your Grace.”

She lay back and closed her eyes, feeling his lips flutter back to her ear, planting breathy kisses, extending the delightful feeling from a few moments ago. She giggled as he whispered gently, “Happy birthday, ear.” His lips then travelled to her neck, and here she felt his tongue gently draw patterns on her sensitive skin for a few seconds. She sighed and stretched out in blissful expectation.

“Happy birthday, sexy neck,” he said. “And, I’d just like to say, as it’s your birthday, you appear to be inappropriately attired...”

She raised her arms. “Take it off then.”

“As you wish.” His hands explored underneath her nightgown; she wasn’t wearing anything else. As they got to the neckline, he pulled the garment over her head from within. “There. Birthday suit.”

She giggled as he peppered kisses down her neck and towards her chest. “Now I would say happy birthday to these, but I’m guessing they’re a few years younger than the rest of you..”

Clearly unphased, he placed his mouth around one of her nipples and began to tease it with his tongue. This felt so good, she had to grab onto the pillow to steady herself. She couldn’t help but groan gently as he continued. When he finally broke contact, she felt an ache inside her for him to do the same to the other, and without her even having to hint at this he moved his mouth across, this time the feeling was even more intense and her unintentional moan was far louder as a result. Her world was spinning, and she was just beginning to wonder if it was possible for her to climax like this, without any contact further down her body, when he abruptly stopped.

Breathless, she relaxed into the mattress, and opened her eyes. He had pushed the covers away, and was studying her naked body curiously, as if deciding where to go next. “Happy birthday, cute lil belly button. It’s definitely *your* birthday.” That got a little kiss, as the anticipation began to build elsewhere. She glanced down as he started to descend further, and couldn’t keep quiet as she felt his breath close to where she wanted him most, but frustratingly he went past. “Ah. Happy birthday feet.”

The slightest touch to her feet during lovemaking always gave her the giggles, and he knew it. He kissed the ball of one of her feet, and she squealed. Next, he began to suck one of her toes on the other foot.

That was a bit weird. “Eww..”

“No? Want me to stop? At your command, remember?”

She sat up and shot him a smoulder. “Maybe less toe-sucking, and more....” She looked at him suggestively.

“More.... *Oh*. More saying happy birthday to the rest of your body. Silly me. Where were we? Ah yes..” He jumped up and rolled her over onto her side. “Right. You stay right there.” He returned to the bottom of the bed. “Happy birthday to the bits behind your knees, that make you go *cray-cray* when I do this...”

He ran his fingers up and down on one side, and as usual it had the effect that he had desired. She gasped in pleasure as a tantalising chill spread all the way up her leg to where her legs met. “And this..” He then moved up to the other leg, this time planting a tongued kiss followed by a little nibble, to the tune of her breathy sighs.

He moved further up behind her, placing gentle kisses on her butt as he passed it. “Happy birthday to the small of your back...” His lips there felt amazing, but she could sense his fingers hovering close to where she wanted them, and she writhed in that direction.

“Hey, patience,” he said softly, and moving his hands up further, rolled her onto her back once more. “First I have to say happy birthday to the insides of your extremely hot thighs..”

This was almost too much to bear, as his kisses moved upwards and upwards, and then stopped, commencing on the other leg. “Ohh. Maxwell. Please...”

“*Then* I want to say happy birthday to your little booty..” He placed his hands underneath her butt cheeks, and gave them both a squeeze, moving in so close she could feel his breath, and the world began to melt away.

“Happy birthday, little blossom,” he whispered, before he finally placed his tongue in the desired location.

She couldn’t suppress her wails of pleasure as he worked his magic, and she wasn’t able to stop herself from falling off the edge about thirty agonisingly pleasurable seconds later.

As she attempted to catch her breath, he returned to her side and held her.

“Oh. My. God. Maxwell. That was...”

“I get the impression that you were quite satisfied with today’s service, Your Grace?”

Whew. “Your impression is quite correct.” She ran her hands over his chest.

“So. What would you have me do now?”

“Whatever you damn well like?” She kissed his tattoo, and looked wantonly at him. “I’m all yours.”

“Oh no,” he said, teasingly. “It’s all about you today. I can only be of service to you.”

She had a really wicked idea. “Well then. Perhaps you could accompany me to the shower. After that, I’m feeling a bit, well, dirty. You could, ah, help with the shower gel. Make sure I’m clean.. all over..”

His grin grew larger, and he pretended to offer up a prayer to the skies while mouthing a silent “thank you”. She giggled at his reaction.

“Come on then...” She shimmied off the bed and rushed into the hotel bathroom, turning to see him in hot pursuit, his best *you don’t have to tell me twice* expression on his face as he removed his boxers in the process.

As she leapt into the shower compartment to turn on the water, she felt him enter her from behind as soon as the warm water trickled onto her. “Oh..” His hands were already on her breasts as he pushed against her, and although she’d thought herself spent, she felt pleasure rising up inside her again. His lips were on her neck, and his kisses felt hotter than ever as the water got hotter.

She reached for the shower gel dispenser and his hands grabbed out to take the soap as she pushed the button, and sighed as he lavished it all over her skin, her chest, her thighs, her butt. Once he’d done this, she turned to face him, allowing him to pick her up and pin her against the tiles. She grabbed onto his wet hair, and through the streams of hot water she could just about see the contorted pleasure on his face.

“Oh. God. Jen. Yes!”

She soon felt more moisture and warmth than the shower was emitting, and guided one of his soapy hands to where their bodies joined, a few light touches being enough to send her into bliss once again. They held each other under the running water, until their breathing returned to normal and their heart rates slowed a little.

“Well, that was a new one for me,” he commented, eyes still shut, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Really?” This surprised her, given his history.

He lowered her back to her feet, and kissed her sweetly. “Really. I’m just so glad we have a shower in our en-suite back home right now. I feel like a little more practice wouldn’t kill me.”

“I really, really, really don’t think you need any practice.” She kissed him again. “But. If you think you do, who am I to stop you?”

“I love you, birthday girl.”

“I love you too babe,” she exclaimed. “That was incredible. So, I imagine you’ll be expecting similar treatment on your birthday...?”

He shot her a playful wink. “You have four months and eleven days to work that out for yourself.”

Giggling in contentment, she relaxed in the warmth of the water as they washed off the rest of the soap from each other’s bodies.

Phew. That had definitely been one of his better ideas. He did seem to have some of his best ideas here in the Big Apple, with one obvious example springing to mind. Jen had also had her best idea *ever* the last time they were here. And this trip in itself had been a pretty good idea, despite Jen's initial reluctance.

He finally emerged from the bathroom, all nicely freshened up and ready to check out and check onto their flight back to Cordonia (they were flying first class on a regular flight to Athens, where the royal jet would meet them for the final leg of the journey). He found the beautiful birthday girl sitting on the floor of their hotel room with her back to the wall, clad in her favourite black vest and jeans combo, browsing through the contents of one of her boxes.

"Hey. Whatcha looking at?"

She looked up. "You, now." A grin crept up her lips.

"Okay. What *were* you looking at?"

Jen sighed. "Wanna see?"

He nodded, and came to sit next to her, as she picked up a photograph from the box.

"This is me with my mom and dad, on my thirteenth birthday. My last birthday before.."

He put his arm around her and held her close. "Yeah." He gazed, first at the image of his favourite person when she was a gawky teen, an image he'd never seen before but that was already so precious to him. His eyes then flickered to the woman on her left, who looked more like a darker skinned version of the Jen of today, with the same green eyes, and the same sea of black curly heaven framing her face. And then his eyes settled on the man to her right, a cheery looking character, with a killer smile he recognised so very well.

"Wow." Maxwell couldn't take his eyes off the photograph. "What were they called?"

"My dad was called Paul. My mom was called Nancy."

"I can see you in both of them."

"Yeah." Jen's voice was strained. "I was like the perfect blend of them."

"Perfect's right." He looked back at her. Her eyes were tearful. "I'm sorry, Jen."

"Thanks." She grabbed his free hand, and continued to look at the photograph. "I think, another birthday coming around has made me realise. I've now been without them longer than I was with them, if that makes sense?"

"Yeah. You lost them more than half your lifetime ago. It's the same for me. And especially with my mom."

"I know. I just.. I don't like to think about them too much, because it's painful. They should still be here. If it wasn't for me going to that stupid party.."

"Shhh." He leant closer to her, holding her as she sobbed. "It's okay. I'm sorry."

“Oh, I’m sorry. This is supposed to be a happy day.” She looked back at him through the tears. “I know they’d have done anything for me, and they’d be here if they could. I just, I still miss them.”

“Well, I know I can never replace them. But you know I’d do anything for you too. I can try and love you as much as they did. And you’ve got me forever.”

She smiled. “I really hope so.”

“Come here.” He knew she could be a real softie sometimes underneath all her badass country-saving, duchy-running, people-inspiring talk. He kissed her gently and watched the sparkle return to her eyes. “There. That’s better.”

“You’re so kind. Did I ever tell you how kind you are?”

“Hey, kindness comes naturally where you’re concerned. You know I’d do anything to help my friends. And you’re my best friend. And more.”

She nodded, wiping her eyes. “Look, I put my bracelets on. I think they look good together.”

“At the risk of sounding overly cheesy, anything would look good on you. But yeah.. they do!”

She smiled fondly. “Listen, Maxwell. I just want to say, I know I got a bit grumpy with you when I found out you were taking me away this weekend, and you know I’m sorry about that.”

A bit grumpy was a colossal understatement, but he was learning quickly when to stay quiet about this sort of thing. “Really, there’s no need to apologise again. It’s forgotten.”

“I know. But, I just want to say, thank you so much. These last few days have been such a breath of fresh air. Just you and me, sharing and reliving our memories of the last few crazy months, and making some new ones..”

“Like me provoking those peacocks to fight each other at the zoo?”

She looked a little disapproving, but nodded. “Yes. Like that. And like the kissing on the subway, and eating pizza, and.. well, what we did just now..”

“One for the Valtoria history books,” he acknowledged.

“But, just reverse back to the peacocks,” she said, “Remind me when we get back to have a word with the people who run the menagerie about getting your peacocks brought across.”

“Oh yeah! A little piece of Beaumont Manor in our own backyard. I’ve missed those guys..”

“Well, Bertrand seemed pretty keen to offload them when we spoke about it last weekend. I thought at one point he might have thrown them in the limo with us.”

“Ooof. I’m so glad he didn’t. Peacock feathers can definitely smart if you get them stuck up your...”

Her eyes alight, she put her hand over his mouth. “Stop. I don’t want to know how you know that.”

“Right. Best you don’t.”

Evidently trying her hardest not to laugh, she stood up. “It must be time for breakfast...”

The mention of the word made Maxwell’s stomach rumble. “Ooh. Now you’ve put me in the mood for food..”

Jen looked at her phone display. “Oh. I didn’t realise the time. I think we might be too late. And we have to check out soon...”

“Ah, so now you regret being so *demanding* earlier?”

She blushed and smiled sweetly. “I regret nothing. Perfect start to my birthday. Hey! I’ve got it!” She pulled him to his feet, excited. “We can check out, get the boxes moved downstairs, and then before we get our cab to the airport, we can go to Dominique’s and get...”

“...CRONUTS!” They said it in unison, in self-congratulatory tones.

“Can we get extra to take some back for the others?”

“Hell, yes!”

“Are we allowed to take cronuts on a plane?”

“As far as I’m aware, Maxwell, they’re not on the banned items list.”

Their next priority

Hana had travelled from Valtoria to the capital on Friday, arriving at the palace late on Friday afternoon, and had spent a relaxing evening with Rick. They'd exchanged stories of the last fortnight, and reminisced on both recent and long ago events. It had been unexpectedly enjoyable; Hana could not remember ever having one to one time with Rick before. He was a font of wisdom and a fascinating companion.

Once she'd relayed the story of her move to Valtoria and the opportunities she'd already had to help Jen and Maxwell out with duchy affairs, she'd listened to his reciprocal tale of the last two weeks, and couldn't help but detect a loneliness in the way he spoke. With Drake being away in Lythikos, he'd seemingly had little in the way of company. Regina kept herself to herself. Leo visited infrequently. Bastien was seldom sociable. And Madeleine was.. well. *Madeleine*.

They'd both agreed that Drake was probably more than ready to come back from Lythikos. All they'd had on their group chat and individual messages with him was daily moaning about the cold. Hana had thought she'd warm him up on his arrival with a nice hot chocolate; Rick had suggested a whisky would please him better, and to be fair Rick was probably correct.

Rick had spoken at length about the day that Maxwell had joined him for lunch at the palace. Hana, curious to see if she could elicit any clues as to the purpose of Maxwell's trip to the capital, had listened carefully. She'd had an inkling that he'd been presented with some sort of opportunity, and was waiting until the time was right to tell them all. Funnily, from the way Rick spoke about it, Maxwell's visit seemed to have been the highlight of his fortnight, which Hana thought a little odd considering how awkward their friendship seemed at the moment. When he'd then started talking about his subsequent engagements, he'd looked lost.

The next morning, Hana had taken a refreshing walk in the rain around the palace grounds, and down to the lakeside where she'd taken Jen ahead of the Homecoming Ball. On returning to the palace she'd called her mother; really just to gauge if she was still talking to her, which she seemed to be. Afterwards she'd read a little of her book, and played piano in the palace drawing room.

Then, as she'd wandered the halls of the palace, she'd bumped into Madeleine. She didn't really know where she stood with Madeleine right now. They'd exchanged a few frosty sentences of conversation, but Madeleine had not been keen to talk for long. Jen had joked once that she thought Madeleine had a crush on Hana; that she couldn't see, but she was all for getting to know her a little better to figure out what sort of relationship they could have going forwards. Hana was willing to let past grievances stay in the past; although Madeleine had been unkind to her during the engagement tour, Hana knew that Madeleine's life had not been a happy one at that stage. Being engaged to a man she did not care about and who she knew did not care about her must have been a trial, even if the engagement was leading to her becoming Queen. She often wondered how Madeleine could be happy. She wondered if Madeleine herself knew.

Hana had then spent some more time with Rick, and Regina, who had joined them for afternoon tea. And just afterwards, Drake had wandered in as if he had never been away, muttering a string of complaints about the train from Lythikos, the weather (the rainy season had definitely hit) and the fact that all they'd left him to eat were tiny little sandwiches. Hana had instantly relaxed. With Drake being back, the dynamics had felt back to normal.

When Regina had returned to her quarters, the three of them had spent a little time together, just like old times. Hana had decided to message Jen on the group chat to wish her a happy birthday, and had caught her first thing in the morning over there so got a response straight away. Jen had sent them some pictures of New York; it seemed as if she and Maxwell were having a magical romantic break. On Thursday night, he'd taken her back to the rooftop lounge where they'd had their first kiss. Then yesterday they'd gone to the zoo at Central Park, before visiting the Statue of Liberty. It might have been Hana's imagination, but Rick and Drake didn't seem quite so enthused by these updates.

Later on, Olivia had joined them for an evening meal. This had been an interesting social experiment; the levels of frostiness between Olivia and Drake appeared to have hit a new high. After dinner, Olivia had been riling Rick endlessly about Monday morning's trial (she was clearly and understandably still furious with Anton) and Drake and Hana had found themselves sitting together, analysing their behaviour.

Eventually, Drake had rolled his eyes and stood up. "Come on, Hana. I've had enough of this. Let's go find a bar."

She'd looked at him curiously. "A bar?"

"Yeah. I've not been to a bar for weeks. I need to let off some steam. I'll go on my own if you're not coming." He'd raised an eyebrow at her.

She'd not had a problem with that idea, and that was why she now found herself sitting in a bar with Drake. It was the first time the two of them had been out together on their own, and they'd not really progressed past small talk yet.

Hana held her hands together and fidgeted, she glanced up at him as he drank his whisky, wondering if she should broach the elephant in the room.

She decided against it. "That rain hasn't stopped," she said, instead.

"Every fall we get this," he explained. "Rains for about a week. Then it dries up. But it's cooler afterwards."

"We get rain in Shanghai too," she explained. "It's often quite tropical."

"Not regretting your decision to stay here are you?" he asked her. Taken aback, she studied his face carefully. His eyebrows were raised, and he was almost taunting her to answer.

"No, why would you think that?"

"Just thought after a couple of weeks of being a third wheel you might've realised it's not all it's cracked up to be."

She paused before answering him. "It's not like that."

"What *is* it like, Hana?"

Now he had her curious. Was he upset that she'd moved to Valtoria? "It's just nice having a little bit of independence, for the first time in my life really."

"You could have had that here, in the capital," he suggested.

"I *could*, but there was no need for me to look for somewhere to live here, thanks to Jen's generosity."

Drake nodded, taking another drink from his whisky tumbler. "So, I guess if you wanted to you could have the best of both worlds. Get a place here too, travel between the two..."

Hana nodded. "I could, but why would I..."

"I'm worried about Rick," he said abruptly. "He doesn't seem himself. He's subdued."

"I imagine he's concerned about the trial," Hana suggested.

"He's lonely is what he is," Drake lamented. "We all left him at the same time, pretty much. I was kinda counting on you to stay put until I got back from Lythikos.."

"Oh, you never said, and I never thought.."

Drake sighed, swirling the last of his whisky around its tumbler. "I'm not gonna go back to Lythikos. Hell, there's no point in me being there. If Olivia needs protecting she can damn well stay at the palace and be protected."

Hana was interested. "How was your trip?"

"Soul destroying. That woman is maddening, Hana. She has no respect for me at all. I mean, she had me running around in circles and then changed the goalposts, she had the cheek to interrogate me on my private thoughts, and she spent most of her time staying as far away from me as possible when I was supposed to be shadowing her... what?"

Hana hadn't been able to suppress her giggles. "Oh, Drake. And here I was thinking that you two might have *bonded*."

"Only way I'm ever bonding with her is if she covers us both with industrial superglue, pins me up against a wall and rubs up next to me."

Hana was still giggling. She had wondered if anything had happened between Drake and Olivia, but clearly this had not been the case.

"So, yeah. Think I'm gonna stay here after the trial. Get Rick sorted. You see, you and I, we both seem to be getting on with things after our crazy ride of a summer. But he seems to be struggling."

Hana sighed. "He *is* grieving the loss of his father."

"Hana, you know that's not the reason why he's heartbroken."

Hana nodded, and looked guiltily at Drake.

"I mean, we're doing okay. With our help, I think he will be too."

"Okay," Hana said, getting what he meant. "Perhaps I'll stay here for a bit after the trial too to help. I don't think Jen and Maxwell will mind."

Drake laughed. "I don't think Jones and Maxwell will even notice, Hana. But hey. Let them have their honeymoon period. They'll soon get fed up of eating each other's faces and get back to normal."

She laughed again, finishing her glass of wine. "What's normal for those two?"

He nodded. "Good point."

"Personally I think it's lovely to see them both so happy," she said. "And I guess while that's normal for me, it's normal for you to think it's revolting. Frankly, I'd be *worried* if you were happy for them."

"Yeah," he said, brightening up. "We're getting there, Hana. Eventually things will be great again. Another drink?"

She tapped her glass. "Same again please."

He got up and headed towards the bathroom, and Hana smiled to herself. The awkwardness of a couple of weeks ago seemed to have gone away, and he seemed to be as glad of her company as she was of his. He would be okay. She would be okay. Rick had to be their next priority.

She took her phone out of her handbag. She had a Pictagram notification - *@thefullbeaumonty has uploaded 8 new photographs*. She smiled, scrolling through pictures of Jen and Maxwell in front of the Statue of Liberty. As she did so, her phone chimed with the group chat notification. A message from Jen. *So we're Cordonia bound! Plane will be taking off soon. See you guys in about twelve hours!*

She replied. *Looks like you've had a brilliant birthday trip!*

I have, thanks Hana. Will show you all our pics tomorrow.

A message from Maxwell. *Why wait? Just check my Pictagram*. This was followed by a series of emojis, some of which made sense, some of which made no sense. Pretty standard for Maxwell.

I have done, she added. *Make sure you get some rest on the plane, you two. So you're all fresh for the trial*. All that sightseeing and travelling must have been exhausting for them, and she couldn't imagine they'd have invested much time in sleeping over the last few days.

Jen again. *What are you suggesting, Hana Lee?*

Maxwell again. *No fear of that. I have two shiny new passes for the mile high club right here!* String of suggestive emojis. Hana hadn't even realised there was an emoji for *that*. A shocked titter escaped her.

Jen again. *I'm not sure who his other pass is for. I'm planning to sleep!*

This was soon followed by a disappointed face emoji from Maxwell.

Hana laughed aloud. *Well, however you decide to travel, safe travels. See you both soon!*

She put her phone down, aware Drake was approaching the table with the drinks. “So, the Beaumont-Joneses are on their way back from New York.”

“Right,” he said, handing her a glass of wine. “In that case we need to make the most of the peace and quiet before we get hit by tropical storm Jen-Maxwell.”

She smiled, shaking her head. “You’ve missed him really.”

“Sad thing is I have,” Drake admitted. “Probably more than...” He trailed off.

Hana nodded, knowing what he meant. “Well, it’ll be good for us all to be back together. Even if it is under tricky circumstances.”

Her eyes met his as she said this, and she could detect some awkwardness in his expression. *Tricky was right.*

Just Desserts

Jet lag really sucked. He felt he might have managed to dodge it the last couple of times he'd come back from New York, because he'd been high as a kite on adrenaline (the first time), euphoria (the second time) and caffeine (well, both times). This time, despite Hana's wise words for them to get some rest on the plane, which they'd chosen to ignore (whatever the birthday girl wanted, he was happy to provide.. nudge nudge, wink wink) they'd arrived back in Cordonia mid-morning on Sunday, and had consequently lost the opportunity for Saturday night's sleep. They'd missed out on so much already that they'd decided to power on through, and this afternoon's briefing with Rashad was crucial. Therefore, it was also crucial that he stayed awake.

The cronuts had gone down well with the others, and he'd never known Drake to be so.. *civil* towards him? Clearly spending a fortnight with Olivia had caused him to malfunction slightly. Hana and Jen were catching up happily. Rick and Rashad were in one of the palace meeting rooms, preparing for the briefing. Rick seemed relaxed and contented, despite the prospect of tomorrow's trial, which was more than could be said for Olivia. She looked as if she was about to dismember someone, so he was doing his best to stay as far away from her as possible, just in case she decided he would be an appropriate case study. So that was why he and Drake were inevitably buddied up, as Drake's life philosophy seemed to be similar on the Olivia front right now.

He'd just been to grab some coffees from the kitchens, and he handed one to Drake. "So, Drake. Pumped for this exciting briefing?"

Drake rolled his eyes. "It's marginally better than being in Lythikos."

"You not looking forward to see Evil Justin squirm?"

Drake shook his head. "Just looking forward to getting this over with. Ten days of sitting in a courtroom doesn't sound like my idea of fun, let alone preceding it with a day of briefings." He pulled a flask out of his pocket. "Good job I have this to keep me company."

"Ooh. Why didn't I think of that. I could've brought some cocktails in. That would liven things up.."

"Yeah, yeah. I bet you've got a trial playlist ready as well.."

"You have high expectations, my good buddy, and I am delighted to say they are not misplaced." He pulled out his phone. "Look. Track one, 'Going Down'. Track two, 'Jailhouse Rock'..."

Drake's face was deadpan. "My good god."

"Track three... oo-hoo, 'I Fought The Law And The Law Won..'"

"Enough." Drake glanced across the room at where Jen and Hana were chatting. "So. New York was good?"

"Yep!" Maxwell grinned smugly. There was so much he could say about it, but when it came to Jen, he was never sure how much he wanted to share with Drake.

Drake sighed. "I don't like it when you have so little to say about something."

"Words are not always necessary," Maxwell gushed. "We had a great time. Did you know that there is only one cow on the island of Manhattan? And I've said hello to her?"

"I did not know that."

"And also, in New York, the average price of a subway ride is identical to the average price of a slice of pizza?"

"You'll be dining out on this trip for decades, Maxwell," Drake sighed, looking distant. "Did Jones have a good birthday?"

"Ahem. Yes, yes she did. At least, she tells me she did. Hey." He drew closer to Drake. "Rick and I are planning a little party for her here next weekend. I had a great idea of maybe doing... wait for it... an escape room?"

Drake looked at him and laughed out loud. "*Really?* Come on, Maxwell. Think about it. Firstly, is there even an escape room in the capital?"

"I'm sure there's some sort of Escape Rooms 2 U company we could hire in... and, if there isn't, I may just have stumbled on a new money-making opportunity..." He grabbed his phone and made a note.

"And secondly, is an escape room really appropriate when you think about what we're doing this week? Remember when you and Jones had to *actually* escape from a *real* life life-or-death situation? Two weeks ago?"

"Oh, uh, yeah. Didn't think of that." He sighed. "Back to the drawing board..."

The doors of the meeting room opened, and Rick and Rashad emerged. "Everyone, please come in and take a seat. We'll begin shortly."

Maxwell headed into the room, and sat down, ensuring he saved a seat for Jen. Madeleine was next to enter the room. *Uh-oh. What's she doing here?* Hana and Drake came in next, sitting just along from him. Olivia stomped in next, scowling at him as she walked past. Finally, Rick and Jen walked in, followed by Mara and Bastien.

"Uh, shouldn't this just be those of us who were at the scene?" Maxwell pointed out.

Madeleine huffed. "*Some* of us were at the scene of the first attack earlier in the day."

"Oh. Right." He liked to shut that one out of his mind even more than the second one. Being in danger with Jen had been a lot less scary than Jen being in danger without him.

Jen sat down next to him and gave his hand a perceptive squeeze. "Hey, you."

"We're expecting Bertrand, Kiara and Penelope tomorrow," Rick explained. "Rashad will brief them first thing in the morning. Lord Rashad, please."

Rick sat down, and Rashad stood at the front of the room. "As you know, I'll be representing the Crown in this trial. Anton Severus is pleading not guilty to the charges against

him. However, the other parties involved have pleaded guilty, which will shorten the trial somewhat. We're hoping that everything can be concluded within the week."

"Good," said Olivia. "The sooner he's rotting in jail, the better."

"Now, the process works as follows," Rashad explained. "As this is a Crown case, it doesn't work in the same way as a civil case, due to the severity of the accusation. Anton is presumed guilty unless the jury find there is evidence to prove his innocence. I will be prosecuting, and I will set out my case on the first day. I will call up many of you as witnesses, to discuss how you know Anton and what he did to you all. I'll also call up the people he worked with, principally Claudius, Gladys, and Lucretia."

Yowch. The mention of the name Claudius still gave Maxwell a headache. Jen must have thought along the same lines, as she stroked his forehead tenderly at this point, to a look of disdain from Olivia.

"So, the second day, Anton will have the opportunity to present his defence. Now, I've got no idea on what grounds he's claiming to be not guilty. My thoughts are he may try to deflect the blame elsewhere. Claim he was indoctrinated by the rest of the Sons of Earth, brainwashed or blackmailed into going through with his actions. We all know he was the driving force behind all this treason, but if he can form any doubt in the jury's minds, then he gets a civil trial, which is what he's hoping for."

"Will his defence call any of us up for questioning?" Jen asked, her face a little pale.

"It's possible. You, Maxwell and Bertrand knew him better than most of us. So he may try to win your empathy somehow."

"Pff," Maxwell said, doing his best to look fierce. "Evil Justin won't be getting any empathy from us."

"Too right," said Jen, taking his hand again.

"But I would also warn you, all of you, to expect him to come up with some lies and personal slurs against you. He's going to try and discredit you all to that jury, to make them doubt your integrity."

"Oh, great," Drake rolled his eyebrows.

Olivia stood up. "The country's gone mad if they listen to that madman over their leaders."

"Sit down, Olivia," Rick urged. She threw him a disappointed look, and sat back down, a pout on her face.

Rashad went on. "There will be cross examination on day three, a chance for anyone to challenge the suspect or witnesses on any relevant matters. I would say that we're likely to get a verdict on day four, if the jury are able to come to a decision. If not, it'll be adjourned until the following week. If they do, there'll be sentencing on day five, assuming he's found guilty. If he's found not guilty, it'll go to a civil trial, probably in the New Year."

Noo, that would not be good. He didn't want any further delay to their honeymoon in paradise.

"What do you think the chances are of that happening?" Hana asked.

"Very low, I'd say," Rashad said. "The evidence is very much against him, but it depends on how well he can manipulate the jury. I'm confident though that we can have him back in the cells, and for a very long time, by the end of the week."

Olivia smiled smugly at Rashad. "I'm counting on you, Rashad."

"Yeah, no pressure Rashad," Maxwell said, nervously. "Some of us have got somewhere to be in February. No time for another trial, huh Jen?"

"I have every confidence in Lord Rashad," Rick said, looking around the room. "And so should you all. We know what happened, and we just have to reinforce it. We have evidence of his involvement, and we know what he's capable of."

Jen sighed, and rested her head on Maxwell's shoulder. He placed a protective arm around her. Evil Justin was definitely going to get his just desserts for what he'd done to Jen. And he wasn't talking about tiramisu.

A bad feeling about this

Chapter Summary

This is the first chapter of the Anton/Evil Justin trial..

Expect lots of drama, but please don't expect technical accuracy / realism as I realised as I was writing it that I haven't actually got a clue as to how trials work :)

Enjoy!

“Would the accused please stand?”

Jen watched carefully as Anton Severus got to his feet. He was very much back in Justin mode, she guessed that was a tactical ploy. He was clad in the sort of suit he'd worn when whizzing around Cordonia in the limo with them during the engagement tour, and had a nervous look on his face. Rightfully so.

“Anton Severus,” said the judge. “You stand trial on the following counts. I will list them with the most serious count first, and all others in chronological order. Count one. Between the dates of 25 August and 26 October of this year, plotting to assassinate the Cordonian monarch, His Majesty King Rick of Cordonia. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty,” Anton said, quietly.

Jen looked across at Rick, who was sitting to her left. He had a poker face.

“Count two. On August 25 of this year, organising a terrorist attack on a private event at the Royal Palace, with the intent to cause injury and loss of life to those in attendance, including the attempted murder of Drake Walker and grievous bodily harm to Lady Kiara of Castellsarrian. How do you plead?”

Jen looked across at Drake, who was sitting a little further to her left, in-between Kiara and Hana.

“Not guilty.”

“Count three. On September 21 of this year, administering a terrorist attack on the Royal Cordonian Orchard at Applewood, and destroying the historic crop of apple trees. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“Count four. On September 30 of this year, arranging a subsequent terrorist attack on the Royal Palace, resulting in the death of King Father Constantine of Cordonia, and causing grievous bodily harm to a member of the King's Guard. How do you plead?”

Jen glanced at Rick again, his expression still stoic.

“Not guilty.”

“Count five. On October 9 of this year, the poisoning of Countess Madeleine of Fydelia. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“Count six. On October 10 of this year, holding Duchess Jen of Valtoria and Duchess Olivia of Lythikos at gunpoint, and causing significant damage to the Nevraakis family fault. How do you plead?”

He sighed, as if getting bored. “Not guilty,”

“Count seven. On October 26 of this year, being responsible for a terrorist attack on the cathedral boutique, including the attempted murder of a member of the King’s Guard and assault on Duchess Jen of Valtoria, Duke Bertrand of Ramsford, Duchess Olivia of Lythikos, Countess Madeleine of Fydelia, Lady Kiara of Castellsarrian, Lady Penelope of Portavira, Lady Hana Lee and Ms Ana de Luca. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty.”

“And finally, count eight. On October 26 of this year, the kidnapping of Duke Maxwell and Duchess Jen of Valtoria, and Duchess Olivia of Lythikos, and the subsequent assault on King Rick of Cordonia. How do you plead?”

Anton stared right at Jen and Rick at this point. “Not. Guilty.”

Jen sighed, and was glad when she felt someone take her right hand. She squeezed the offending hand tightly.

“The charges now read, you may sit,” instructed the judge. “I now invite Lord Rashad of Domvalier, the Crown’s Counsel, to present the case against the accused.”

Rashad stood up and walked up to the front of the courtroom, a bow towards Rick as he reached the platform.

“Esteemed jurors. You have the opportunity to secure your country this week, by ensuring this dangerous man is behind bars where he belongs. Anton Severus was the driving force behind the recent plot to overthrow the Cordonian monarchy, causing distress to not only the royals and nobles you see up in the gallery, but to ordinary Cordonian people like yourselves, living in fear of attacks such as the one on the Applewood orchard. As I will detail, he had compelling reasons for his crimes, and the means to take power if his plans succeeded. They did not succeed, and justice must be done to ensure a strong message is sent to anyone else who would threaten the Crown. Today, I will call up many of those affected by his actions, and those he conspired with who have pleaded guilty to their involvement, to testify to his involvement in this dreadful campaign of terror.”

Jen sighed. This was going to be a long day. She heard a rustling next to her, and glanced to her right.

“M&M?” she heard Maxwell whisper, as he held out a brown bag in her direction. Although she pushed the bag away firmly, she had to smile.

Tiredness had really caught up with her now; the jet lag from their New York trip had kicked in. It was only an hour after they'd returned to the palace after a full day of setting out the case against Anton, but she'd decided to head up to bed after their evening meal, and was delighted when Maxwell had joined her. They weren't quite asleep yet, instead they were dosing comfortably together in bed, chatting about the day.

"I thought Bertrand did well today," Maxwell said, winding a strand of her hair around his fingers. "I know he feels a lot of guilt because he hired Evil Justin. Heck, I know *I* do, even though it wasn't my decision. But he didn't let that show. He just gave Evil Justin the ole what for."

"Mmhmm," Jen agreed. "That was long overdue."

Throughout the day she and the others had all been called up. She'd explained how she'd met Anton, or Justin, and how they'd interacted and what he'd known about and helped with when he was operating undercover as Justin. She'd been through the things he was accused of in detail. They'd all spoken; Rick, Maxwell, Olivia (which had been entertaining), Bastien, Mara, even Kiara, Penelope and Madeleine had given their versions of events.

The fascinating part for Jen had been listening to Claudius, Lucretia and Gladys give their testimonies. Claudius had accepted he was a beaten man, and had pleaded guilty to his involvement. He had already been keen to bring down the monarchy, feeling it was weak, and on meeting Anton and Lucretia, and discovering the ace that Anton had to play (his marriage to Olivia and the technicality in the Cordonian law) they had decided that they all had to work together. Claudius would bring the manpower, Anton would bring the final result, and in the meantime he would be the spy in the Crown's camp.

Lucretia had then come in to assist later in the plan. However, although the majority of Claudius's men had stayed faithful to him, many lost sight of what they were fighting for under Anton's power-hungry leadership. And in the end, he'd even alienated Lucretia. Obviously, she had been detained ahead of the final attacks, and her information had been somewhat useful, although she had not been able to predict when and where he would strike on the wedding day.

"Did you feel a bit sorry for Gladys, though?" Maxwell asked her, putting his arms around her.

"Yeah," she sighed. "She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. She was manipulated by Claudius. I don't think she wanted to put us in danger. She never felt she had a choice. I hope she manages to get back on her feet after this."

"Yeah. Same. It's been a long day. But now the jury know everything he did, why he did it, what he stood to gain out of it. I'm not sure what he can say to get out of it now."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll think of something," Jen said, an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach. "Anton's smart. He had to be to plan everything he did."

"Well, whatever he throws at us, we're ready," he said, twining his hand with hers. "We're in this together, remember?"

"Yeah," She still had a bad feeling about this, especially after what Rashad had said about lies and slander and sensationalism. What exactly did Anton have up his sleeve?

“Anyway, what’s the worst that can happen?”

She opened her eyes and looked at the bundle of human loveliness that was gazing back at her. “Always so positive. I think I need a bit of your positivity at the moment.”

“That’s what I’m here for. We’re together. Things will work out. I promise you.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Where would I be without you?”

“Ah, you see, I know that now. You’d be in Anita’s flat in New York, eating pizza and gazing at the city lights. I can picture it.”

She sighed. “Looking for my Lord Right.”

“Hey, that’s Duke Right to you.”

“Not if you never found me you wouldn’t be. You’d still be a common old Lord.”

“I could still be a Duke if I’d found someone else instead of you who also ended up inevitably falling in love with me due to my charm and wit.”

She shook her head, giggled, and kissed him on the cheek. “Go to sleep and dream about that alternative reality then.”

“Nah. Because even though I’d obviously have proposed to that someone else in order to obtain a ranking equal to Bertrand, I’d never have loved her like I love you. I’d still have been secretly searching the globe for my New York waitress.”

“Well, you’ve got her right here.”

“I know,” he whispered. “And I have no intention of letting her go.”

As he kissed her gently, she relaxed into sleepy contentment.

The House of secrets

“What is your name?” Anton’s defence counsel asked him.

Anton cleared his throat. “Anton Severus.”

“You are pleading not guilty on all of the counts that were presented against you yesterday. Today, the jury needs to know why you consider yourself not guilty of these crimes. Please, in your own words, could I ask you to put forward your defence.”

Anton nodded, and threw a smirk in the direction of the Royal Gallery. “Of course.”

Yesterday he had portrayed himself as the timid victim, but today, Jen thought, he seemed much more assured.

He looked around the courtroom. “Listen. I’m not saying that I wasn’t involved in all of this. There’s way too much evidence to place me at some of the crime scenes. And, yeah. I hold my hands up. I was part of it all. The whole overthrowing the monarchy thing. But, nobody’s stopped to consider *why* I was a part of it all. So that’s what I’m about to tell you.”

His face contorted into a frown. “There are greater forces at play here. Or should I say, *a* greater force. And, until today, I’ve feared for my life to reveal the truth. But, in a court of law, the truth is the only thing that I can speak. And so, here it is.” He paused for dramatic effect.

“You all know from yesterday that when I was young, my parents and the Nevraakis family entered into a marriage alliance. For me to be married to their daughter, the lovely Olivia over there.” He blew Olivia a kiss, and it took both Rick and Bastien to hold her down, such was her outrage.

“And for the two of us to be the next heirs to the Cordonian throne, should the Rys family find itself..” He threw a callous look at Rick. “..*lacking*.”

Jen glanced at Rick, who was maintaining a dignified expression, his hand still on Olivia’s shoulder.

“Now, for most of my life, I didn’t even know about my secret. I respected and admired the Cordonian royal family. Others, however, resented them, and wanted them out, but not for the good of the Severus and Nevraakis houses, no. For their *own* good.”

Jen looked nervously around her. She wondered who on earth he could be referring to. Her friends all looked just as anxious, and confused. *Remember what Rashad said. He’ll come up with lies.*

“And so, I was blackmailed, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. I was forced to become the face of this programme of terror, against my will, by a dangerous man who discovered my secret. A dangerous man, who is sitting right over there, in the Royal Gallery.”

There was shouting from both galleries, and Jen continued to look around her, as did the others.

“Ah, you see,” Anton went on. “You can look around you all you want. But, like you knew my secret, I know *your* secret. And now the whole of Cordonía will know it too. I was working for you. In fact, I started working for you in a slightly different capacity. Didn’t I, *Bertrand?*”

Jen felt as if her heart had leapt out of her mouth, and stared at Bertrand in horror. She heard Maxwell’s stunned voice from next to her. “No. That’s not true.”

Bertrand was too shocked to say anything, his face growing red with anger.

“I came into the Duke of Ramsford’s employ as a PR agent. He needed some help with a wayward suitor, who had not succeeded in securing the hand of the King in marriage, and needed an image change pronto to have a second stab at it. Had she become Queen, Bertrand would have had more influence over the Crown, via his little mole, Jen Jones. And it wasn’t just influence he needed, no. He needed cash. Because, unbeknown to most of the Cordonian court, House Beaumont is penniless. Their fortune is spent.”

There were a few audible gasps from the main gallery, and a sea of nods from the royal gallery.

“And this was Bertrand’s desperate attempt to gain not just prestige and leverage, but euros to keep the House afloat.”

Jen sighed, realising that Anton’s story was a melting pot of truth and lies. Which wouldn’t help their case. Although the financial position that House Beaumont was in was no longer such a secret among the court as it had been when Jen had arrived in Cordonía, it was still not common knowledge.

“But, this plan had failed miserably, and Bertrand needed to work harder to convince the King to break off his engagement to Countess Madeleine of Fydelia. Obviously, the King had seen the light and made the... classy choice.”

Now it was Jen’s turn to get angry. She stood up and pointed at Anton. “Wait just one minute...”

The judge turned to Jen. “Your Grace, you must not interject. You will get your chance to put your counterargument across tomorrow.”

“WHAT?” Jen raised her hands up in dismay. “So he just gets to make lies up about Bertrand all day and Bertrand doesn’t get a chance to defend himself?”

“He will have the opportunity tomorrow, Your Grace,” the judge said. “I’m sorry, but if you have any further comments, I will have to eject you from the courtroom.”

Jen looked first to Maxwell, then to beyond him to Bertrand. Her distress must have been obvious, as Maxwell took her hand and gave it a squeeze. She sat back down.

“Please continue, Mr Severus.”

“As I was saying, before the impulsive American so rudely interrupted me. I was working for Bertrand. It was one of his plans to secure power and money for House Beaumont, by placing Jen, the woman he’d plucked from obscurity, in line to become Rick’s queen. She would

then use her influence on King Rick for the good of House Beaumont. A once great house, so overlooked in recent Cordonian history. Bertrand felt that the throne had been denied to House Beaumont back in renaissance times, when his ancestor had been linked romantically to a Cordonian Queen from an unestablished House. He wanted to succeed where his ancestors had failed. And he wasn't going to stop there. He needed the money, sure. But he was also going to attempt to take control of the other Cordonian houses, be it directly or indirectly."

Bertrand shook his head, his face as red as beetroot. Jen looked sadly at him.

"But, during my employ, Bertrand Beaumont realised that I wasn't who I said I was. I wasn't Justin Clarke, as per the name on my CV. When my parents were killed, along with the majority of the Nevraakis family, I was taken in by another family and raised under a different name. The name Anton Severus was unknown to me. But it wasn't to Bertrand. His knowledge of Cordonian history is vast. And he soon worked out *exactly* who I was, and how I could be an even more useful pawn in his plans to grow more rich and powerful."

Jen glanced at Maxwell, who had his worried face on. No wonder, really.

"By this point, he'd obviously realised that he was never going to get the King to reverse his decision to marry Countess Madeleine in favour of Jen. This so called great house had to come up with another way of making a quick buck to pay off their debts, and infiltrate the monarchy. And that's where I came in. Ironically enough, the King did eventually break off his engagement, but Bertrand had bigger plans for our American friend by that point, which I will come back to." He laughed. "You're all gonna love that bit. Well, one of you won't. But the rest of you..." His sinister laughter unsettled Jen, as he seemed to be almost looking straight at her.

"But anyway, back to where I come in. Bertrand knew exactly who I was. And he threatened to throw me to the wolves if I didn't go along with what he wanted me to do. He was going to drag me before the King and the Duchess of Lythikos, my *wife*, and turn me in, for a king's ransom of course, as a danger to the throne. Ha, me, a danger to the throne. *He* is the real danger to the throne, and it's time you all knew that."

Bertrand had regained some of his composure by this point, and threw Anton a very disappointed look. Jen sighed. Hopefully Anton would call Bertrand forward at some point today to give him the opportunity to speak. If not, tonight was going to be a long night.

"I didn't want to get involved in a plot against the King, but I was worried that if I didn't, my life as I knew it would be over. I then sought out the one person I hoped might be able to help me. Lucretia Nevraakis. She might have some recollection of what happened, she might be able to get me out of the bizarre marriage that had put me in so much trouble." He sighed. "But she was as rotten to the core as my employer. She encouraged the treason. She pushed me into it from the other direction. I had nowhere to run, nowhere to go. I had no choice. I was a puppet, a face to take the blame if it all went wrong. And I'm glad it all went wrong. I didn't want any of this. I just wanted to live my life like a normal person." Those had to be crocodile tears. "And now... I'm going to meet the same fate I would have done had I refused to carry out what you wanted. You win. Except you don't win. Because the good people of this jury know who you really are now. And they're going to clear me."

Maxwell had his arm on Bertrand's, and was shaking his head furiously, looking as angry as his brother. Jen was holding Maxwell's other hand, and gave it a fierce squeeze.

“Oh, look at them up there. House Beaumont. Such a proud, noble house. But, wait. Whatever happened to the former Duke of Ramsford? He hasn’t been seen for fifteen years. And he was such a stalwart servant to King Constantine in his time, wasn’t he? Where is he now? I scoured the press, and never found an obituary. Is he as guilty as the rest of House Beaumont? The house of secrets, such as undisclosed mammoth debts, illegitimate children.. and shameful affairs with sponsored suitors?”

Just when Jen thought she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from standing up and shouting out again (and getting herself kicked out in the process) she heard another voice shout out.

“That’s enough!”

She spun around in amazement to see Drake standing up.

“Cut it out. Nobody likes a bully, especially a bully that’s full of shit!”

Maybe it was the reference to Bartie that had done it.

“Mr Walker, please sit down or you will have to leave..”

“You know what, I’m leaving anyway. I’m not listening to any more of this bullcrap today.”

Drake made his way out of the courtroom, to murmurs from both of the galleries. Jen looked desperately back at him, quite thankful for his interruption. Maxwell looked equally gratefully in Drake’s direction. Bertrand just continued to frown ahead.

Cordonia's most gullible man

Chapter Notes

It's about to hit the fan...

Contains one (in my opinion completely justifiable!) instance of strong language which is a bit out of character.

Hold on to your fancy hats!

“Oh, man. Drake had the right idea. I mean, I’d walk out too if I wasn’t worried for you, brother. I’ve never heard such a load of tripe in my entire life. And I can *always* hear myself speak.”

The two of them were sitting quietly just outside the courtroom after the lunch adjournment. Jen had gone to try and find Rick, worried as to what he thought of everything that had been said.

“C’mon, Bertrand. You gotta say something.”

Bertrand had his head in his hands. “Maxwell, I just need a moment.”

“You’re in shock. That’s what you are. And I am too. And if I were in your position, I’m not sure how I would feel either. But we have to stay strong and fight this. You’ve got to make that jury realise that they’re listening to the rantings of a certifiable madman.” He looked down the corridor, relieved to see Jen sashaying back towards them. “Everything okay, Jen?”

“I can’t find him,” she sighed, sitting down in-between him and Bertrand, and placing her hand on his knee. “Drake’s gone back to the palace. I think Rick must be with Rashad. Oh, Bertrand. Rick knows better than to believe a word of this nonsense.”

Bertrand still had his head in his hands. “Trouble is, it sounds feasible, Jen.”

“It does,” she said, taking Bertrand’s arm and guiding one of his hands away from his face. “And Anton’s had two weeks to come up with a good story. But it is just that.”

“Yeah. It’s just a story,” Maxwell chipped in, resting his chin on her shoulder. “Believable or not, it’s still a work of fiction. Probably worthy of the Booker Prize. And we all know that. And Evil Justin knows that too.”

“Court to resume,” came a call from within the courtroom. Bertrand stood up and made his way towards the door of the courtroom, gloomily.

Jen stood up next, but Maxwell put his arm on hers, holding her back for a moment. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Her expression was tense, but she looked as if she appreciated the attention.

“You doing okay?”

She let herself smile, and sunk into him. “Yeah. This is tough. But we’ll all get through it.”

“Now you’re singing off my hymn sheet,” he said, winking at her. “Come on then. Hey, Hana!” Hana was approaching them, her face pale.

Jen stood up again. “What is it, Hana?”

“Oh, I’m just concerned about Drake,” she sighed. “Going off like that earlier..”

“Hey,” said Jen, putting her arm around Hana. “He’ll be fine. He’ll go off and drink some whisky, and sulk that he’s missing out. I’m sure he’ll come back tomorrow.”

“I have to say, I’m a little bit in awe of my buddy Drake,” Maxwell said, as the three of them walked back into the courtroom. “Telling it like it is right there. I’d love to have done the same, but I think my brother needs me right now.”

Jen and Hana both nodded, nervously.

“I mean, all this crap that Evil Justin’s coming out with...”

A silence settled around the room, as Rick walked in, his expression fierce. Maxwell had only seen that look on his friend’s face a handful of times, and he didn’t like it.

They all found their way back to their seats in the royal gallery, and the judge re-entered the court. “All be seated. The defence will now call its second witness.”

All eyes turned to the defence counsel.

“The defence calls Duchess Jen of Valtoria to the stand.”

No way.

Jen looked frozen and pale for a second. He drew close and whispered gently into her ear. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Her expression changed, and she fidgeted with her fingers. “Hey. At least we get a voice this way.”

“My brave wife. I love you.” He kissed her gently on the cheek. “Go get him, tiger.”

Her face lit up. “Rrrr.”

He laughed, reminded of the last time he’d said that to her, and she left his side, edging past the others and heading down the stairs to the witness stand, her public face as ever the picture of confidence.

The defence counsel spoke. “You are Duchess Jen of Valtoria?”

“That’s me.” She shot him a self-assured smile.

“Can you tell me about the first time you met my client?”

Jen looked a little thrown, but spoke. “Yes. I was with Maxwell.” She smiled up at him, and he winked back. “We were leaving Countess Madeleine’s manor, and we were surrounded by the press.”

The counsel looked interested. “Ah. Were they asking you awkward questions, Your Grace?”

Jen nodded. “Yes. And Justin... *Anton*... was posing as my new press secretary. Bertrand had just hired him. He helped us out.”

“What sort of awkward questions were you being asked, Your Grace?”

Jen paused, as if considering her options, then spoke. “The reporters were speculating on whether Maxwell and I were in a relationship.”

“Which you were denying?”

She nodded. “Of course. Because we weren’t in a relationship. We were just friends.”

“Just friends,” the counsel said, looking at the jury. “Right. Now. This happened.. when?”

“Uh.. sometime in July? It was a really hot day. It was the day of the barn raising.”

“And you announced your engagement to Lord Maxwell at the Five Kingdoms festival on the 31 August?”

She looked blankly for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, that would be right...”

“Just friends in July, engaged to be married in August, and married in...what, October?”

She sighed. “I know it sounds crazy, but...”

“Thank you, Your Grace. You may return to the gallery. We may need you again shortly, so don’t go too far.”

Confusion on her face, Jen did as she had been instructed. Maxwell was confused in equal measures. *What the fudgecakes had they asked her about that for?*

“The defence calls Anton Severus to the stand.”

Anton stood up, smugly, and took Jen’s place, as Jen returned to his side.

“You okay?” he whispered to her.

“Yeah,” she sighed. “I don’t get it.”

“Me neither, Jen.” He shook his head, and they both looked up as the counsel spoke.

“Can you tell me anything else that would support your claims about Duke Bertrand of Ramsford?”

“Oh, can I.” He rubbed his hands together. “So. As I said earlier, Bertrand wanted to control Cordonia. And he couldn’t have his little pawn sitting as Queen, as that ship had sailed. But, he came up with another idea of how she could help him gain power.”

“And what was that?”

“Bertrand learned, through his spies in the royal circle, that the King was planning to appoint Jen Jones as a Duchess. Of the affluent Duchy of Valtoria, no less. Now, Bertrand wanted Valtoria for himself. To pay off his own Duchy’s terrifying levels of debt. So he leapt at the chance to consolidate power. Now listen carefully, ladies and gentlemen. I know you all watched the beautiful wedding of Cordonia’s self-styled *newest power couple* in front of you.” He gestured towards them, and Maxwell gave him his best scary glare in response. “Maybe you watched it on TV, maybe you were amongst the adoring crowds outside the Cathedral. Cordonia loves a good happily-ever-after love story. But Cordonia has been deceived.”

What?

“So, Bertrand made Jen a deal. In exchange for the hospitality that had been offered to her so far, she had been expected to marry the King. But this plan had failed, and she still owed Bertrand big time. On learning through a source at the palace that she was to be gifted Valtoria, Bertrand insisted instead that a marriage alliance was the way to go, just like the deals that were struck in olden Cordonian times. So, Bertrand told Jen that she would have to marry his younger brother, in order to formalise Bertrand’s control over Valtoria and his access to the Valtorian purse.” Anton looked from Bertrand to Jen accusingly. “And Jen had no choice but to go along with this. Because if she didn’t, Bertrand was going to make sure she’d have been grounded in New York, where coincidentally, the engagement tour was calling. If she wanted to return to Cordonia, if she wanted to live out her fancy new life as Duchess of Valtoria, she had to put on a show and convince Cordonia’s most gullible man that he was the only one for her!”

Now he was on his feet. “That’s not true!!!”

Anton looked at him and laughed menacingly.

The judge looked at him. “Sit down, Your Grace. You will get your chance to speak tomorrow.”

“I...”

He sat down, bewildered. He looked at Jen. She was horribly pale, staring at Anton with fear in her eyes.

“As has just been beautifully demonstrated,” Anton continued, an evil glare in his eyes. “Bertrand did *not* bring his brother up to speed with the plan.”

Maxwell’s head was spinning. This was all just a sick joke, right?

“So you are saying that the Duke of Ramsford ordered Jen Jones to pursue a relationship with his brother, in order that they might be married, solely to secure the Duke’s hold over Valtoria?”

“I am. He did.” Anton looked up at him, his expression seemingly sincere. “I’m sorry, Maxwell.”

Maxwell felt his fists clench in anger, and Jen gripped him by the wrist, but she seemed unable to look him in the eye.

“The defence calls Duchess Jen of Valtoria back to the stand.”

He heard her breath catch nervously, and she stood up and walked, ghost like, back to the stand.

“Your Grace. Can you tell me when you were told by King Rick that you would become the Duchess of Valtoria?”

She looked as if she was deep in thought. “It would have been August 23.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. And can you tell me the date that you entered into a relationship with Lord Maxwell of Ramsford?”

She bit her lip. “August 20.”

“No further questions.”

He felt as if his stomach was about to give way, as Anton looked up at him.

“The defence calls Duke Maxwell of Valtoria to the stand.”

No, no. This wasn't happening.

He was shaking like a leaf. Wait.. did leaves shake? When? Whatever, he was definitely shaking.

Bertrand gave him a nudge. “Go, for heaven’s sake. At least you get your chance to tell them all he’s full of poisonous lies.”

Yeah. I should go.

He passed Jen on the way to the stand. She grabbed his hand and squeezed it. As she looked at him, he could see tears in her eyes. He just didn’t have it in him to smile and wink at her right now, and quickly looked away as she released her hand.

He took the stand and counted to five in his head, his focus on the table in front of him. He couldn’t look at anyone right now.

“Your Grace. I take it you disagree with my client’s version of events.”

“Of course I disagree! Evil Justin is the man behind everything here, he’s just trying to push the blame onto someone else so he can get away with it!” He looked up and at the defence counsel. “My brother is innocent, he didn’t do any of this. And, I’d have you know that Jen and I are *very much* in love.”

“I understand that you are sure of your own feelings, Your Grace, but how can you be sure of hers?”

“Because..”

“The situation is,” the counsel interrupted, “That you have always been a liability to your brother. Is it not the case that you had never really lived up to your brother’s standards?”

Maxwell laughed ironically. “Oh, I’m not denying that..”

“And so, your brother didn’t trust you to stay quiet about his plans to overthrow the monarchy and consolidate power between all the duchies of Cordonia.”

“Uh... except he never had these plans..”

“So he decided it was best for you not to know a thing. Including the fact that when the woman you, let’s face it, had already fallen for, declared she had feelings for you, she was *lying*.”

“She wasn’t lying! Why would she lie?”

“We’ve been over this. She lied because she had been put under pressure to do so, by your brother.”

“Well, that’s not what happened..”

“Your Grace. You were told nothing because you would be highly likely to betray your brother to the King, who is a close friend of yours. Whether by accident or on purpose. Probably by accident, given your track record. So you weren’t in on this little secret, either. Which I suppose worked well, as it made your relationship seem all the more genuine to the outside world.”

Maxwell shook his head. “These are all lies, and everyone in this room knows it.”

“So, when your brother gave the order, all of a sudden, Jen confessed her love for you. Did you not think it happened suddenly?”

“Well, yes it did, but she’d been wanting to tell me for a...”

“Did you not think it was odd that she accepted your proposal, only six days later, so easily?”

“No.. I knew she loved me..” He glared at Anton, feeling as if he could rip his head off right now.

Anton laughed. “Please, Maxwell. Look at her, and look at you. You’re nothing special.”

“Mr Severus, please be silent!” shouted the judge.

Mr Severus, please be silent. Please shut up. Please just fuck off and die.

“It had to look as if Jen had moved on from her unsuccessful pursuit of King Rick. And your brother needed to consolidate power as soon as possible. Did you wonder why the wedding was rushed? And why the attacks took place on your wedding day?”

He finally allowed himself to look up towards Jen, whose face was painted with devastation, tears running down both of her cheeks.

“I... don’t have an answer, your honour.”

“No further questions.”

Following protocol

Five excruciatingly long minutes had passed since the three of them had got into the car, and they were now almost back at the palace. Bertrand was sitting in the front of the car with the driver, and Jen was sitting silently with Maxwell in the back of the car as Bertrand ranted in their general direction.

“To even suggest that I could be capable of such things... the nerve of that awful little conniving man... but to declare it to a full courtroom... I’m.. simply flabbergasted.”

“You’ll get the chance to refute it all tomorrow,” Jen said, taking Maxwell’s hand. “I just can’t believe he thinks spinning all these audacious lies about us will get him off.”

Maxwell abruptly pulled his hand away from hers. She looked at him, a little concerned. He’d barely said anything to anyone since Anton had singled him out earlier. His face was fixed on the floor. She understood that he would be troubled by Anton’s false accusations. She was upset enough, even in the knowledge that it was all lies, and nobody was questioning his feelings for her.

She was also less than impressed with herself for the way she had dealt with this onslaught so far. Initially, she’d been in shock. Then, she’d been upset. Then, she’d not known how best to comport herself to deflect any wrongful suspicion from the people around her. She had figured that getting overly cosy with her husband at that point would probably not have been the best course of action. She’d not had the chance to explain all this to Maxwell yet, but as soon as they got back to the palace, she’d take him to one side and make sure he was okay. They were just coming up the drive now.

“Well, only a complete idiot would believe anything that vile man came out with today,” Bertrand growled.

Jen nodded, and watched the rain leaving trickles down the car windows, as the car slowed and arrived at the palace entrance.

Once the car stopped, Maxwell got straight out. She waited for him to rush around to open her door, just as he always did. However, he didn’t arrive. Eventually, Bertrand opened her door for her, concern on his face.

“He seems like he’s in a hurry?”

She looked curiously in the direction Bertrand was pointing. “Maybe he’s not feeling too good. I could get that; the way Anton and his defence counsel went for him earlier.”

“At least his character wasn’t besmirched for all to hear,” Bertrand whined as they made their way inside. “He was the lucky one out of the three of us today.”

Jen wasn’t so sure about that. “I’ll talk to him. But I guess you need to speak to Rashad tonight to get your story straight.”

“There’s no *story*, Jen. There’s just the truth. And nothing but the truth.” He was truly enraged in a manner she had never seen him before. “Anton deserves to hang for his crimes, but our justice system enables him to cry innocence and smear the good names of his victims before he

even goes to the cells? What sort of a country do we live in? What sort of a legacy is this for our children?”

Jen put her arm on Bertrand's, soothingly. “Hey. Call Savannah. Have a drink. Talk it through with Rashad. And just remember, nobody here believes a word of what Anton said. So why would the jury? Especially when you give them your side of the story tomorrow. I know you're a faithful servant to the monarchy. And so does Rick.”

“Thank you, Jen,” Bertrand sighed. “We have to put that nasty little man in his place.”

“And we will,” she agreed.

“Excuse me.” Bertrand walked away, and she was met by Hana.

“Oh, Jen. What a day.” She threw her arms around Jen, who welcomed her comforting embrace.

“Yeah,” Jen agreed, not really knowing what else to say.

“We're due in the dining room for a meal,” Hana explained. “Are you joining us?”

Jen nodded. “Ah. Guessing Maxwell already went through that way, if there's food involved. I wondered where he'd gone. I was starting to worry about him actually.” She linked arms with Hana, and they made their way through to the dining room.

Drake was in the palace drawing room, trying to stay out of everyone's way after a tense dinner. He was riled up, which was probably putting him in the calmer range of where the others were at. Olivia was infuriating him, running around trying to break things, which wasn't going down too well with Madeleine. Bertrand was pacing the corridors, red faced and streaming out sentences to express his unequivocal disgust at today's events. That in itself was irritating, although Drake did find himself in the unprecedented position of feeling for Bertrand. Meanwhile, Jones and Hana were sitting in a corner, their hands fidgeting nervously, their faces full of concern and fear, often looking over in his direction. They were making him feel nervous too.

Rick had been in private talks with Rashad in the study for some time, but Drake now watched as Rashad left. “Ah, Drake. Have you seen Bertrand?”

“I'd say he's due to march back over here in about another three minutes, if you sit tight.”

“Right. Thanks. In that case, I'll be back in two minutes.” Rashad nodded to Drake, and headed off in the direction of the bathroom.

Drake stood up, pulled a flask out of his pocket, and, first tapping at the study door, let himself into it.

Rick looked up at him. “Ah. Quite a day, huh?”

“Here.”

Drake passed Rick the flask, and watched as he poured it into two glasses on his desk. They drank in solidarity together, silent at first.

Drake was next to speak. “You believe a word of that bullshit?”

Rick looked at him curiously. “I take it you caught up with what you missed?”

“Nah. I didn’t need to hear any more of that bastard’s poison.”

Rick sighed. “You might want to sit down for this.”

He looked warily at Rick, and sat down. “I get that he’s blaming Bertrand for everything.”

“Yeah. But he dreamed up another story to corroborate what Bertrand was capable of.” He shook his head, his fist curled. “I won’t go into the full details, but he suggested Bertrand found out I was going to appoint Jen as Duchess of Valtoria, about a week before I did so.”

“Guessing that wasn’t possible?”

“No. Even I didn’t know I was going to bestow Valtoria to her until the day I proposed to her. It was only that day that I was advised she had to have her own lands to be a Queen.” He looked away, fraught. “When she gave me her answer, I couldn’t deny her what I had intended her to have. If it meant she would stay in Cordonia, so much the better for all of us. Otherwise, I could have foreseen the two of them leaving the country. Making their home in New York, or perhaps London.”

Drake pondered on this. Sounded like perfection. Jones and Maxwell could have been really happy away from this circus. Had Rick wanted to curtail their relationship? Put pressure on it? There was a side to his best friend that he didn’t particularly like, and he wouldn’t put it past him.

He decided not to comment on this, in case his suspicion came across in his tone.

“Anyway, Anton suggested that on discovering that Jen was to receive Valtoria, that Bertrand put pressure on her to repay House Beaumont by way of formally consolidating the two houses. The result? House Beaumont-Jones.”

“Oh, shit.” The penny had dropped. “He’s saying that Bertrand *ordered* Jones to..”

“Exactly.”

“Oh, man. How did Maxwell react to this?”

“He didn’t get the chance to say a lot.”

“So what was Anton’s reasoning for why Bertrand would do that?”

“If Anton had been successful in taking the throne, he alleged that Olivia and Maxwell would both have ended up as collateral damage. Imprisoned or killed after a while, once he was installed as the rightful heir of Cordonia. He then alleged that Bertrand would go on to have Anton marry Jen to combine all the noble houses and the crown, with the two of them mere puppets at his disposal to control Cordonia.”

“Good grief.”

“You missed a lot, Drake.”

“But nobody believes that poisonous toad and his lies?”

“No.”

“You going to tell Bertrand and Jones that? Because if I was in their position, I’d be feeling a little jumpy.”

Rick sighed, and sat down at his desk. “If they are in any doubt of the fact that I trust them both implicitly, they won’t be tomorrow when I present myself for cross examination.”

“Who else is Rashad calling on?”

“Not you, if that’s what you’re worried about. Obviously Bertrand will wish to defend himself. Jen will need to take the stand too. Rashad may also want to call on Olivia. It might be necessary to call Claudius and Lucretia back too. Hopefully that will be sufficient.”

“You’ll have to calm Olivia down first. She says as soon as she gets within half a mile of that courtroom she’s gonna kill the bastard. And, now that I know what I missed, I don’t blame her. I might help her do it.”

Rick sighed. “There’s so much evidence to refute his claims. I don’t understand what he thinks he gains by doing this.”

“Pissing us all off?” Drake suggested.

“You could be onto something there,” Rick said, taking a swig of his whisky. Drake took one too.

“Joining us all?” He nodded in the direction of the study’s door.

“I wish I could,” Rick said. “But Rashad has advised me to keep my distance from Jen and Bertrand, for fear that we may be seen to be colluding.”

“Colluding? That’s rich. They’re accused of wanting you dead. Wouldn’t it look better if you were out here with the rest of us? Jones looks as if she’s about to be sick...” He sighed, understanding better why now, and wishing he’d stayed earlier to support his friends through this crisis. “And Bertrand... well, he’s just being his usual indignant self but times about three million.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to comfort them, Drake. I’m just following protocol. As I said, I’m sure they both know there’s no way I believe Anton’s allegations. If I did, they’d be in the cells with Anton right now. Rashad will update them.”

”Protocol? Pah. No-one can see us here..”

“We’ve had spies within our camp before. That’s how we ended up in this mess.”

Drake nodded. “Do you hate him?”

Rick looked at Drake with narrow eyes. “Who?”

“Anton. He killed your father. Do you hate him for that?”

Rick sighed. "My father was a dying man. His death was but a consequence of a greater crime. Any of us could have been standing where I was standing that evening. Would we all have had one so brave to take the impact for us."

"Hell, you know I'd have done the same as he did, Rick."

"I do know. And I for you."

Drake mulled on this for a moment, remembering the homecoming ball and his sacrifice then. He touched his shoulder involuntarily.

Suddenly, the doors to Rick's study were thrown open, and they were met with the tearful face of the very person he'd taken that bullet for. "Oh. Hey."

"Hey, Jones.."

She looked around, fretful. "He's not in here, is he?"

"Who?"

Hana followed her into the study. "Maxwell," she explained. "Jen's not seen him since we got back from the courthouse."

"But that was over an hour ago.."

"Exactly," sobbed Jones. "I know he's upset... I've not had the chance to speak to him... he's not answered any of my twenty five messages even though they've all been delivered... he's not even sent me a single emoji..."

Drake and Rick looked at each other in concern. This wasn't good.

"We'll find him," Hana assured her. "He can't have gone far."

Rick pulled up another chair next to Drake for her to sit on. "You don't think for a second he'd believe those lies that Anton threw at him, do you?"

Drake had to agree. "You know Maxwell. He's infuriatingly positive in all situations." Well, most. "He'll see the funny side of it all."

Jones shook her head. "I do know Maxwell. Better than you two do. That's why I'm worried."

"So, you've looked everywhere you can think of?" Rick said.

"Pretty much," Jones sighed.

"Can Bastien help at all?"

"I'm beginning to think that might be necessary," she sobbed.

"Wait," said Hana. "Think about it. Is there anywhere you think he might go, if he wanted some time to think about something?"

“Well, he won’t have left the palace,” Jones said, looking wistfully out of the window. “Look at that rain. He hasn’t got a coat with him. He won’t want to get his shirt wet. Rainwater would distort its natural fibres.”

“So where could he have gone in the palace?” Hana went on. “Do you have any ideas?”

Jones paused, looking at her phone as if willing it to respond. “I have a few.”

That knife is in your back

Chapter Notes

With new art scene from @elleillustrationss!

"I've done overthinking us, Jen," he could hear himself say. "I love you. And somehow you seem to feel the same way about me. I can't promise I'll be perfect, but I want to show you how I feel. Physically."

Now he heard her voice; seductive, loving, true. *"Just kiss me. Everything else will fall into place."*

He was sitting on the floor of Leo's bedroom, with his back against the locked door, looking through his tears at the empty room in front of him. Picturing what had taken place in this room a couple of months ago as the images replayed in his brain, and hearing every word anew.

"I love feeling this close to you," she had whispered into his ear.

"I've always loved dancing, but if I'm being totally honest.." She had turned to face him, and he had looked at her with all the love he felt for her. "It's never been what it was tonight. What it was with you."

He had kissed her again, deeply, and let his lips linger on hers while they swayed together, letting the last of the silent song they'd been dancing to play out in his mind. The anticipation of what they were about to do had made him tingle all over.

Too good to be true, that little voice in his head had still been telling him at that point. Things are going too well. Something is going to go wrong. You are going to screw this up.

But he hadn't seen *this* coming.

Whatever, his luck had finally run out. He'd been exposed for the idiot he really was. Bertrand had pretty much confirmed that on the way back here. But he was feeling far too numb to think about how he felt about Bertrand's betrayal right now. It was Jen's deception that was in the forefront of his tortured mind.

He was still crying, still looking ahead into the quiet room. Now instead of seeing their dancing continuing to its beautiful conclusion, he was seeing Evil Justin laughing at him. Bertrand laughing at him. Jen laughing at him. The whole courtroom laughing at him.

Did you not think it happened suddenly?

Look at her, and look at you. You're nothing special.

Did you wonder why the wedding was rushed?

He put his head in his hands to try and make Evil Justin go away, but he was glowering at him from the inside of his eyelids. *You're nothing special.*

Hey, I thought I was. For a few months, anyway.

My whole life just got turned on its head because I let myself believe that she could possibly love me.

I shouldn't have let myself believe it. I should have stuck to my original instinct. I'm Maxwell Beaumont. Mistake, class clown, family embarrassment, court jester, loveable screw-up, spare friend to make up the numbers, perpetual single pringle. I was never supposed to have the happily ever after.

Of course this was all a big joke at his expense. Of course they were all laughing.

Suddenly there was a loud knocking behind him, jolting his whole body. He gasped in shock and jumped up, moving nervously away from the door. He settled on the bed, eyes fixed on the door, hoping whoever it was would just go away.

Next, there was a tremendous crash, and he saw a red heel make its way through the door. Before he had the chance to fully process what was going on, he'd been joined in the room by Olivia Nevraakis.

She scowled at him. "Well, this is a bit pathetic, isn't it?"

He said nothing, just attempted to dry his eyes, even though he knew the tears hadn't stopped yet.

"Someone's clearly been taken in by the most absurd, preposterous fairy-tale ever written." She sat down next to him. "And I thought you had some shred of intelligence. Not much, given. But enough."

He looked at her sadly. "Yeah. It felt like a fairy-tale. The whole Unity Tour, our wedding, moving into Valtoria.."

"No, that's not.. I mean Anton's fairy-tale."

He sat up. "You don't believe Evil Justin?"

"Of *course* I don't believe Evil Justin. I can't believe you would even suggest that I..." Her expression flashed from irritation to shock and horror. "Oh my god, *you really do believe him?*"

"Shouldn't I? I mean, don't you think there's some truth in what he said? It was all just too good to be true. I should have seen this coming."

"Oh, you really are one of a kind, Maxwell Beaumont," sighed Olivia. She took his hands in hers, and looked sincerely into his eyes.



“Now I don’t know why, and clearly you don’t know why either, but I know that Jen loves you. And you know it too. So stop with the moping, and go to her, and tell her you know it.”

He sighed, pulling away. “So you don’t think that Bertrand put her up to..” He toyed with his wedding ring. “All of this?”

Olivia rolled her eyes and tutted. “Do you honestly think your brother’s a criminal mastermind? *Please*, Maxwell. Even *you* managed to pull the wool over his eyes. First with the whole Savannah’s secret baby thing, then again when you started seeing Jen. Now, on the other hand, Anton Severus is a sick, warped bastard. He’s enjoying every last second of playing with us. He knows he’s beaten, and he can’t bear to go down without twisting the knife.” She stood up, and headed for the door. “Seemingly, that knife is in *your* back at the moment. But don’t let him have the satisfaction, Maxwell.”

She opened the door. “Do you reckon Mr Walker will fix this door for us? Is that the sort of thing he does round here?”

He forced a small smile. “Not when he finds out it was you who broke it.”

“Oh. Too bad.” She kicked at the hole she’d made.

“Hey. Olivia. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank *me*,” she pointed out. “Just thank your lucky stars. Or your ancestors. Or whatever it is you believe in. Because they’re definitely looking out for you. God knows why. But they are.”

As Olivia looked at him, her expression changed for a second, to one that he very seldom saw on her face. He couldn’t help but laugh in response.

“What?” Her scowl was back.

“For the record, I still think your smile is effulgent.”

“For the record, I still don’t care. What were you thinking of, embarrassing yourself by bringing that up in front of everyone that time?”

He knew he was blushing. “I *miiiiight*’ve been trying to make someone a teensy bit jealous. Someone whose smile is even more effulgent than yours. Well, in my humble opinion, anyway.”

She looked at him curiously. “Your plan succeeded. She probably tried to hide it from you, but her face was a picture of tetchiness just after your pitiful little sob story. I got quite a kick out of it at the time, actually.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’m not stupid. I had my suspicions about you two even then. And that proves my whole point. So, get a grip.”

She closed the door, and he took a deep breath. Olivia’s little chocolate party observation had really helped him focus on reality. And she was right. It was time to get a grip, and stop jumping to conclusions.

Evil Justin was *not* going to win this.

A great dictator

Forty minutes after Olivia had reported back, Maxwell had still not returned. Jen had sent him another message, letting him know she would wait for him in their guest room, but there was still radio silence. She toyed with her phone case, and took out the token he had given to her on her birthday, only three days ago. It seemed an eternity ago right now.

You're pretty much my favourite person of all time in the history of ever.

She knew it was true, and she knew she felt the same way about him. But what frightened her was how *he* was feeling right now. He was vulnerable, he'd been played and victimised by Anton. And hopefully he could see that, and he wouldn't let his insecurities that he always did so well to hide from the world take him over.

Her heart leapt into her mouth when she heard the familiar knock on the door. She leapt to her feet to let him in, as although she had of course left it unlocked for him, she had the feeling he would wait until she answered the door tonight.

She opened the door, and relief swept through her. "Hey," she said to him.

"Hey."

She gulped, trying to think what someone who was faking being in love with someone would do at this point. Because she definitely had to make sure she didn't do that, whatever that was. At a loss, she just grabbed him, throwing her arms around him.

The tears resumed, and she realised that he was tearful too. She placed her forehead against his, and they sobbed together for a moment. This progressed to a brief and welcome kiss, after which she beckoned him in.

"I'm sorry, Jen. I needed to be alone to think."

She nodded. "Olivia said she found you."

"Oh." He looked nervous. "Did she say anything else?"

"No. But I gather you must have been up in the best bedroom in all of Cordonia. I sent her there. I sent Drake to your favourite bathroom, and I sent Hana to the boutique."

"All good calls," he sighed, sitting down on the bed. "Listen, Jen.."

"Shhh. It's okay." She sat next to him, stroking his hair gently. "I get it. It's messing with my head too. I'm now questioning everything I say to you, everything I do. I mean, what would I do if I was faking it? Would I be stroking your hair like this? Would I be saying this to you?"

"Oh, Jen. I never doubted you. I only doubted myself."

"In doubting yourself, you had to doubt me too," she sighed.

He just stared sadly back at her; his expression broken.

She gazed back into his puffy blue eyes. “I’m not going to say I don’t know how you could doubt me, after what Anton said today. Because I get it. I know you and I know your insecurities and I know your weaknesses. But I also know your strengths. And I know that by tomorrow we’ll be laughing about this. And I know that I love you more than life itself. And I need you to know that too.”

“I do know that, Jen. And I’m sorry.. I just..”

“It’s okay. You don’t need to apologise. There’s only one person who should be sorry for what he’s done today.” She’d never been so angry with anyone in her life. “I can’t wait to see him sent down for a very long time. I was so worried when you disappeared like that. As long as you’re okay now, though..”

“Yeah, I’m okay. How’s Bertrand?”

“Surprisingly okay. Last time I saw him he was cursing and gesticulating wildly at the audacity of that Sons of Earth scum. He’s probably in his room right now referring to his compendium of great Duke of Ramsford put-downs as he formulates his response..”

“Ah, you know, he’d make a great dictator. I feel kinda sad for him that it isn’t true.”

He was laughing now, and she smiled. “And you’re back with me.”

“Oh man. I would not want to be Evil Justin tomorrow. What he’s going to get from Bertrand and Olivia..”

“And me! I’ve never hated him more for what he’s put you through today. It’s been such an emotional strain on both of us. You wait until I get on that stand. We’re not going to let him go down with any satisfaction. We’re gonna refute all the nonsense, all standing together against him. What did you say to me on Thursday night, on the roof? Together, we can do anything.” She took both of his hands in hers. “And do you remember what you said to me on our wedding night, when we got back to our hotel?”

He looked confused, and laughed self-consciously. “Um, probably something like how eager I was to get my pants off..”

She giggled. “Well, yes. You did say that. But what I meant was, when we first got back to our room and I got upset. You said to me that Anton would never be able to hurt either of us, ever again. Seems that you weren’t quite right. But from here on in, I think you should take your own advice. Don’t let him hurt you, Maxwell. You’re so much better than him.”

He closed his eyes and shuddered out a shaky sigh. “I love you.”

“And I love you. And anyone who dares to question it tomorrow is going to regret they were ever born. Don’t worry. We got this.”

She leant into him and felt a surge of relief flowing through her veins as his protective arms wrapped around her.

“Hold me like this tonight,” she begged him. “Don’t let me go.”

“I could never,” he promised her, letting his soft lips rest gently on her neck. She sighed, feeling warm and safe again.

Particular disdain

There was a full programme for day three, and Rashad was soon getting into the swing of things, encouraging each and every witness who stepped forwards to say the very best to refute Anton's lies, while reinforcing the truth. Jen and Maxwell had both had their turn already, and were now back up in the royal gallery, holding hands, doing their best to demonstrate that they were unshaken on the outside by Anton's attempts to fabricate a scandal.

This morning there had been some reporters outside the court; as a Crown proceeding this was supposed to be a closed session and the press were not allowed to enter the courtroom or report from outside it, so they had been moved on. But it worried Jen, in case they returned. The thought of all of this getting into the papers made her feel queasy.

Just now, Claudius had been called up by Rashad. He'd confirmed that he'd never even met Bertrand, let alone taken any orders from him, and he wasn't aware that Anton was working for anyone. That seemed to have helped their case, although no doubt Anton would try to spin this to accommodate the lies.

"The prosecution calls Duke Bertrand of Ramsford to the stand."

Bertrand stood tall and paced to the witness stand, his head held high. As he passed by Rick, Rick patted him on the arm respectfully, which seemed to elevate him further.

"You are Duke Bertrand of Ramsford?"

"Yes, of House Beaumont."

Rashad nodded. "Would you like to add any further comments to those you gave on Monday, about your employment of Anton Severus?"

"Oh, that I would."

Bertrand cleared his throat. Jen looked across at Maxwell, who was beaming with pride. She couldn't help but smile too.

"I would like to remind the jury that where an accusation is made, evidence is required. Anton Severus has no evidence, and I repeat, *no evidence* to back up any of the preposterous claims he made yesterday. It seems that the last few weeks have given him sufficient time to conjure up a parable that thrusts the blame onto somebody else, raising a slight doubt in your minds. May I remind you." He glared at the jury. "Anton is indeed correct in that I take great pride in my noble House. And yes, there was a time in our history when we could have taken a different path. We did not. But we chose our own path. As we continue to do today. And I am very proud of my House's legacy."

"Do you deny everything Mr Severus claims?"

Bertrand sighed. "No. He has been extremely shrewd in winding subtle undisclosed truths in amongst his deception. I don't deny that I expended a remarkable amount of energy during the summer on one particular aim; for our suitor, the then *Lady Jen*, to become King Rick's queen. This was, principally, for financial reasons. I also don't deny that our House has run up

considerable debts over the last few decades, and that I was desperate to find a solution to this problem. For a while, my hope was that Jen would represent a change in our family's fortunes." He looked over at her, and what could almost be described as a smile landed on his face. "Which, of course, she did. But not in monetary ways."

This made her melt a little bit inside, and she held onto Maxwell a little tighter.

"However, to suggest that I had some despotic masterplan to conquer the whole of Cordonia.. is the most nonsensical baloney that I've ever heard in my life. And I'm sure most of you can say the same." He turned to Rick. "I have nothing but respect for our great royal family. I consider His Majesty King Rick a good friend. And while I am proud to preside over the Duchy of Ramsford, I have no aspirations to expand my empire. Other than... in a more familial way, of course. To grow my family, with my fiancée Savannah, and to invest what little I can scrape together back into the Duchy to refresh its potential. For example, our vineyards have been understaffed and uncared for over the last few years. I aim to employ staff to get the vineyards up and running again. That is my plan. Much more modest than taking over the entire country."

"So you deny forcing Mr Severus to act against the crown on discovering his true identity?"

"I deny it. I didn't discover his true identity until he'd carried out most of his attacks. None of us did. It was Jen and Olivia who worked it out, from evidence they located in the Nevraakis family vault, as discussed in detail on Monday."

"And you deny putting pressure on Duchess Jen to fake a relationship with your brother?"

Bertrand laughed. "I was horrified to learn of their relationship at first. I'm not proud of that now. But the tell-tale signs had been there for a long time. And I understand now. That money and prestige are not always as important as what the heart wants. The two of them taught me that, and they have helped me to find my own happiness."

"Is there anything else you would like to say?"

Bertrand's expression darkened, and he straightened his tie. "I would remind you all, I am not the individual on trial here. That dubious honour falls on Anton Severus, who you see before you. If you ignore the ludicrous lies he has spun, you have nothing left in his defence. You have plenty of evidence to place him at the site of the attacks, plenty of accomplices to confirm that he was the instigator. And you can clearly see, from the stunts he has pulled this week, that he is a villainous, ill-bred lout, with no respect for the good people of this country!"

Jen couldn't help but whoop a little, and Maxwell joined her, along with most of the gallery.

"And can I just say to you, *Justin*, while I have the chance, that anyone who hurts my little brother, acquires my particular disdain. I already loathed you, for what you have done to Cordonia. Then I despised you some more, for exposing our debts and concocting poisonous lies about me. But what you then went on to allege..." Those eyebrows had never been more disparaging. "That amounted to psychological torture. I hope you can live with yourself while you're rotting in prison."

Anton looked on blankly, and there was a roar of cheers in the gallery. Jen and Maxwell exchanged a high-five.

“That’s my brother,” Maxwell sighed.

“You know what?” Jen said to him quietly, resting her head on his shoulder. “I think he just admitted to the whole room how much he loves you.”

“You think?”

“I do.” She sighed. “And he’s not the only one who loves you that much.”

“Shhh. Let’s not miss his big finish.” Maxwell’s eyes were fixed on his brother.

“In summary, I would like to dismiss the entirety of Anton Severus’s defence, other than the parts I have explained to be true. He is the dangerous man here, and while he has riled me into responding, I am well aware that the most damage I can do to anyone present is a tongue-lashing. I am not capable of hurting or killing anyone, and that despicable little toad over there is, and needs to be put away. Don’t give him the chance he so badly wants to worm his way out of this, like the filthy little cur that he is.”

Maxwell pulled Jen to her feet and applauded loudly. Laughing, she joined him, and others in the gallery did the same.

With everything in her

It was time for the King of Cordonia to take the stand.

He'd discussed their strategy at length with Rashad, and although it wasn't strictly necessary to the case for him to give evidence, he felt there were things that needed saying. In any case, it would help to discredit Anton's versions of events further. And anything he could do to help the Beaumont-Joneses in their hour of need would hopefully make him feel better about himself.

He felt a terrible unease at the fact that he'd been getting a kick out of the pressure this trial had been putting on their marriage, with the ink not yet dry on the certificate. He'd gained a smugness from seeing Jen's pale and unhappy face, felt a sadistic glow when Anton had goaded Maxwell. Couldn't believe his luck when they then couldn't look each other in the eye. But, the truth had to be verified, and it would allay the guilt that he felt over his internal reactions to their trauma if he could help them, as well as the Crown's case, all in one go.

"The prosecution calls King Rick of Cordonia to the stand."

He stood up and slowly walked to where he was to give evidence, aware that all eyes were on him. He maintained a serious stance.

Rashad bowed. "Your Majesty. Thank you for agreeing to give evidence today. We both know that this isn't strictly protocol in a Crown case."

"Correct," Rick said. "But it is essential that the jury know what I have to say. Because it will contradict some of the lies that Anton Severus has fabricated, which seemingly make up his entire defence. I would stress that what I tell you today is not publicly available knowledge, and I would appreciate confidentiality within the walls of this courtroom in respect of what I am about to disclose."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I am sure the jurors and members of the galleries will respect your wishes. With that in mind, here is my question. Could you tell me when you first had the idea to appoint Jen Jones as Duchess of Valtoria?"

"I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that it was August 23 of this year."

"Why so sure?"

Rick paused. "Because I broke off my engagement to Countess Madeleine on August 22. The reason for this was that I intended to propose to Lady Jen on August 23. The unfortunate allegations against her, which I had known all along were untrue, had been proven to be false on August 21, as you will see from checking the news publications on that date."

"And you had the idea on this date?"

"In speaking to my father and other advisors that morning, I was informed that there was another barrier to her suitability as Queen that I had not appreciated. In that, a Queen must own her own lands in Cordonia."

"So you gifted her some lands?"

“I planned to gift her the Duchy of Valtoria, on our engagement, to get around this problem. It was a vacant Duchy after the recent death of Duchess Carmine, who had no heir.”

“However, this engagement did not come to pass, Your Majesty,” said Rashad, respectfully. They had rehearsed this to ensure that they were both happy with the presentation of the questions and answers.

“No,” Rick said. “Lady Jen did not accept my proposal.”

There were shocked murmurs from the gallery, but Rick just wanted to see Anton’s face at this point, which was pale. His reasoning had not factored this possibility in.

“Did she give a reason?”

“Oh yes,” said Rick, looking at the floor. “She informed me that she was unable to accept due to being in love with another man.” He wasn’t going to name names, or look across at them. “A man who she had been in love with for several months, although due to the fact that she was a suitor for my hand, she had found herself unable to tell him how she felt. That is, until a few days prior to my proposal.”

“I see, Your Majesty. I’m sorry, I know this must be difficult for you. Please, only tell me what you want to.”

Rick sighed. “She told me that they had entered into a romantic relationship three days previously.”

“Can you tell me who she was referring to?”

“The man who is now her husband,” Rick stated.

“Duke Maxwell of Valtoria? Or, at that point, Lord Maxwell of Ramsford?”

“Yes. That is correct.”

“Your Majesty, I’m trying to understand what happened next with respect to Valtoria.”

He sighed. “My intention had been to gift the Duchy of Valtoria to Jen on her accepting my proposal. It had never entered my head that she would say no, even despite my suspicions that she could have feelings for another. And for that... I felt ashamed. I suppose I underestimated her bravery, her determination.. her loyalty.” He looked up and finally let himself meet her gaze, she was tearful. “Her selflessness. It was never about becoming a Queen for Jen. Even if that is what everyone around her wanted her to become. It was about being true to herself. And I respected that.” He made brief eye contact with Olivia, fire in her eyes, before turning back to Rashad. “And at that moment, I decided that regardless of her decision, I would gift her Valtoria regardless.”

“So there were no plans ahead of August 20 to gift Lady Jen the Duchy of Valtoria? Bearing in mind that August 20 was the date that Lady Jen entered into her new relationship?”

“Definitely not. At that stage, I was not even aware of the technicality. Besides, nobody other than myself, and possibly Jen and our close circle of friends, could have anticipated that I would break off my existing engagement.” He looked in Madeleine’s direction. She looked straight ahead, expressionless.

“Was Duke Bertrand of Ramsford in your close circle of friends?”

“He is a close friend of mine. But at that point, he was entirely focused on the idea of Jen becoming Queen. Not for his own personal power, not to infiltrate the monarchy. But to help his House financially. I knew that and was well aware of the position. It was an agreement that Jen and the Beaumonts came to right at the start. Therefore, I am certain that Duke Bertrand did not orchestrate the relationship between his brother and Jen. There is no doubt in my mind that they are genuinely, and somewhat maddeningly, in love.” He looked over at Jen and Maxwell for the first time, seeing fraught expressions on their faces. “And I am happy for them both.”

He smiled, and they both smiled back; Jen instantly, Maxwell a little more hesitantly, as if initially in shock.

“I need it to be known that I proposed to Jen. And if the plan that Anton Severus alleges had been in place, it would have been far more advantageous for Bertrand to insist she had accepted my proposal than to arrange a marriage within his family. But this alleged plan is all a work of fiction. Here is the truth as I see it. Duke Bertrand of Ramsford is a faithful servant to the Crown. Duchess Jen of Valtoria is a true friend to me. I know she would never betray me. She was honest and fair with me when she turned down my marriage proposal. She adores her husband with everything in her. I think I realised that before she realised it herself. And Maxwell?” He looked over at him. “You need to know that.”

Maxwell nodded, he was by now just as tearful as Jen.

Rick next turned his attention to Anton, who looked a defeated man, and met him with a triumphant glare. The flaw in Anton’s logic was obvious to Rick. Anton, as Justin, had clearly been told by Bertrand that Jen and Rick were not engaged, and had jumped to his own incorrect conclusions as to why. Bertrand would only have told him the bare minimum, as he too would have been told the bare minimum from a nervous Maxwell, hoping to hide the startling truth from his brother for as long as possible. But undoubtedly, Maxwell would have mentioned to Bertrand the fact that Jen had been appointed as a Duchess. So when Anton was told this by Bertrand, he could have assumed that Bertrand had already known about the appointment.

“Anton Severus, on the other hand, is a dangerous man, clutching at straws to push his responsibility for these heinous crimes onto another, seeing as he cannot deny his involvement. These heinous crimes include the murder of my father, and savage attacks on both myself and my close friends. Anton Severus must be found guilty of conspiring to overthrow the Cordonian monarchy.”

Too good. And true.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

“How amazing was Rick today. I mean. *How. Amazing. Was. He.* He was like.. I knew Bertrand was gonna be good, but.. I was not expecting Rick to deliver the killer punch to Evil Justin’s heart. Were you?”

“Know what I think?” Jen said, as she began to get ready for bed, quite late that evening, as there had been lots to discuss with the others after the days’ developments. “I think, the most amazing person in that courtroom today *wasn’t* Rick. *Or* Bertrand.”

“Ooh, you think it was Rashad?” He sat down on the bed. “He was pretty awe-inspiring too..”

She sat beside him. “It was *you*. You didn’t let everything that happened yesterday get to you. You went in there all confident, said what you needed to say, you didn’t leave my side all day.. you listened as Rick literally poured his heart out, and you were so, so strong, Maxwell. I’m so proud of you.”

He paused, uncertain. “If by strong, you mean crying like a baby..”

She sighed, and ran her hand across his face. “People aren’t strong because they don’t show their emotions, Maxwell. They’re strong *because* they can show them. You were so strong for me today, and I appreciate it. You could have easily hidden away here, not wanting to come back to the courtroom. You faced your fears and you listened to the truth, and I hope you feel better than you did this time yesterday now.”

“I definitely do, Jen. I’m so sorry about yesterday. You must have been so disappointed in me.”

“Never,” she said, taking both of his hands in hers. “I could never be.” He laughed, and she looked curiously at him. “What’s funny?”

“Just the stuff Rick said today. Did you notice it took him ages to mention my name?”

She had noticed, and she nodded. “Did that worry you?”

“Not really. It’s just... some days, he’s fine. Some days, it’s like he’s thinking about having me assassinated? Today was like that.”

Jen laughed. “I’m sure that’s not true. If he wanted to have you assassinated, he’d have done it by now, and you know it.”

“Huh, yeah, but I’m sure before the wedding it was never this awkward. I mean, he even officiated the wedding. He *caused us to be married*, Jen! And *that* wasn’t even this awkward..”

“Maybe he was putting on a brave face that day,” she said to him, soothingly. “Maybe that brave face has got tired of being brave. He needs to move on. And we can all support him with that. But I know one thing, Maxwell. He might still find it awkward seeing us together, but he loves and respects you as a friend, as much as you do him. I guess that’s why he’s a little unpredictable with you.”

Maxwell nodded. “When I see him one-to-one he’s fine. Well, mostly fine. Like, not talking about you.. fine. Talking about you...”

“Well, don’t talk about me then, silly,” she said, ruffling his hair.

“Hard not to,” he admitted, drawing her into a quick kiss.

Afterwards, she kissed him again, hungry for his lips, and he was happy to oblige. She ran a hand down his back and underneath his shirt, stroking the small of his back, prompting a little rumble in his throat. She laughed as she pulled away. “There’s the man I married.”

There was no mistaking the look in his eyes. “I said to myself last night that all this was too good to be true. But it is true. And it’s good, Jen. Too good. You are too good..”

“You’re not too bad yourself, Maxwell Beaumont,” she said, starting to unbutton his black shirt, by now she could probably do this blindfolded and one handed.

“And you’re true. My one true love. My one and only..”

“You’re not going to start singing are you..?”

He suddenly scooped her up and stood up, spinning her around in a circle.

“Eeeee... Maxwell!”

“I’m sorry what was that?”

She could only giggle now as he kept spinning her around until eventually they toppled together back onto the bed, her nightie riding up above her waist in the process, her legs wrapped around his, still stubbornly inside his black jeans, and their laughter mingling together just like their bodies.

He put his hands on her butt. “Keen, are we?”

“You have no idea...” It had been far too long since the last time, and her desire was building.

One of his hands moved around to the front of her body. “Well, hopefully this will give me an idea...”

“Ohhh..” That was intense. As his fingers danced, she did her best to use her own to free him from his clothing, although it wasn’t easy.

“You seem.. distracted, Jen.” That perfect playful look was back in his eyes.

“Ohh.. well, I... Ohh!” was all she could manage, as she attempted to liberate him from his shirt.

He pulled his hand away. “That better?”

“Yes. I mean.. no!” She soon had him naked. “*That’s* better.”

“Well, why didn’t you just say so?” He was looking around, as if debating their options.

“Hey,” she said, pulling him into another kiss. “Just tell me how you want me.” She felt like she had something to prove.

“Ohh.. right here, right now?”

“Yeah. That works for me.”

She ran her hands behind his back and pulled him up and towards her, and let her legs fall onto the bed behind him as their bodies connected. They were close enough to the wall for him to push one of his hands against it to keep them balanced, as they desperately drove into each other, both moaning in ecstasy.

It was intense and passionate and it wasn’t many minutes before she screamed out, digging her fingernails into his back as she felt herself melt away, which clearly was too much for him to bear; she felt another pulse to match her own and a sublime tickling sensation just hitting that sensitive spot.

She laughed, at first from the fuzzy feeling, and then out of pure happiness. He started to laugh too, and she held on to him, feeling his body rattling to the rhythm of his amusement.

“Did that tickle, Your Grace?” he eventually asked her.

“You know it did, babe.”

Still giggling, she steadied herself and then collapsed onto the bed alongside him, wrapping her arms around him.

“I think we needed to do that,” he said, eyes closed and breathless.

“I know I needed to,” she agreed.

“God, I love you, Jen Jones.”

“And I love you, Maxwell Beaumont.”

“Well, I guess you just proved it.” He opened his eyes, and looked at her, with what she hoped wasn’t question in his eyes, but more curiosity as to what she might say next.

“Listen. Last night, yesterday evening when you were AWOL, I was thinking.”

“So was I,” he laughed.

“Babe, you were *overthinking*,” she teased.

He nodded. "Guilty as charged."

"Well, I was thinking. About when we were on that roof on Thursday night. You knelt down on one knee, and you made all those promises to me. And what did I do? I just stood there and giggled."

"You were a vision of loveliness. Those giggles were music to my ears. Did you not see me dancing to them?"

"There's a lot to unpack there..."

"But you didn't need to do anything else. I was just so pumped to see how happy you were that night. I'm so glad I took you back there. It was a perfect moment to me."

"It was. And I was enjoying the moment, yeah. But I should have made some promises back to you. You might not have felt so vulnerable yesterday if I had."

He rolled onto his side to look into her eyes. "What promises would you have made?"

"Well, without wasting any more time," she sighed, running her hand around to the back of his neck and stroking it. "I'm going to make them right now. I promise to never take you for granted. I promise to always respect your wishes, and your feelings. I promise to be your best friend though thick and thin. And I promise you that I will *always* love you, no matter what."

"Jen.."

She wasn't sure if he was about to crack a joke or crumble. Before he had the opportunity to do either, she pulled him in for a long, luxurious kiss.

Afterwards, he raised an eyebrow. "Just to clarify. What if I did something really bad? Like, I dunno, ran off with Hana?"

She smirked. There was her answer. "I'd still love you. I might not like you, but I'd still love you. Hana, on the other hand.."

He laughed. "Don't worry. I have no intention of testing *that* theory. But, you know. Just want to double check your love for me is perpetual, so I know I can get away with *anything*."

"Do your worst, Beaumont. I'm yours forever." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Starting with tonight."

He looked startled. "But we only just.."

"And your point is?" Now she raised an eyebrow, and ran her hand slowly back down his body, her eyes fixed on his throughout its journey. "See? Standing to attention."

He laughed. "I love my life. And I love my wife."

"Your turn to prove it." She shot him her best come-hither look.

Reinforcements

It was well after midnight, and the lights in the palace corridors were dimmed as she stealthily made her way down the staircase that led from the royal quarters and back onto the floor where most of the guest bedrooms were housed. She caught sight of herself in an ornamental mirror on the corridor; her red hair was dishevelled, and her make-up no longer perfect. Still, small price to pay. She smirked at her reflection.

“Who’s that?”

Oh, for pity’s sake. “Your worst nightmare,” she hissed at Drake Walker as he approached her.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Olivia.”

“What are you doing skulking around the palace at this hour?”

“I could ask you the same question.” He stood close to her, so close that she could smell the whisky on his breath.

“You could, but I wouldn’t answer it.” It was none of his business that she’d decided to call in on Rick this evening, feeling he could do with an ally and a sounding board in the wake of his brave testimony earlier. Though most of her ire was directed at Anton this week, she still felt powerless and frustrated when it came to making it all alright for her oldest friend. But she had a feeling the passionate kiss they had just shared in his private quarters might have helped boost his spirits. It had certainly boosted hers. “However, you’re going to answer me. I want to know.”

He glared at her, defeat in his eyes. “Couldn’t sleep. Of all the bedrooms in this goddamn palace, Rick had to put Jones and Maxwell in the one next to mine.”

“Oh. Well. Clearly if that’s a problem for you, they’ve worked things out.”

“Yeah..” He scratched his head. “They certainly seemed to be.. getting along just great...”

“Well, I’m pleased to hear it. Not.. pleased to hear.. *it*.. obviously. Ew. But pleased they’re back on track.”

He looked surprised. “Really?”

“Really. I know I’m not Maxwell’s biggest fan, but I wouldn’t want Anton to have the satisfaction of having split them up. Besides, I don’t want Rick to start sniffing around Jen again.” That would not be conducive to her current strategy. “Anyway, I was just heading to my room. There’s some whisky in my minibar, if you want some.”

He shrugged his shoulders, and followed her. She opened the door, and he slid inside.

“Help yourself.” She kicked off her heels, and sat down on the bed, watching him going through the contents of the minibar.

“Ah. Come to papa.”

She handed him two tumblers from the sideboard. “We drink to Anton’s inevitable fate.”

“Yeah.” He poured, and handed one of the tumblers to her. “Poisonous piece of crap.”

“You didn’t see him at his worst yesterday,” she sighed. Drake had made a point of not wanting to listen to Anton’s lies, but it hadn’t stopped them. They’d got worse. “Some of the stuff he said about me.”

“I must’ve missed that bit. Rick told me about the whole Jones and Maxwell thing.”

She nodded. “He was *vile* to Maxwell.” Seeing Jen’s normally jovial, carefree husband in bits last night had been a sobering experience. “But, he wasn’t exactly nice to me either. He made out like I was a privileged entitled brat, born into an uncontended title, spoilt by the royal family.”

“And your point is?”

She glared at him. “Do you want to know how many different ways I could kill you in this room right now?”

“I’m guessing it’s more than six, and probably less than eleven.”

Scowling, she took a big gulp of her whisky. “Whatever, it’s just a shame he won’t hang for what he’s done to this country.”

“What was your take on Rick’s testimony?”

She sighed. “I don’t think it needed saying. But I can see that it helped.”

“Yeah. He was brave.” He gazed off into the distance. “I mean, I knew it had happened to him. Hell, I tried to talk him out of asking her, because I knew what was going on. But how it must have felt...”

“You’re just bitter it wasn’t you she gave as the reason she couldn’t marry him.”

He shook his head, swishing his whisky around the glass. “Like we said, Olivia, Rick’s my best friend. He’s going through a difficult time right now. He needs someone here with him. He never thought he’d be this alone.”

“And you’re proposing..”

“Not to go back to Lythikos with you.”

This was a proposal she was not going to accept. “You know I didn’t want you there in the first place, Drake. But I’ve got used to you being around now. You come in handy. And if Anton does go down this week, there’ll be a high risk of reprisals in Lythikos. I could do with the reinforcements.” *And the eye candy.*

“Then stay here for a few weeks.”

She shook her head. “My people expect their Duchess. I’ve spent a lot of time away in recent months.” She had some morale boosting to do. Cordonia’s impression of Lythikos was poor

now, and its inhabitants would be feeling the brunt of this.

He sighed. “You going to stay for Jones’s party on Friday?”

“What sort of party?”

“Last I heard, it was going to be some sort of murder mystery? I think Hana’s organising that part of things.”

A smirk lit up her face. “I hope I get to be the murderer. I’ve got a few people I wouldn’t mind killing.”

“Then you’ll stay?”

“Only if you come back to Lythikos with me. Just for a couple of weeks while things blow over.”

He drained the last of his whisky, banged the tumbler down on the bedside table, and stood up. “I’ll think about it.” He headed to the door. “Hopefully, my noisy neighbours will have passed out by now.”

"Not like you to be so optimistic."

He rolled his eyes, and left her room.

One didn't come

“Have the jury reached a decision on which they are all agreed?”

“We have, your honour.”

“On the first count of plotting to assassinate the Cordonian monarch, His Majesty King Rick of Cordonia, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty,” said the head juror.

Jen jumped out of her seat in elation, and received a high-five from her whooping husband. Thank goodness. This was finally over.

“On the second count of organising a terrorist attack on the Royal Palace, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

Jen looked at Rick, who was sitting stoically, but she could see a little smirk of satisfaction on the corner of his mouth.

“On the third count of administering a terrorist attack on the Royal Cordonian Orchard, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

“On the fourth count of arranging a terrorist attack on the Royal Palace, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

Maxwell and Bertrand were hugging each other, she decided to let them get on with it, proud of them both.

“On the fifth count of poisoning Countess Madeleine of Fydelia, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

Madeleine huffed to herself from her seat just in front of Jen.

“On the sixth count of holding Duchess Jen of Valtoria and Duchess Olivia of Lythikos at gunpoint, and causing significant damage to the Nevraakis family vault, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

Jen laughed as Olivia blew Anton a kiss. He was frowning forlornly.

“On the seventh count of being responsible for a terrorist attack on the cathedral boutique, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

“And finally, on the eighth count of kidnapping and assault, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty.”

“Thank you, head juror. You and the rest of the jury are dismissed. We will return tomorrow for sentencing.” The judge turned to Anton. “It would seem that your desperate attempts to divert the blame from yourself onto innocent parties were fruitless, and this malicious attack on certain individuals will not go unpunished, and will be reflected when your sentence is considered. Until then, you shall be returned to your holding cell. Court is dismissed until tomorrow morning.”

Anton was led away, and Jen threw her arms around Maxwell in jubilation. “It’s over.”

“It really is.” He kissed her gently.

“It makes me feel better that he’s going to get a longer sentence for what he did to us this week,” she sighed.

There was a tap on her shoulder, and Hana was behind her, a huge beam on her face. “I’m so happy that’s over!”

Drake was with Hana, his arm linked through hers. “It’s been a tough week. But we did it. We all did it.”

Jen nudged Rick who was beside her. “The dream team does it again!”

“Hell yeah!” Maxwell joined in, and they all raised their hands in a five-way high-five.

Olivia strutted over, and glared. “Well I’m glad I missed that childish gesture.”

“Group hugggg!! Get in here too Bertrand!”

“Maxwell...”

But it was no use anyone resisting, as the seven of them embraced across two aisles of the gallery, some of them more keenly than others.

Maxwell was buzzing. “So, tomorrow night.... After sentencing... Party round Rick’s! You’re all invited!”

She raised her eyebrows. “Maxwell, I think you should probably check first..”

“Don’t worry, Jen,” Rick said, placing a hand on Maxwell’s shoulder. “He’s been planning this for a while.”

She turned back to Maxwell. “What’s this about?”

“Your birthday party,” he explained. “I know we had our own little birthday celebration in New York last weekend, but I thought you might like to celebrate with all of our friends in the palace before we head back to Valtoria?”

She grinned. “That sounds amazing!”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“We felt it wasn’t appropriate to celebrate until we knew that Anton had been detained,” Rick said. “But now, there’s nothing stopping us. I’ll put out invitations to the wider court, in case anyone else wishes to join us in celebrating your birthday.”

“Are we having a ball?” she asked him.

Rick looked to Maxwell, whose eyes were alight. “Don’t you think we’ve had enough balls? No, my dearest, we are having our very own... *murder mystery night!*”

She squealed. “Oh wow! I’ve always wanted to do that!!!” She grabbed him and kissed him square on the lips. “Was this your idea?”

“It might not have been my first idea....”

“Or his second,” moaned Drake.

“I think the third idea got vetoed too,” Hana sighed, sympathetically.

“But eventually Rick agreed to one of them!” Maxwell announced.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea,” she said. “You guys are the best friends ever. It’s been a tough week for all of us, and it’ll be great to let off some steam.”

“Especially for you two,” Hana said. “And you, Bertrand. I still can’t believe what Anton put you guys through on Tuesday.”

“I hope they add at least ten years to his sentence for it,” Bertrand commented.

“I don’t think he’ll be getting out in his lifetime, Bertrand,” Rick assured him. “Will Savannah be joining us tomorrow?”

“Alas, we don’t have anyone to sit with Bartie,” Bertrand said. “So she will be unable to join in the festivities.”

“Aw, she misses out on so much,” Maxwell said. “Maybe you two could switch..”

“Absolutely not,” Bertrand exclaimed. “I for one am not going to let an opportunity such as this go to waste. A murder mystery party... I was born to play a role in one of these games.”

Maxwell whispered to Jen. “My money’s on him being the murderer.”

“I’m not so sure,” she said to him. “Not if Olivia’s going to be there.”

Olivia was standing behind them, staring towards the box where Anton had been. She had fire in her eyes and a sneer on her lips.

“You guys go on,” she said. “I’ll catch you up.”

They all began to file out of the courtroom, and Jen stayed standing next to Olivia, waiting for her to make some sarcastic remark. But one didn’t come.

“Listen Olivia,” she said eventually. “I just want to say thanks, for what you did the other night.”

“Pff. Wasn’t exactly a big deal.”

“It was,” Jen said. “I don’t know what you said to him, but, well.. it worked.”

She turned to face Jen, with a smirk. “I may have offered up an anecdote that convinced him you were *not* faking it.”

Now Jen was curious. “Really? What was that?”

“If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

She sighed, and nodded. “Oh well. I’m not going to question your methods, given the result.”

“I mean, I would totally get it if you were. But Anton’s story didn’t add up. Besides, I know how nauseatingly in love you two are. And so does Rick.”

She giggled. “I thought Rick was *great* up on the stand yesterday.”

“He did what he needed to do,” Olivia stated.

“I bet you’re glad this week is over too, huh?”

Olivia threw her a grouchy look. “The only good thing to come out of this week is that my so-called husband will soon be serving a life sentence.”

“Not your friiiiiiiend’s fun birthday party tomorrow night?”

“Please, Jen. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Aw, please!! It’s a murder mystery night! It’s going to be so much fun!”

Olivia looked as if she was thinking about it. “That doesn’t actually sound awful. I thought you were just going to get Maxwell to play all his dreadful music.”

“I guess we might finish off the evening with that,” she admitted.

“Ugh. Count me out.”

“Aw? So are you off back to Lythikos tomorrow?”

“Perhaps I’ll give it until Saturday morning. Endure your little social experiment first. I’m of course expecting I’ll be the one to solve the mystery.”

“Yessss,” said Jen. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“But I’ll have to pass on the late night dancing. I have to get back to Lythikos the next day. There are things I need to do.” She looked into the distance. “Although, I thought you might like to join

me for Christmas.”

This was a curveball. “I’m *sorry*?”

“It’s not too far away now, what, about six weeks? I’m planning a Winter ball, and I’d be honoured if you and your husband would be there. I’m inviting all the other nobles too, of course. And Drake.”

Jen jumped to her feet and clapped. “You want me and Maxwell to come to yours for Christmas? How exciting! See, we must be friiiiiiiends!”

“So you can make it? It won’t interfere with your plans?”

“I hadn’t even thought as far as Christmas yet, Olivia. So as far as plans go, we have none. What do Cordonians even do at Christmas anyway?”

Olivia smirked. “You’re about to find out.”

“So this Winter Ball happens every year, does it?”

Olivia looked into the distance. “Let’s just say there are a number of lapsed festive traditions in Lythikos that I thought I might try to.. resume.”

Jen looked at her, suddenly getting it. “Oh, Olivia. You don’t have anything to prove. Please, don’t put any pressure on yourself.”

“It’s just, with everything that that vile little man has put us through, my family name has been... tarnished, disgraced. It wasn’t common knowledge what my parents did, until he shouted it all over this courtroom, before he brought my aunt into his awful schemes. Now? What does it mean to be a Nevraakis? I need to make sure that the court understands that I don’t stand for any of that.”

“Olivia, we’ll both be there. Rick will be there. Hana and Drake will be there. You know we will.” She ran her hand down Olivia’s arm, and Olivia did not pull away. “If anyone else has a problem, then that’s their problem. But we’ll be there for you.”

“Thanks, Jen. I.. appreciate it. I really do.”

Jen patted Olivia’s arm, and walked away and out of the courtroom, feeling a hundred times better than she had when she walked into it.

Who goes first?

“Okay, everyone,” Hana said, her eyes bright. “I’m pleased to announce that I am the murder victim tonight, for Jen’s murder mystery birthday party!”

“That doesn’t sound like a good thing,” Rick observed, with a wry smile in Drake’s direction.

“It is, because it means that I know who did it and why, and you lot all have to work it out for yourselves, with my help!” Hana was wearing a smart blazer with a tight top underneath, and a pencil skirt. It was not her usual attire by any stretch of the imagination, but it strangely suited her. “Now, outfits are of course compulsory, and I have suitable costumes for all of you in the boutique, but first of all, let me fill you all in on who I am.”

Maxwell raised a hand. “How come you get to be in charge? This was my idea!”

Hana tutted. “Because I was the only one here who thought to put some time into preparing the murder mystery! These things don’t happen by themselves, you know..”

“Because Hana can do anything,” Jones explained. “I’m sure you would have done a great job though, babe. And I reckon your talents might be put to better use later.”

“Yeah?” Maxwell pulled her close flamboyantly.

“Yeah. We’ll want a disco at the end, won’t we guys?”

Maxwell did a little triumphant shuffle. “It’s gonna be so on....”

Drake rolled his eyes. “Anyway, Hana. Please continue.”

Hana smiled softly. “The headmistress of Cordonio’s most ordinary primary school, Mrs Sterner,” She did a little curtsy. “Has been found dead in her office. There are six main suspects, three local couples who between them all could have had a reason for wanting her dead. You need to work out who did it. You will be given an information sheet about yourselves to read so you can play your role. Then you will all talk to each other and mingle, over a few drinks if you wish, and you will all get one guess as to who you think the murderer is. You can make this guess at any time, but if you’re wrong, you don’t get another guess!”

“This is going to be fun,” Jones chimed, rubbing her hands together.

“So does the murderer know they’re the murderer?” Olivia asked. “It’s hard to get into character unless they know.”

“Only I know,” Hana said. “You might suspect you are the murderer; you can accuse yourself if you like.”

Olivia groaned. “This is stupid.”

“I for one think this will be a fun exercise,” Bertrand declared. “It’s been a while since I indulged in such intelligent games.”

“Makes a change from peekaboo,” Jones giggled.

“When I say a while, I mean a long while,” Bertrand sighed. “Your husband struggles with the concept of anything more intellectual than Monopoly...”

Maxwell made out like he was offended. “Hey, don’t diss Monopoly. I’m pretty good at that..”

“I *love* Monopoly, babe. We’ll have to play it some time.” Jones said soothingly. “Hey, do you have a Cordonia version?”

“Ohmygod you’re a genius, Jen. I’ll get on to Hasbro first thing on Monday!”

“Well the palace will have to be Boardwalk. Where would we put Valtoria?”

“Ooh, it would have to be Park Place..”

Drake groaned. “Right. So who goes first?”

“Whoever rolls the highest amount on their first roll!” declared Maxwell.

“Not at Monopoly, Maxwell,” sighed Drake. “I mean now.”

“You can if you like,” Hana suggested. “Come and get your costume and I’ll give you your briefing and your sheet.”

“And that gives me time to get my punch on,” suggested Maxwell. “Permission to raid the palace kitchens?”

“Permission granted,” Rick said with a nod.

“So... you’ve really gone all out for this?” Drake said as he accompanied Hana along to the boutique.

“I just want Jen to have a fun night. It’s been a tough week for all of us.”

“I’m sure she will,” Drake said. “Thanks, Hana. So, have you decided what you’re doing? Are you going to stay on here for a little while? I’ve got to go back with Olivia for a couple more weeks. Hell, I don’t want to.. but..”

She looked at him with wide eyes. “I’ll stay. Until you get back. I think Jen and Maxwell could use some space right now after this week, anyway. Perhaps that’s how I’ll approach it.”

He nodded. “Good plan.”

“Now, I gave you a role I thought you’d be *fairly* comfortable with,” she said mischievously, as they entered the boutique. “You are Eddie Sloane. You live next door to the school, with your partner, and your daughter.”

“Right...”

“You are also the school caretaker.”

Drake laughed. “I’m getting typecast vibes here..”

Hana unveiled a boiler suit. “This is your costume.”

“Woah...”

He could tell she was trying her hardest to keep a straight face. “Go and put it on in the changing room. I’ll tell you more about your character while you change.”

“The things I do for you people.”

He trudged into the changing room, the blue boiler suit under his arm. He sighed, and began to undress. He removed his shirt, then grabbed his whisky flask from his pocket, and had a swig.

“So, Eddie is dad to a little girl at the school, he finds it quite hard to bond with her, she’s closer to her other parent. He’s recently been sacked from the school, he isn’t telling anyone why, but the real reason is because he was falsely accused of stealing the PTA collection money.”

“Doesn’t sound like a motive for murder to me.” He decided to put the boiler suit on over his jeans.

“He and his partner are struggling for money to make ends meet for their daughter.”

“So, who is my partner in this scenario?” *Please, anyone but Olivia.*

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she giggled. “They will come and introduce themselves to you once they’ve got their outfit on and their role.”

“Right.” He didn’t like the sound of that giggle. He buttoned up and pulled the curtain. “So. Do I look all Eddie Sloane to you?”

“Oh, perfect,” Hana said, her eyes widening. “Right. You go and rejoin the others. And send me... errrr.... Jen next.”

“Right.”

“Don’t forget, you’re no longer Drake. You’re Eddie. Stay in character.”

“Right. Thanks, Hana.”

He wandered through the palace hallway and back into the drawing room, where he found that Jones and Maxwell were the only people left in there, curled up together on a sofa, engaging in their favourite sport; tonsil-tennis.

“Ahem.”

They broke apart, and stared at him for a second. Maxwell was first to comment. “Woah, Drake! You look all... butch!” He stood up and hurried over in Drake’s direction.

“I’m loving the boiler suit look,” Jones commented, wandering over in Maxwell’s pursuit. “What are you, a plumber?”

“Nah. School caretaker.” He sat down. “So, what’s a school caretaker got to do to get a whisky round here?”

“Oh, buddy, it’s pineapple paradise punch all round tonight! At the request of the birthday girl..” Maxwell pulled up a trolley of drinks to the sofa where Drake had settled.

“Great.” He picked up a glass, and drank some. “Eugh. This stuff is like pop. Oh, Jones. You’ve got to go to the boutique next. Hana’s waiting.”

“Oooh!” She did a little shimmy, picked up her glass of punch, and ran out of the room as quickly as she could with those killer heels on.

Drake turned back to Maxwell, whose eyes were fixed on the door, a giddy smile on his face. “So. Where have the others gone?”

“Oh, did they go somewhere? I didn’t notice.”

He rolled his eyes. “Funny that. Never mind. I’m sure they’ll be back.”

Maxwell sidled up to him. “So. Has this school caretaker got a name?”

“Eddie Sloane. I live next to the school with my partner and my daughter. Just got sacked by the villainous headteacher.”

“Ah. You did it. You have a motive!”

“I think you’ll find we’ll all have motives, Maxwell.”

Bertrand strode back into the room. “Ah, Drake. I was just speaking with your sister. She wants to let you know how proud she is of you.”

“*This* is not *Drake*,” Maxwell said, in his usual over the top style. “This is Eddie Sloane. The school caretaker.”

“My apologies Mr Sloane,” Bertrand said without flinching. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He shook Drake’s hand, and glared at the drinks trolley. “*Maxwell.*”

“Yes?”

“You made *that* drink, didn’t you.”

“Of course. It’s Jen’s favourite.”

Bertrand sighed. “I still have nightmares about the last time we had that concoction at a Beaumont Bash..”

He grinned. “That was the time that I replaced all the toilet rolls in the manor with duct tape and filled the ballroom floor with ten thousand plastic cups, wasn’t it?”

“Those pranks I could forgive, it was more the proportion of guests who found themselves incapacitated was even higher than standard..”

“Well? There were plenty of plastic cups for them to throw up into.”

Drake sighed, and then watched as Jones strutted back into the room. She was wearing a spaghetti strap white vest top, tight blue jeans, and a pair of reading glasses, and carrying her glass of punch, now half empty, and her script.

“Grrr,” Maxwell exclaimed, going to greet her. “Sexy mama.”

She laughed. “Yeah, that’s me. My name’s Helen. Helen Harper. And I’m a stay at home mom.”

“I’d stay at home with you anytime you like, Ms Harper...” He draped his arms around Jones, and she glowed as she basked in the attention he was paying her.

“*Mrs.*,” she explained. “And, as I’m not sure who my husband is yet, you’d better watch yourself. Anyway, you’re next up. Off you go. Boutique. Hana.” She patted him on the butt to send him on his way, and his face lit up.

“Well, that told me. Bossy.”

Maxwell went off with a spring in his step, and Drake and Bertrand exchanged exhausted looks. Jones eventually pulled her gaze away from the door and looked at them both. “What?”

“So, how did you know the murder victim?” Drake asked her. Might as well make a start on this painful charade and get it over with. It wasn’t his idea of fun, but he knew the others were more pumped for it.

“Hmm, well I didn’t really like her,” Jones said, sitting down next to him, and studying her sheet. “My husband and I had clashed with her on many recent occasions over matters to do with the school and other things. And apparently my husband and her go a long way back. I have a feeling that they might have been an item when they were younger, but I haven’t been told.”

“Ah. So, who’s your husband?”

She shrugged. “Dunno. Obviously not you, Eddie.” She grinned, and raised her eyebrows. “Hopefully he’ll be back in a minute.”

“Nah. Knowing Hana, I reckon she will mix it up a little. You’re more likely to be married to Rick. And, talking of Rick, where has he got to?”

“He and Duchess Olivia have been gone for a little while,” Bertrand explained. “My understanding is the subject of her divorce arrangements are being discussed, now that her husband has been convicted in respect of his crimes.”

“Really? At my birthday party?” Jones dropped her lip.

“Well, we’re off back to Lythikos tomorrow,” Drake moaned.

“Ah okay. Well, they better be back soon.” She took a long drink of her cocktail, and licked her lips. “Mm. Not had this since our beach picnic.”

“So,” said Bertrand, getting out a small notepad from his jacket pocket. “Here we have Eddie, the recently dismissed school caretaker. We have Helen, a stay at home mum with a grudge against the headteacher. Two potential suspects indeed. I can’t wait to discover my role.”

“Well, with Rick and Olivia otherwise occupied, I don’t think you’ll have too long to wait, Bertrand,” sighed Drake. He was growing a little suspicious of Olivia. There was more to this. He’d caught her sneaking around again last night, once more without explanation. His hunch was that she was trying to get into Rick’s pants. A dirty trick, when Rick was at his most vulnerable, after a trying week. But that was Olivia Nevraakis for you.

“Shall I go see if I can find them?” Jones offered, standing up.

“No,” Drake warned. “I’d leave them to it. They’ll be back soon.”

Just then, Maxwell swaggered back into the room, clad in an extremely flamboyant coloured suede suit, and struck a pose. “Hello darlings!”

Jones applauded, and Maxwell made a beeline for the sofa that she and Drake were sitting on, but what happened next was not quite how Drake had thought it would play out. Maxwell jumped onto *his* knee and planted a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

“What the hell, Maxwell?”

“Who’s Maxwell? I’m Jimmy.” Maxwell was putting a camp accent on, which seemed to come surprisingly naturally. “And you, Eddie, are my *husband!* Look at you, sitting there all manly.. aww, so adorable..” As Maxwell threw his wiggly arms around him, Drake could hear Jones’ uncontrollable laughter, along with Bertrand’s tutting.

“Uggggh, the things I do for you people,” Drake lamented, not for the first time that evening.

A game for two players

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She'd been left lying on her back, on the rug on the floor of the royal chambers, while he went to freshen up. Sighing, she sat up, and reached for her red dress, slung over the bottom of the bed a little earlier in the heat of passion. Standing up now, she climbed back into it carefully, making sure she didn't catch any of her concealed weapons against her skin. She wasn't going to give that man the satisfaction of seeing her undressed again when he came back. Even her shoes were in place once he returned from his en-suite bathroom, although he was still as naked as the day he was born.

"Leaving so soon?" he asked her, looking a little hurt.

"We are supposed to be attending Duchess Jen's birthday party, remember?"

He nodded, and leant down to grab his boxers from the rug, climbing back into them. "As usual, Olivia, you are right."

She grinned, fixing her hair. "Although I'm sure a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. I'll wait for you."

"Shouldn't we be seen to return separately?"

She shook her head. "I told Bertrand I was going to speak to you privately about my divorce. It would seem odd to him if we didn't come back at the same time."

He nodded. "Very well." He sat down next to her. "Although, I was wondering if we should, perhaps, maybe not *right* now..." He looked at her with that commanding expression, and she knew he was hoping to get what he wanted from her. "Maybe we should let our friends know that we're involved. Before they start to suspect."

Olivia was delighted at his words. Rick confirming they were in a relationship was everything her heart had ever desired. However, the Duchess of Lythikos was disgusted at his suggestion.

"God, no," she said, standing up suddenly and backing away.

"Why ever not?"

"We keep this to ourselves. At least for now."

"Give me two good reasons," he said, standing up and pacing towards her, placing his hands on her waist.

"One, I'm still technically married," she said. "If this got out, and I know you trust your friends, but it could get out.. the King and a married woman..."

He nodded. "Although we can address that matter, Olivia. As I told you earlier. I will get Lord Rashad on the case immediately now his work on Anton's prosecution is complete."

“Two,” She sighed, looking at him. “And I’m only telling you this because it’s true, and we go back a long way. But you need to know that I’ve got more respect for myself than to publicly be in a relationship with someone who’s still got one foot in his last relationship.”

She saw his expression change. The stern monarch before her had suddenly transformed into a lovesick puppy.

“Don’t deny it Rick,” she challenged him. “You’re still in love with her.”

“I would not deny it to you, Olivia.” He sighed, clearly emotional, and released his hold on her, turning and going to sit back down on the bed.

“Because you know I wouldn’t believe you, right?”

He looked at her and shook his head. “Because I believe I owe you the truth.”

She nodded, and stood there for a moment as he collected his thoughts. Eventually, he looked back up at her.

“That relationship you speak of. Right from the start, there were three people in it. It just took me too long to realise it. And by the time I did, it was too late.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Think about it, Olivia. All the times I spent with Jen, during the social season, and on the engagement tour. She never sought me out because she wanted to spend time with me. She sought me out because she’d been encouraged to by someone else. Someone she was developing feelings for, someone who incorrectly thought his need for her to become Queen was greater than his need for, well, *her*. And so our courtship was based more on her wanting to please *him*, than me. And I suppose, at some point, she questioned this and realised that the three of us were all playing an impossible game, as it was a game for two players, not three. And just as I realised all this for myself, I was discarded.”

Olivia looked at Rick, conflicted. She knew how much he was hurting, but she also knew that he should have treated Jen better if he’d wanted to keep her. If she’d been in Jen’s position during the engagement tour, having to sneak around as the other woman, she would have become just as disillusioned. And if she’d found the chance of love elsewhere (although not from where Jen had found it, ugh) she would probably have taken it too. She’d said as much to Jen when everything had kicked off.

“I think about this a lot, Olivia. It consumes my thoughts. I believe that she came dangerously close to accepting my proposal. For the wrong reasons. And that was why she allowed it to go that far.”

Olivia raised her eyebrows. “You think she’d have married you just to make him happy?”

“I think she could have very easily done that. And I would have gone ahead with it, thinking I had won the battle.”

“But not the war.”

“Exactly.” He stood up, and collected his shirt and trousers from the floor. “Happily for all concerned, she was strong willed enough to put her own feelings first, ahead of the expectations of

those around her.”

Olivia sighed. The fact that he could still praise Jen for the cruel way she had rejected him really irked her.

“But if she had accepted my proposal, imagine what a mess that could have caused, ongoing.”

She pulled a face. “You think she’d have been unfaithful to you?”

“I can’t know for certain,” he said, buttoning up his shirt. “I’d like to think not. But just imagine that scenario. And if that got out. The public’s confidence in their monarchy, perhaps the whole nobility, would be ruined. So I think I favour this scenario. At least I get to see two of my close friends happy, even if I’m not.”

That he still could consider them both close friends, she found hard to grasp. But, she didn’t question it. Seeing the emotion in his blue eyes, she went to him and held him. He returned her embrace tightly, seemingly grateful for the interaction.

“Come on now,” she said, as she pulled away. “You can move on from this.”

“I’m trying.”

She tutted, and looked away. “Trying’s not enough.”

“Olivia, you know how fond I am of you.”

“*Fond’s* not enough, either.” She now knew that she was going to have to use other means to shake some sense into him. “When you want me badly enough, I’ll know. For now, this needs to stay between us. For both our sakes.”

He nodded. “Once again, you are right.” He pulled on his trousers.

“I’ll go back to Lythikos tomorrow. I think that would be for the best.” She had work to do there. She had a reputation to rebuild.

He nodded. “For now, I believe we have a murder mystery party to get back to.”

She rolled her eyes. “Whose idea was this? Oh, wait, don’t tell me... *Maxwell’s*.”

He nodded. “Be thankful you were not privy to his other suggestions. This was by far the most tenable.”

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious to see what would have happened had Jen accepted Rick's proposal, look out for my upcoming fic "you can't uneat the apple"

Some Jimmy magic

“My husband could not have killed anyone,” Jen (or should that be Helen?) exclaimed. “I mean, look at him.” She gestured to Bertrand slash Harold. “And, he’s an accountant. Accountants are not trained killers.”

“Someone in this room is a killer,” Rick (or maybe that should be George?) argued. “And it’s as likely to be him as anyone.” He stood up, and went to get a drink from the trolley.

Time to find out George’s story, Maxwell thought. Or was that Jimmy thinking? Yes, it was Jimmy. Channel your inner Jimmy. Be fabulous. He strutted over to meet Rick by the drink trolley.

“Hello darling. You’re looking *magnificent* today.”

Rick smiled and shook his head. “As are you, Jimmy. As are you.”

“Oh, thank you darling. Mwah.” He kissed him on the cheek. “So, where were you when that poor girl was killed? Oh, it’s such a tragedy. She had the most beautiful dress on as she lay dying..” He gestured to Hana, who was observing in the corner of the room, tight lipped.

“I’m more intrigued to know where you were, Jimmy.” Rick shot him a glare.

“Oh? Oh well. I was with our little Angel the whole time. One of us has to look after her. You’d be surprised to learn that my hunk of a husband over there is not the most maternal. He has his uses, though.” Maxwell raised his eyebrows and wiggled them at Rick.

And there it was. A genuine smile from Rick in his direction, the first in months. Followed by a laugh. *Yessss*

“Ahem. But I know from my experience as Angel’s teacher that you were at odds with Miss Sterner over Angel’s treatment at school.”

He feigned shock. “How could you know that?”

“You thought that Angel was treated differently at school because she came from an unconventional family. Not by me and the children in her class, but by Miss Sterner. She singled her out in the corridor, punished her unfairly. I noticed it too.”

“You *did*?”

“I did.”

“Then why didn’t you *say anything*?”

“I did.” Rick smiled wistfully. “I raised my concern to Miss Sterner, but she would not admit to it. I considered going to the Chair of Governors. But she said she would dismiss me if I did that.”

“Like she dismissed my Eddie? Oh man! She was a monster! In a noteworthy dress, of course.. I must go tell him. Thank you George. Thank you thank you thank you..” He shot Rick a genuine, serious look. “Thank you.”

“What are friends for?” He smiled sincerely.

Maxwell squealed and ran off towards where Jen (currently known as Helen) and Bertrand (aka Harold) were sitting.

“George says he’s my friend!” He jumped up and down with excitement.

Jen looked worried, and he wasn’t sure if she was acting or not. That wasn’t the first time he’d thought that this week. Scratch that. Jen looked worried. So she was obviously worried.

“Don’t worry, Jen or Helen, everything is fine.”

She beamed at him. “Helen is worried that you have been talking to George, for an undisclosed reason that you need to try and probe out of her. Jen is... curious as to how things went with Rick just now?”

“Ahem, dearest,” Bertrand said. “Remember, you are Helen. That conversation must wait until someone has solved the mystery.”

“Right,” Jen said, with a sigh. “So what were you talking to George about?”

“He admitted that Miss Sterner had been bullying Angel. He had tried to do something about it, but she had threatened him with losing his job if he exposed it. Like she sacked my Eddie! I have to tell him...”

“Wait, just be reasonable, Jimmy,” Bertrand said authoritatively. “Miss Sterner was going through a difficult time. None of you know just how difficult. She is not here to defend herself, and you should not slander her.”

Jen turned to Bertrand. “Harold, really? I am hurt. Look at me.” She pointed to her face. “Hurt.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Jen/Helen stormed off, and Bertrand/Harold sighed. “Do you have this much trouble with Eddie?”

Maxwell contemplated the situation, and decided to follow Jen. “I’ll be back. Just.. wait there.” He sprinted after her, and found her just outside the drawing room.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

He checked nobody had followed him. “Can we just come out of character for a minute?”

Jen looked around. “I don’t see anyone watching.”

He grabbed her and kissed her deeply, sighing as her body nestled against his. “Phew. That’s better. Kissing Drake just wasn’t doing it for me.”

She giggled. “So how did it go with Rick?”

“I think I’m getting somewhere. He seemed genuinely amused by me just now. At least, I think that’s what it was.”

She smiled. "I think the trial has been a good opportunity for us all to reflect."

He nodded, as Hana walked out of the drawing room.

"I hope you two are staying in character.." she warned.

"Oh, darling. I was just checking in on Helen here. She seemed upset about something and I thought some Jimmy magic could make her feel all brand new."

Hana looked dubiously at him. "Okay. Don't want to have to disqualify you both." She wandered off.

"Okay, I'm Helen now," Jen said. "And I'm upset. Because Harold is always leaping to that woman's defence. I think something happened between them, before I came on the scene. He's been her accountant for years. I think he knows something bad that she didn't want him to expose."

"Like, what?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should talk to him? He won't talk to me about it."

He raised his eyebrows. "Teamwork makes the dream work." He kissed her on the cheek, and ran back into the drawing room, where he found Bertrand/Harold in conversation with Olivia/Violet. "Hello again. Oh. I don't believe we've met, but you are *fabulous*." He took Olivia's hand, and kissed it, much to her obvious disgust.

"Ah. You're the caretaker's bit of stuff, aren't you."

"Bit of stuff? I'll have you know we are happily married with a beautiful daughter..."

"Such a waste." Olivia shuddered.

"Oh sweetie, I'm sorry. If I was straight, I *so* would."

"I wasn't talking about *you*. Still. Did you have something you wanted to say?"

"Ah, yes. I wanted to speak to Harold. What do you know about the state of Miss Sterner's finances? I heard that things were not too rosy in her garden... financially speaking?"

"Whatever I know, I certainly cannot disclose to the likes of you," Bertrand growled. "I have a duty of confidentiality to my client."

"Especially in the presence of the wife of one of her colleagues, I would suggest," Olivia commented.

"Oh, you're George's wife? How have we never met before?" Maxwell studied her up and down.

"Well, George is punching above his weight, isn't he?"

Olivia shot him an evil glare. "George and I have an understanding. I work away a lot, and he understands that."

"Ha, ha, that's almost funny Oliv...violet."

“But after what that woman did to him.. he changed. She threatened to sack him if he came forward about that little girl that she was picking on...”

“Angel? *My* Angel? So you knew too?”

“Oh, she was your little girl?”

“My bright shining star...”

“Actually, I couldn’t care less. But I won’t have anyone undermining my husband. I don’t care why. I just won’t have it.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Oliviolet huffed and walked away from him in Heljen’s direction. Time to go and talk to Eddrake.

“Daaaaarling...” He enveloped Drake in a hug.

“For pity’s sake, get off me.”

“Oh come now, my hunky hubby. Show your lover some love.” This was So. Much. Fun. Maxwell noticed Hana giggling from a few paces away. She was obviously loving this as much as he was.

“What do you want?”

“Oliviolet and Georick knew that Mrs Hana was picking on Angel!”

“Yeah, I’ve already worked that one out for myself.”

“Oh? I thought I was really getting there! I thought Oliviolet was the murderer for sure!”

“Well, I was suspecting Bertrand, until I found out from him that he thinks his wife is having an affair...”

“What? Jen? No way...”

“Helen?” barked Drake. “Yes. So who’s she having the affair with. Who do you think, *Jimmy*?”

Hmm. This was concerning. “Well.. don’t look at me! I’m as gay as Pareeee!”

“You might be making yourself out to be.”

He pulled Drake tightly to him again. “You would know by now, my beloved...”

Just then, Hana tapped Maxwell on the shoulder. “I think Violet is ready to make an accusation.”

“Oooh! Drama!” He followed Hana out to the hallway, where the others stood around, looking at Olivia.

Hana stepped forward. “So, Violet. You think you know who murdered me?”

“I believe that the murderer is George Peters.” She glared at Rick. “My *husband*.”

“For what reason?”

“Because he was sleeping with Helen Harper.” She turned her frown towards Jen. “Mrs Sterner found out, and threatened to expose the affair. So he killed her.”

Hana beamed. “Well done, Olivia! And that only took you fifty minutes! I’d calculated that it would have taken at least an hour and a half for someone to guess!”

“Thank the lord,” Drake sighed. “It’s over. I don’t have to be married to Maxwell anymore. No offense, Jones.”

“None taken,” Jen giggled, as she sidled back up beside him and took his hand.

“Aw, I think you all did great,” Hana said. “I got some brilliant pictures...”

“Ooh, can I put them up on the ‘gram?” Maxwell asked, standing behind Hana to try and get a peek.

“Perhaps later,” Hana said. “Right now, someone needs to get the disco going?”

“Ooh! Ooh! Yes! Of course! Say no more...” He hotfooted it in the direction of the ballroom, where a small area had been cleared earlier in the evening for the disco to take place. “Time to bring this place down!!!”

A cathartic experience

"All packed?" Maxwell picked up her suitcase obediently.

"Yes," she said. "I can't wait to get home. I bet Chance has missed us."

"Christopher had better not have been scrimping on his walkies time, or he'll have me to answer to." He shook his head. "Anyway, I'll get this down to the car. Is Hana coming with us?"

"Ah. About that." She'd had a chat with Hana a few minutes ago, just after breakfast, when he was seeing Bertrand off. "No. She isn't."

"Oh?"

"She's staying on here for a couple of weeks. Just while Drake's away. So Rick's not on his own."

He looked a little bit confused. "He's a big boy, you know.."

She shot him a mischievous look. "You know full well I *don't* know."

"Yeesh, for a noble lady you need to get your mind out of the gutter." He prodded her playfully.

"What I'm saying is, well what I'm asking is, why does Hana want to stay with Rick?"

"Well, she said something about giving *us* a little bit of space." Jen wasn't convinced that was the reason, but she had to take Hana's word for it.

"Aw? I thought she was all pumped for getting her cottage decorated for Christmas. I was going to help her, remember?"

"I think she's only talking about a week or two, just while Drake's away. So we'll still have lots of time for that. And we need to get thinking about decorating our place for Christmas. Which will be a slightly bigger task. *And*, we need to get the disco sorted, so it's all ready for your New Year's party.."

His face lit up. "I'll get ordering coloured light up floor tiles straight away!" He kissed her on the cheek. "Right. See you downstairs."

"Just got something I need to do before we go," she called to him as he headed off. "Won't be long."

"Missing you already," she heard him call back.

She laughed, shook her head, and did a final check of the room to make sure nothing had been left behind, as she was coming to realise that Maxwell was very good at leaving a random sock or toothbrush or doodle lying around. In the bathroom, she found a tub of hair gel as if to prove her point, still open. She gave it an affectionate sniff (she adored the smell of his hair, well the smell of all of him was adorable to be honest) and popped it into her handbag. How much stuff he must have mislaid on the engagement and unity tours, she couldn't help but wonder. Well, good job he had her now to keep him organised.

She left the bedroom and headed downstairs and along the corridor in the direction of Rick's study. The door was ajar, which usually meant he was in it. She tapped on it, gently.

"Yes?"

Cautiously, she walked in. "Hey. Sorry if I'm disturbing you.."

He smiled. "Duchess Jen. Always a pleasure. Have a seat."

She sat down opposite him. "I just wanted to say thank you. For having us over the last week, for your hospitality.."

"It's nothing, Jen. You and Maxwell are always welcome here. You know that."

She nodded. "And for what you said in court."

He looked at her awkwardly, nodded, and looked away. "I said what needed to be said."

"It's appreciated. I'm sure it couldn't have been easy for you."

He looked back at her. "To be quite frank with you, I found it quite a cathartic experience."

She raised an eyebrow. "And that means?"

He laughed. "You might say liberating? Or, purifying? It gave me a chance to relive everything, and get it out of my system."

She nodded. "I appreciate it."

"With the trial over, I will be turning my attention to the next steps in making Cordonía a safer, better place." He looked around the room. "I hope I'm not speaking out of turn when I say that I hope you will play a role in that process."

She smiled. "I'd be honoured."

He nodded. "The honour is Cordonía's. But until then, you have definitely earned a break. Go home. Relax and settle into your duchy. Enjoy the holidays. And did you decide on a honeymoon date?"

She nodded. "Yeah. We'd like to go in February, if that's okay with you?" That would give her some time to slim back into her bikinis after any Christmas excesses.

He nodded. "That should be fine. It should be very warm in that part of the world then too. I think I went in March once, and came back with sunburn. Best make sure Maxwell packs his sunblock."

"I will." She looked at him searchingly. "On that subject.."

Rick looked back at her blankly.

"Everything alright with you two?"

"Yes," he said sharply.

"Yes? Is that all you've got on the subject?"

“You two seemed fine before the wedding, even just after. Now? I just want to make this really clear. He really was rooting for me and you to work out, even up until the night I made my decision. He did not want to hurt you, or take anything that was yours. He loves you like a brother, and he’s desperate for you to know all of this. If you want to hold a grudge against anyone, that should be me.”

Rick shook his head. “I hold no grudges.”

“You’re hurting, and I get that. But remember, he’s hurting too, because he feels guilty and he feels confused about where he stands with you.”

Rick sighed. “I feel the same way. I feel guilty. I feel confused.”

“Guilty? Why?”

He sighed, and covered his face with his hands. “If I tell you something, will you try to find it in your heart to forgive me for it?”

“Only if it’s another cathartic experience for you,” she said, feeling nerves in her chest but smiling through it.

“When I was listening to those things Anton said on Tuesday, the suggestion that you did not enter into that marriage for love...” He looked at her. “I wanted to believe it.”

She frowned at him. “But surely if that had been the truth, then I would have been lying to you about why I couldn’t marry you.”

“I accept that. But, it would have hurt less. And looking at Maxwell’s face that afternoon, I recognised some of my own emotions. And I felt.. I don’t know how I felt.”

She glared at him now. “You do.” She stood up. “You got a kick out of it all. And you sit there and tell me everything is alright...” She stormed towards the door.

He stood up, and followed her. “Jen, it is. Because I realised how I felt was wrong. I felt guilty. I felt ashamed. I had to atone. And that’s why I spoke up.”

She watched his face carefully, and let him continue, her hand on the door.

“I am but a weak man, feeling emotions that any man would feel. But I have to be a King. And more importantly, I have to be a friend. Because my friends make me a stronger man. And a better King.”

“Best you don’t lose sight of that,” she sighed. “Listen. Neither of us went into our arrangement guessing how it would end. I mean, think about it. The outcome was the ultimate fail for both of us, wasn’t it?”

Rick smiled fondly at her. “No, Jen. It wasn’t. And you know that.”

She giggled softly, and smiled back at him.

“Can you forgive me?”

She raised an eyebrow. “If you throw in some extra honeymoon perks, I’ll think about it.”

“That can be arranged.”

At that there was a knock on the door, and she knew instantly who it was. Her hand still on the handle, she pushed slightly and he crashed into her.

“Well, hell-llo!”

“Hell-llo to you too,” she giggled. “As you can see, I was just leaving.”

“Yes, Jen was just giving me your preferred dates for your honeymoon,” Rick said, diplomatically as ever. “And you should know that I’ve advised her to remind you to pack your sunblock.”

“Two week beach party coming right up,” he said, doing a little jig. “Rick. I can’t thank you enough for everything.”

“No need. Come here.”

Jen stepped back a little to allow the two friends to hug it out, not sure which of them she was prouder of right now.

A strategy

As the week progressed, the miserable November rain finally stopped, mirroring his more positive outlook following the end of the trial. With the drier weather, Rick had taken the opportunity to take some long walks around the palace grounds, and on a few occasions Hana had joined him. He had been a little perplexed as to her intention to stay on at the palace this week, feeling that Drake may have influenced her to do so. But her reasoning that she wanted to give Jen and Maxwell a little space was sound, and he was after all pleased to have someone around.

Once Drake returned from his second stint in Lythikos, Hana would return to Valtoria. For now, they were keeping each other company. They'd had a very interesting conversation this morning on the subject of Anton's allegations. Hana had said she'd thought at length about what Anton had suggested, but that she'd never once felt it possible that Jen could have done that to Maxwell. Rick had disagreed, but had admitted to Hana that he'd only entertained the possibility for selfish reasons. Having already confessed as much to Jen, it felt somewhat liberating to talk his thoughts through with Hana, who maintained a dignified impartiality throughout their conversation.

This afternoon, Rick was in conversation with Madeleine. As Royal Communications Director, she was his main sounding board and source of outside ideas at the current time. Ironical, really, as had she ended up a Queen, her role would have been no different. But luckily, that would never be the case.

He was allowing himself to daydream; his passionate encounters with Olivia less than a week ago were still very much fresh in his memory. Right now, they were not something he regretted, although his concern was that he might come to one day. He was not due to see her again now until Christmas. He knew the wise thing to do would be to deal with her divorce from Anton before anything further developed. That would remove one of the barriers which she was brandishing. He felt that she could be good for him. Certainly, she had been good for him on Friday.

"Thoughts?"

Madeleine was looking at him.

"Oh, my apologies, Countess Madeleine. I was momentarily distracted."

"Ahem. I was asking for your thoughts on your Christmas message."

"Ah. I will get something prepared soon. Presumably you will want to see it before I record it?"

She nodded. "With recent events, I am sure you can come up with something suitably rousing and reassuring."

"Quite. Was there anything else, Madeleine?"

There was a condescending smirk on her lips. "Actually, yes. I feel it is my duty to remind you of factors that are already known to you. Factors that require careful consideration, and proposed actions."

"Then, by all means."

She cleared her throat. "You have no Queen, and no heir. It leaves Cordonia in a delicate situation. We need a strategy."

"I am well aware of this, Madeleine."

"I note that Lady Hana is staying at the palace."

He looked at her, confused.

"I appreciate that your affections are sadly misplaced in the direction of those unobtainable.. or *unsuitable*."

He glared at her. "Explain your second comment."

"Oh, please. I've got my sources. Olivia Nevraakis sneaking around this palace after midnight can only mean one thing."

He had no response, and stared out of the window.

"Lady Hana would be an excellent choice. I am sure you could come to an understanding with her, a little like the understanding we came to. And you two seem to be getting on well."

"With respect, Madeleine, with a little time I hope to find someone to marry for love." And although that might not turn out to be Olivia, it was within the realms of possibility that he could feel that way about her. He was already thinking about her much more frequently since their rendezvous in his quarters.

Her retort was swift. "With respect, Your Majesty, time is something you do not have the luxury of. You know as well as I do that you need to secure an heir for this country. You cannot do that without a Queen."

"Actually, I can, Madeleine. I can appoint an heir of my choosing."

"Yes, that is true. But Cordonian law will only allow you to appoint an infant under the age of six months. So, good luck finding a suitable volunteer."

He sighed, frustrated by the technicality. "That is ridiculous. Who wrote these laws? Can I amend them?"

"You can amend them, but they will only take effect in the next monarch's reign. Otherwise, you could just fulfil all of your personal whims. Cordonia needs to be protected from that prospect. And, I have it on good authority that Cordonia's protection is paramount right now."

"What have you heard?"

"That Anton's attempt to overthrow the Cordonian monarchy has caught the attention of our neighbours in Auvernal. They covet our wealth, and will wish to bargain their military strength in return for financial assistance, now they have seen a weakness in our own security."

He sighed, well aware of the issue. It was something he had discussed at length with his father prior to his passing. "Who have you heard this from?"

"My father."

“Of course.” Godfrey was always one to interfere in matters that did not directly affect him. “Well, I note your concern, Countess Madeleine.”

“Think about it, Your Majesty. I believe that Lady Hana would bring some much needed stability and level-headedness to match your own. The Duchesses around you are loose cannons. And this Countess is very much off the table.”

He nodded. “Thank you. I will give your proposal some thought.”

Madeleine nodded, and left the room, leaving the door open. He sighed, and continued to gaze out of the window. To take Hana as his Queen? If only it were that simple.

Perhaps it could be.

There was a gentle tap on the door.

“Come in.”

Hana stepped into the study. “I hope I’m not interrupting you, Rick?”

“Not at all, Hana. Madeleine and I have finished our meeting.”

“Good. I just thought you might like to join me in another walk? It’s a pleasant evening.”

“An excellent idea, Hana. I will be right there, if you give me a few moments. I will meet you by the palace door shortly.”

She smiled and nodded, and left the room, leaving him to his contemplation. As much as he loathed to admit it, Madeleine was right. Olivia was not a suitable Queen at the moment as she was still married to Anton, and time was not on his side. A seed had been planted by Madeleine, perhaps he should observe if it could break through the soil, before speculating on whether it would grow.

I never said never

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

“Ooh, this is a good one...” He pulled the card all the way out of the box, and his blue eyes shot her a mischievous glint. “If you could move *anywhere*, where would it be?”

She pondered on that for a moment, as his fingers fidgeted about the corners of the *Love Questions* box. She stretched her nightie-clad body out on the bed, and let her head fall into his lap; he was sitting up straight against the headboard of the bed. “That’s tricky.”

“Tricky? It’s impossible! So many amazing places out there I’ve never even been to! Australia, Africa, South America... ooh, *Antarctica*! Think of the penguins!”

“You’ve gotta live there though,” she reminded him. “I obviously can’t say here, because I couldn’t move here.. although there’s nowhere else I’d rather live.” She mimed a kiss up to him, gazing up at his upside down face from where she lay in his lap.

“That is cheating. Where would you move to?”

She pondered some more. “I think I’d move back to New York you know. I think it just holds so many special memories for us. I liked living there, and I think you’d love it.”

“Hey, just take the words right out of my mouth, Jen, why don’t you?”

She giggled, reaching up to touch his mouth, which he opened playfully.

“Maybe one day we’ll move there for a bit,” he went on. “Then I can drink all the cw-affeeee.”

“Here’s *your* next one,” she said, licking her lips and looking at the card she’d just picked out. “Oh.” This was a question she really wanted to know the answer to, and she could feel her face light up with excitement. “When did you first know you were in love with me?”

He didn’t say anything, just looked back at her, a little stunned.

She put the card back in the box. “Hey. Not like you to be speechless.”

He laughed, running his fingers through his hair.

“Come on, babe, I’ve wanted to know this for aaages. You know when I knew? I’m pretty sure I told you..” It was in Paris, just after she and Drake had found Savannah. For a couple of long, excruciating minutes, Jen had been convinced that Maxwell and Savannah were together; and the crushing pain she’d felt as a result had confirmed something she’d been thinking was a possibility for some time.

“I’m pretty sure you did too, but you are very welcome to tell me again...”

She glared at him. “You are stalling for time, Maxwell Beaumont.”

“Okay, okay.” He sighed. “It was the night of the Coronation Ball.”

Ohhh. That early. She’d not expected that. “Wow.”

He nodded. “I’d obviously had strong feelings for you before that, but.. that was the night it hit me. I guess it was because I thought that was it. Everything was going to change. You and me, on that staircase, putting the world to rights..”

The memory was vivid, and she felt a shiver down her spine. “Oh god, I just wanted to give you a clue how I felt. There was no point in telling you outright at that point.”

“Well, that didn’t come across. I was still clueless.”

She giggled. “The blatant ‘am I ever gonna see you shirtless’ comment didn’t even give you a little hint?”

“Oh. I just thought you were being ironic...”

She laughed, and sat up, proceeding to unbutton his shirt on the spot. “How’s this for irony. You’re still dressed, and I get to see you shirtless whenever I feel like it these days. And I feel like it right now.”

“Like I said, you never know what you’ll see...”

His shirt was gone. “And I never even had to get you drunk. Aw, there you go.” She kissed his chest reverently just below his tattoo, then looked back up at him. “You really knew you were in love with me that day?”

“Oh, totally. Love had struck me down and defeated me like the monster it is. I just never thought there was a hope in hell you could return that love. You were the one person I could never have.”

“I have to say, I wanted to return it, but I was so confused. Maybe I *was* in love with you then. But it wasn’t until Paris that I knew I was, for sure.”

“The city of loooove...” He drew her into his arms, and pulled her up to standing, and into a waltz. She giggled.

“Somewhere we *definitely* need to go back to,” she agreed, as they collapsed back into each others arms on the bed.

“Yes. We do. And this time I get to take you up the Eiffel Tower.”

“Careful now,” she teased, revelling in his mischievous smirk. “Anyway, don’t get me wrong, I fell for you long before Paris...”

“Yes, I know, in Lythikos, just after I stood on your foot..”

She giggled, glowing in the memory. “Yeah. That was the moment. But knowing I was in love with you? That was.. complex.”

“Maybe it was easier for me. I mean, I fell for you the night I met you. And it was only when I thought I was going to lose you that I realised for certain.”

“Same, I guess. But you didn’t lose me. I hung around. And now you can’t get rid of me.”

When she tickled his sides to torment him, he responded with some sort of non-verbal complaint and ducked away from her.

“You don’t get away that easily, Beaumont.”

“Next question.” He picked out a card, and looked at her suggestively. “What is your favourite part of *your own* body.”

“Oh, what?” She blushed. “How am I supposed to answer that?”

“How about honestly?”

She giggled, hiding her face in his shirt. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe.. my face or something?”

He laughed. “Oh, modest much?”

“Hey, you keep telling me how pretty I am, maybe I started believing you! What’s your answer, anyway?”

“My abs,” he said with a grin.

She shook her head. “Really?”

“Really,” he said, looking down at them smugly. I’m freaking proud of this six pack you know. If Drake and Rick can do it, then so can I!”

“You are so much more than a hot body, Maxwell. If I had to choose my favourite part of you... I’d.. uh...” This was harder than she’d thought, and he laughed. “Um...”

“I’m 99% sure you’re going to say my mouth,” he prompted her.

“Hmm, I can’t argue that it has a lot going for it..” She ran her fingers along his lips. “It’s very kissable, and what comes out of it makes me laugh..”

“Are we talking words or...”

He drew her in for a tonguey kiss, and she sighed, running her hands down his back. “That too. Hey what about you? What’s your favourite part of my body?”

He tapped the top of her head, playfully. “It’s in there.”

“My brain?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because it decided that the rest of your beautiful body was going to be all mine.”

“Interesting theory,” she said between giggles.

“Well, it decided that you were going to love me, anyway. And, hey, I don’t want to choose my favourite part of you. So I guess your brain is the nearest thing to being all of you.”

She sat back a bit and looked at him. “That’s super sweet. Shall we do one more?”

“One more. It’s getting late and you need your beauty sleep, little blossom.”

She drew the card out and gulped, not sure how honest to be. “Oh.”

He looked at her. “You don’t think I’m going to like your answer to this question, do you.”

“Rumbled. And that’s before you even know what the question is..”

“Go on.”

“The question is, what’s one thing you’ve wanted to do with me that we haven’t done yet.”

A massive giddy grin lit up his face. “Well, I’ve got my answer.”

“What is it?”

“Not until you tell me yours. Although, I think I know what yours is.” He raised his eyebrows.

She sighed. “I’m that predictable, huh?”

“Am I right?”

“Depends what you’re thinking,” she said. “But I’m not saying I want to do it now. I’m just saying I want to do it more than anything, when the time is right.”

He nodded. “I know.”

“And I know you’re not sure. And I get that. I don’t want you to feel that you have to do anything you’re not comfortable with. And I’d rather just have you, and us be happy, than us start a family that you don’t really want.” She sighed again, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“I don’t remember saying I didn’t want us to have a family.”

She looked at him anxiously, taking a deep breath. “You just never said you did.”

“I never said never.” He looked around the room, then back at her. “Hey. The thought of it terrifies me. As far as I’m concerned, I’m still a kid myself. But, we’ve been through plenty of terrifying things together, and come out on top. So... I’m willing to think about it.”

“Really?” She felt an adrenaline rush. The thought of never getting the chance to procreate with such a beautiful human being had been weighing her down. Of course she would have chosen him. But perhaps she wasn’t going to have to choose after all.

“Really. I guess we do need to give the world what it’s waiting for one day.”

“And what’s that?”

“A little Maxwell junior. I can just picture him now.” He held his arms out dramatically.

She giggled. “That’s gonna be his name, huh?”

“Hell yeah. He’ll have your eyes though. And your intelligence and good looks.”

“He’d better have your sense of humour.”

“And my sweet dance moves...”

“World renowned...”

They both collapsed in laughter.

“Anyway,” he said once she had just about managed to stop chuckling. “How about I think about it for a little while, and you think about it for a little while, and we’ll talk again in a few months?”

“Thank you,” she said, enveloping him in a hug. “You don’t know how happy that makes me. I mean, I’m not in any hurry. We only got married last month. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Plenty of time to practice,” he said suggestively.

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Okay. What was your answer to the question? If you’re going to make mine possible one day, I should do the same for you. What’s one thing we haven’t done together that you’d like to do?”

He looked down, to the side, and then right at her. “69?”

Her eyes almost popped out of her head. “MAXWELL!”

“Hey, I’m a bit more easily pleased... it’s not quite as life-changing as your thing..”

She put her hands on his shoulders. “You are a very, *very* bad boy.”

“Is that a no?”

“I never said never.”

With an evil grin, she pushed him down onto the bed, and began to get to work on the zipper of his jeans. Once she’d done this she pulled his jeans off, along with his boxers, and threw them to the side. He twisted so he was lying on his side, and she laid herself next to him so that they were top to tail.

“Um, well, this feels kinda awkwa...”

But suddenly it didn’t, because he had grabbed hold of her thighs and started to work his magic. It felt a new level of intense due to the different angle and she moaned in appreciation for a little while, before remembering the game plan. Soon she began to understand exactly why he had thought this was such a good idea; his movements grew breathier and more erratic and that was a good thing; and she could focus on him to distract herself from falling off the edge too soon.

But inevitably it happened; her body could only resist for so long. She heard him moan as she found her own release, and shortly afterwards she felt him reach up to tap her stomach. “I’m...”

She pulled away and, placing one hand on him, nudged herself up so she was looking at his face, taking in his starry-eyed stare as he climaxed.

He spoke first. "God, Jen. I love you."

"I love you too. And that was.. *interesting*. Maybe we should do it again some time."

He closed his eyes in bliss. "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

She kissed him gently on the lips, savouring the feeling as a grin formed on them. "You really are easily pleased, aren't you?"

"Only by you, Jen Jones. Only by you."

A pandora's box of possibilities

It was early in the evening, and Rick was pacing around his study at a loss. Madeleine's comments a few days ago had really got him thinking. Every time he'd seen Hana since, he'd seen her differently. And it wasn't that he was developing feelings for her. He was just assessing her suitability for the role she had originally come to Cordonia to fill; that of his Queen. And his assessment was somewhat positive. She was knowledgeable. She was attractive. They shared interests, friends, experiences. It would definitely be a move that her parents would approve of, and he was sure his own family would have similar views.

But what should his strategy be? Although Hana was worldly and assertive in many ways, he knew very little about her romantic history. He knew a little from things that Jen had mentioned in passing, and that Olivia had informed him about gladly to discredit her rival during the social season. She had been engaged to an English nobleman, but they had separated before marriage, although he knew not why. Would Hana be practical enough to enter into another engagement in formal, rather than romantic terms, or would her heart preclude this? He suspected he knew the answer, and so he would need to play the long game.

His suspicion was formed from his belief that Hana had also fallen for Jen over the course of the social season. He had never suspected the attraction was mutual; but he empathised with Hana. She was no doubt getting over it better than he was, she seemed to be doing fine. She and Drake were getting on rather well. He sighed. Hopefully he wasn't going to be treading on any toes by following this course of action.

And what of Olivia? There was no doubt that Olivia made his heart burn; they were like two halves of the same whole. But he was afraid that if placed together the fire would overwhelm them, that it would be too intense, that they would end up having the sort of relationship that his mother and father had. That relationship had not been a good thing for Cordonia. Cordonia needed stability. He needed stability. Jen would have brought him stability. But Jen was off the table, and Hana was the next best option. A refined, unspoiled, pure Queen.

He took a look at his appointments schedule, and left his study. He soon found Hana, sitting in the drawing room, sketching.

"What are you working on?"

"I'm surprised you can't tell yet," she pointed out.

"It's a portrait of.. someone..?" He squinted, looking more closely at the sketch.

"Yes. Maybe when I've got a little further with it, you'll work it out."

"I was hoping to catch you," he said. "I wondered if, while you're staying here, you'd like to help me out with some engagements?"

She looked a little like a rabbit in the headlights for a second, but then relaxed. "Of course. What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I'm expected to attend the capital's Christmas Fete at the weekend. I wondered if you wanted to accompany me."

“That would be lovely,” she said. “Does it involve switching the capital’s Christmas lights on?”

He laughed. “They tend to save that job for reality TV stars and singers. My role, as I understand it, is to meet the organisers, listen to the choir sing, and shake a few hands. I did attend on my father’s behalf last year, so I know it’s a pleasant event to attend.”

“Oh well. In any case, I’d be honoured, Rick. Are you sure?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have asked otherwise. I will leave you to your drawing.”

“Thank you. I’ll be sure to let you have the first look when it’s done.”

“Thank you Hana.”

He stepped away; before he left the room, he watched her for a few minutes. Her face was a picture of concentration, she was seemingly unaware he was observing. His focus turned to her artwork, and he could see now that she was sketching an image of him.

He pulled himself away and headed up to his private quarters, and checked his phone. No notifications on the group chat today; things had gone quiet again after all the excitement of the trial and sentencing had died down. He called Drake’s number.

Drake answered quickly. “Rick?”

“Hello. Everything alright?”

“Uh, hardly. I’m bored out of my skull. I think I’ve drank all the whisky in the keep, so I’m moving on to the wine.”

“All is quiet, though?”

“It’s dull. I’ve been out with the Duchess a few times. Nobody’s tried to kill her or called her a treacherous bitch. Quite disappointing really.”

Rick didn’t need to hide his amusement when talking to Drake, and laughed. “Did she have a warm reception?”

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s sub-zero here most days. I had to go and buy a new coat.”

“I mean, were the people okay with her?”

“Uh, yeah. Bit quiet. Bit scared of her, I’d say. Can’t blame them.”

Rick sighed. He was glad that Drake was with Olivia for a little longer, as he hated to think of her isolated in her keep, surrounded by a public who she was unable to connect with.

“Things okay with you?”

“Yeah. Bit quiet. Got the Christmas Fete at the weekend.”

Drake laughed. “Looking forward to kissing some babies or whatever it is you do?”

“I like the Christmas Fete. It’s a pleasant way to mark the start of the festivities. Which, I believe, we may be together for in Lythikos?”

“You got that invitation too?”

“Yes. Olivia is keen to bring all the nobles together for Christmas. I have yet to make plans so I can see no reason why not.”

“Is Hana going?”

“I’m not sure,” Rick said, remembering the purpose of his call. “But speaking of Hana, I wanted to run something by you. She is going to escort me to the Christmas Fete, and I thought I might get her involved in a few more engagements while she is staying at the palace.”

Of course you did.

Drake wasn’t stupid, he could tell where this conversation was going. *He’s scoping me out to see if I’ve got a problem with this.*

I haven’t got a problem with this. Why would I?

“Oh right. As like your consort or something?”

“Well, yes. I have to be honest with you, I would appreciate your thoughts. I had a conversation with Madeleine a few days ago.”

“Hell, Rick, this is Madeleine’s idea isn’t it? She wants you married and making babies with Hana.”

Rick laughed. “It’s never going to be that simple, Drake, and I told Madeleine that. She does have a point though. I know the pressure is on for me to secure an heir.”

“What does Hana think?”

“Well I... haven’t told her.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I have a feeling Hana wouldn’t be very... amenable to me suggesting we marry for the good of the country.”

Drake laughed, a long ironic laugh. He could see his breath rising up into the cold Lythikos air, as he walked through the grounds of Olivia’s keep.

“Is that your way of saying you agree?”

“You have no idea what sort of little firecracker you’re dealing with, have you? Hana Lee is never gonna go for that, Rick, and I’m surprised you would. If you’d wanted that kind of arrangement, you should’ve stayed with Madeleine.”

“I just wonder though. The idea having been placed in my head.. perhaps, I could grow to love her. And she me. It might be worth seeing how things go.”

“So you’re gonna start with the old Rys charm. It didn’t work on Jones. What makes you think it’ll work on Hana?”

“I don’t have any competition this time,” Rick said. “Or, do I?”

Woah, he was really pulling some punches tonight.

“Listen, Rick. We’re all friends together, yeah? My suggestion would be to be honest with Hana. Let her know what she’s getting herself into.”

“My concern is that by doing that she will back away. I need to draw her in somehow.”

“Alright, you do it your way, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I just need to know you’re okay with it, Drake. I don’t want to be underhand.”

He wasn’t okay with it. But there wasn’t any point in telling Rick that. “Yeah, whatever.”

“What do you know about her relationship history?”

Pfff. What sort of a question was that? “Next to nothing.”

“She was obviously engaged in the past, but...” There was a long pause. “I was wondering if she has had any relevant experience.”

“You think she’s a virgin, don’t you.”

“Well, yes.” Rick faltered. “Don’t you?”

“I don’t know, Rick. It’s not something that really ever came up in conversation. Why don’t you ask Jones, see if you can mine her for gossip. Or even better, ask Hana.”

“I can’t..”

Seething, Drake hung up, throwing his phone back into his coat pocket. This was an awful idea, probably Rick’s worst idea since he’d insisted on going all out to propose to Jones that night in New York. Drake had tried to warn Rick off then, fully aware that Jones’s heart belonged to Maxwell by that point, but his advice had been ignored. It seemed like Rick was never going to learn; he was going to get his emotions trampled on all over again.

Drake didn’t want this for Hana. He wanted Hana to find her own way. He now felt enormously guilty that he’d suggested she stayed at the palace instead of returning home. He’d unwittingly led her into a Pandora’s box of possibilities. Hopefully, she’d be savvy enough to see what was going on.

And as for Rick’s musing over her sexual history, well Drake had asked himself that question often enough. He could rest assured that Hana wasn’t going to jump into bed with Rick at the first opportunity. It wasn’t that long ago that Drake had assumed that she wasn’t even into men. When she’d told him she was attracted to both men and women, it had shocked him at first, and he’d felt a

little more vulnerable around her than he had previously. But things had returned to normal, and developed from there, and sometimes he did find himself thinking about her in that way.

Not like he had with Jones; that had been unhealthy, and borderline creepy now he looked back on it, given her supposed pursuit of Rick at the time. The things he'd thought about back on the engagement tour, even on the unity tour, had almost driven him insane. But she was never meant to be his, other than in his fantasies, and he'd drawn a line underneath it now. The trouble was, he needed a new fantasy, or at least, a reality. And with his life being the way it was at the moment, there were not many contenders to choose from. When he got out of Lythikos, he might travel for a while. See where the breeze took him. Search for an adventure.

But then again, he might not. It would depend on Rick, really.

He was back at the keep, and as he entered the building, he sent Rick a message. "Just be careful. I care about both of you."

He could almost predict the response that he was going to get, as he sat down on one of the chairs in the drawing room. His phone buzzed, and he looked at it, nodding with satisfaction.

As do I.

The exclusive first read

How cool was that, the day that he had to go back to the capital for all the final meetings about his book was the same day as the big Christmas Fete. There was one problem with it all though, he'd intended to call in on Rick afterwards, but Rick was doing his rounds at the fete. And he'd been advised that he *had* to speak to Rick. His publishers were a little jittery over a few of the things in the book, as to whether they'd face a lawsuit from the Crown over state secrets or whatever. He'd told them all it was cool, but they didn't seem to have much confidence in his assurances. So, it was going to be a late one getting back to Valtoria. Maybe he'd see if he could stay over, rather than having to get his driver to drive him back so late at night. Although, the thought of a night away from his little blossom was far from appealing.

He was sitting in one of the palace reception rooms, just waiting for Rick and Hana to get back. Madeleine had taken particular pains to advise him that Hana was accompanying Rick as an official consort this afternoon. Of course she'd be loving this, desperate to marry the King off at the earliest possible opportunity for the good of Cordonio. And in some ways, Maxwell could totally see Hana going for it, she'd do anything to help out her friends and her country. But he couldn't see Rick seeing things that way. And, after all, Rick was in charge.

He pulled out his phone, and sent a message to Jen.

Guess where I am?

He didn't have to wait long for a reply.

Please say you're at the shop buying me flowers and chocolates..

He made a mental note to try and find a late shop on the way back to Valtoria. *Nope. I'm at the palace!*

Why?

Never you mind, Sherlock Jones. That's for me to know.

I thought you'd be on your way back by now babe. Miss your face xx

He grinned, and tapped out a response. *I miiiiiiight be a bit late. I mean, I could see if I can stay the night and come back in the morning?*

He got a sad emoji. *If you have to.*

Well, I don't have to...

Your Duchess decrees you must return to her bed tonight.

Phew, this was getting interesting. *Oh really? And what would my Duchess have me do when I get there?*

"Maxwell! Hey!"

He looked up to see Rick and Hana standing over him. Quickly, he put his phone away. "Hey!"

“To what do we owe this pleasure?” Rick asked him.

“Oh well, it’s... I have something I need to talk to you about, Rick.”

“Very well,” Rick said. “Will you be staying for supper?”

“I.. uh....”

Hana laughed. “My guess is that Jen wants him home tonight.”

“Your guesses are usually pretty accurate,” Maxwell conceded. “So I’ll pass on that, but would it be okay for us to have a chat now?”

Rick looked a little thrown. “Well, this is a little unusual..”

“It won’t take too long, I promise. And Hana, I’m sorry but this needs to be just me and Rick.”

Hana sighed, and nodded. “So this is about your secret.”

“Maaaaybeee...”

She laughed. “Right, I’ll get out of your hair, leave you boys to talk.” She breezed out of the room.

“Come this way,” said Rick, gesturing towards the study.

Maxwell followed, strutting along smugly behind Rick. He wasn’t normally important enough to get invited into the study. He sat down, as Rick went to prepare drinks.

“Whisky?”

“Hey, I’m not Drake. But, I appreciate the gesture. Got any champagne?”

“No.”

“Cocktails?”

“No.”

He pulled a face. “Cherryade?”

“No.”

He nodded. “Right. So. The girls have been suspicious that I’ve been up to something for a while, and I can exclusively reveal to you, before anyone else... that...” He reached into his pocket, and produced a shiny memory stick. He threw it into the air and caught it, before throwing it at Rick, who caught it. “I have.”

Rick examined what he was holding. “What’s on this?”

“My *masterpiece*. The definitive story of the adventure we’ve been on since your first bachelor party. The story of a certain Duchess’s journey and rise to fame and fortune, her trials and tribulations, her.. well.. *our* love story... and then the epic tale of how we all vanquished the forces of evil together!”

“You’ve written a book about it all?” Rick didn’t look totally on board with this.

“Yes! It started small scale, like it was more of a scrapbook of the social season and a collection of memories of how we all met. Then, back on the engagement tour, I had an idea.”

Rick laughed, and sat down. “You and your ideas..”

“I realised how much the public loved Jen, how fascinated with her they are. I mean, she’s a staple item in all the gossip magazines these days, and she’s always the first person the press ask questions of, even when you’re in the vicinity. I figured that the public would love the chance to hear, from the horse’s mouth, and yes I am referring to myself as a horse, everything that has happened, from New York to our wedding day.”

“It’s... impressive, Maxwell. But...” He sighed.

“But, you’re worried that I might have put things in there that you don’t want the world to know! Like all the stuff with your Dad, and Olivia’s parents, and Anton, and I had thought of that... well, more specifically, my publishers had thought of that.” He whispered. “They don’t want you to sue them for every penny they’ve got.” He then raised his voice again. “Which is why you are the first to know! You have the exclusive first read of *The Royal Romance*, and you can chop out anything you don’t want to stay in there. Promise. Well, within reason.” There’d not be much book left if Rick removed all the romantic bits, would there?

“So Jen hasn’t read this yet?” Rick produced his laptop from a drawer.

“Jen doesn’t know a *thing* about this,” Maxwell stressed. “I want to surprise her with it, when it comes out.”

“So where does she think you are today?”

“She knows I’m in the capital. She just doesn’t know why. Don’t get me wrong, she knows I’m up to something.”

“Surely this has taken time to write, how did you manage to do it without her realising?”

“Well, most of it was written on the Unity tour, late at night, in a highly caffeinated state. The last few chapters, I’ve managed to write at Valtoria. I’d hoped to get it out for Christmas, but obviously the whole evil Justin climax was an even better ending than I could have hoped for!”

Rick tapped a few keys, and inserted the memory stick. “What’s in this for you? Why publish it to the world?”

“Because the world wants to read it, Rick! It’ll be great for the Crown’s reputation, even for Cordonias’s tourism industry! There’ll be Duchess Jen sightseeing tours before we know it.”

Rick nodded, sagely. “And it’ll make you a lot of money, won’t it.” He looked probingly at Maxwell.

Well, at least he had an answer. “Hey. I’m not doing this for my own financial gain. I have a debt to repay.”

“To who?”

“To Bertrand.” He sighed. “He was expecting to cash in on our Jen becoming Queen, remember?” He fidgeted with his fingers nervously. “I... may not have helped with that.”

Rick nodded. “Bertrand has forgiven you, Maxwell. As have I.”

This was news. “Really? You have?”

“Let’s talk about Bertrand. He said it himself that seeing the two of you find happiness inspired him to search for his own.”

“I know. But I still feel bad. We’re.. he’s still in a financial mess. So, this will help!”

Rick smiled. “So all the profits are going into House Beaumont?”

“Yeah. That’s the plan. And I think Jen would want it that way too.”

“You’re a good guy, you know that don’t you.”

He laughed. “What is it with everyone telling me that? Am I not supposed to be?”

“Of course you are. You couldn’t not be, Maxwell.”

Maxwell felt like doing a little dance as his friend looked across the desk at him without any hurt or pain in his eyes. Instead, he smiled back at him.

“I will give this a read. When do you need it back by?”

“Ah... yeah. Does Monday sound alright?”

Rick laughed. “Maxwell, it’s Friday now..”

“So that means you have the whole weekend!” He wrung his hands together. “Pleeeeeease, I don’t want to hold this up, and it really needs to go to print before Christmas so that we can get it released early February..”

“I’ll do my best, Maxwell.”

“You are the greatest!” Maxwell jumped up and pumped a fist in the air. “And remember, you know *nothing* about this. Don’t tell Drake. Or Hana. Or Olivia. And definitely don’t tell Madeleine. She, um, might not come across all that well.”

Rick’s eyes lit up. “I’m sure she can take that on the chin.”

“You, of course, have nothing to worry about. You are portrayed as the brave and noble King that you are.”

“And you?” Rick’s eyes were alight with amusement.

He put a hand to his chest dramatically “The plucky young narrator, a chancer who just wanted the best outcome for everyone, but who was not expecting the reality to deviate from the script as it did... as his heart was..” *Don’t push it, Maxwell.* “Welp, you know the general gist of it.”

“I look forward to reading it,” said Rick, closing his laptop and returning the memory stick to Maxwell. “And if I am to have it read by Monday, I best make a start immediately.”

“Works for me, I’ve been summoned back to Valtoria anyway.” Maxwell saluted his friend. “So, give me a shout with any state secrets you want covering up, and I’ll do the necessary!”

“I will.”

They stood up, and together they left the study. It wasn’t long before Hana came to greet them.

“Hey Hana.” He’d thought she would be fishing for gossip, but she looked upset. “What’s... up?”

“If you don’t mind, Maxwell, I’d like a quick word with you before you go,” she said.

“Sure! I’ll.. uh..”

Rick nodded, clutching his laptop. “In any case, I have something I need to.. start on. I’ll return to the study to do that. I’ll be in touch, Maxwell.” He clapped him on the shoulder, and walked back in the direction of the study.

Hana stood in front of him, as distressed as he had ever seen her.

“Oh Hana.. what’s wrong?” He pulled her into a hug, and she threw her arms around him.

“Can I come home with you tonight?” he heard her little voice say.

“Of course! Hey, it’ll be great to have some company on the drive back! But..” He pulled away, and looked at her questioningly. “What’s happened?”

“It’s not what’s happened. It’s just..” She wasn’t tearful, she maintained her composure. “Things are a little odd here, and I don’t like it anymore.”

“Oh?”

She nodded. “It might be that I’ve overstayed my welcome... I don’t know.”

“Aw, Hana, Rick loves having you here! I mean, you got invited to one of his engagements! What was that like? That must have been glamorous..”

“It was weird. *He* was weird. It’s like.. he’s treating me like a different person, and it worries me. And Madeleine’s been really strange. She’s been overly nice to me, and I don’t know why. But.. I know I don’t like it.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about, Hana. But if you want to come back to Valtoria...”

She looked at him with big eyes. “Only if it’s okay. I figured you and Jen needed a bit of space after what happened last week..”

“Sheesh, Hana. We’ve had a whole week of space now. And you don’t get in our way. Far from it. We love having you as our neighbour.”

She nodded. “Well, I know you were keen to get home to Jen, so I packed my things just in case..” She gestured to a suitcase by the door, which Maxwell hadn’t even noticed until now.

“Well, can I just say I am impressed by your efficiency, Hana, but not surprised?”

She smiled, looking at her feet.

“Do you need to let Rick know?”

She nodded, sadly. “Yeah. I’ll just.. do that now.”

As she wandered towards the study, Maxwell got his phone out. A message from Jen. *Whoa whoa whoa*. He’d somehow forgotten about the conversation they’d been having before Rick and Hana had returned, and it had just taken a *fascinating* turn. Time to report back to base for duty!

Perfectly in tune

“I did miss you last week,” Jen said to Hana as they wandered down the stairs. “I’m glad you’re back. Especially with what you said about things being a bit weird. I guess it can be a bit odd when you put two people together without the rest of the gang being about.”

“Not always,” Hana pointed out. “Look at you and Maxwell. And I’d like to think that you and I can spend plenty of time together without it being awkward.”

“True,” Jen said. “Still, I’m sorry that you felt like that. It does make me curious as to what Rick was thinking.”

“It’s nice to be back in my own space,” Hana acknowledged. “And it won’t be long before I can trim it all up for Christmas.”

“Oh. My. Goodness. You have to see this.” Jen led Hana into a side room, which was filled with boxes and bags. “This is the Valtoria Christmas decorations collection. It was brought over from storage last week while you were away. And I’ve told them we’re going to decide how to decorate for Christmas this year!”

“My goodness...” Hana was amazed by the sheer amount of decorations around her. It was like a garden centre warehouse. “All these lights... and look at these beautiful baubles..”

“It just made me wonder though, how you decorate things for Christmas in Cordonia. Is it the same? Do you know?”

“I can’t imagine it being that different, Jen. But, you happen to be married to a real life Cordonian, remember? I’m sure he can tell you what you need! Where is he today, anyway?”

“Ah, something about his top secret project...” Jen laughed. “At least I know exactly where he is this time. Holed away in his little mancave room upstairs.”

“Do you think he’s rehearsing for one of these dance competitions he’s always going on about?” Hana suggested. She had a theory that Maxwell was writing a book, but she was well aware that whatever he was doing, he wanted to surprise them.

“Oh, do you have Dancing with the Stars here? Maybe he’s going to be the next judge!”

Hana giggled. “No, unfortunately there isn’t a Cordonian version. That would be his dream job, wouldn’t it?”

“Yup. Maybe that’s what he’s planning!”

They both laughed a little longer, until Hana picked up a bauble from one of the boxes. “Well, I wouldn’t think that the concept of trimming up is that different here from anywhere else. Big trees with baubles, lots of lights... the outside will look so pretty if you have lights in the trees on the driveway coming up to the bridge..”

“Lights over the bridge too..”

“Aw, definitely..”

“And then a big tree in the hallway, and another one in the ballroom.. is mistletoe a thing here? Because we definitely need that.”

“I think so. But I don’t think you need any. I think your Christmas kisses are guaranteed.”

“True, but I mean for everyone else. Is there anyone you might want to kiss under the mistletoe this year?”

Hana sighed. There was of course, but life wasn’t that simple. “I’ll be happy just to celebrate Christmas and New Year with my best friends in the world.” She let her eyes wander around the rest of the room, until they settled on something. “Oh!”

“What?”

“Look...” She led Jen to the back of the room, where fabric enveloped a shape by the wall. “You know what, I think there might be a piano under here..”

“Ohmygosh!” Jen lifted some ornaments off the top sheet, and together they unveiled what was underneath, an upright piano in a walnut finish. “You were right!”

Hana looked at Jen in excitement.

“Go on, play something!”

“Oh.. I wonder... it could be in need of a tune..”

“I didn’t even know it was here. But then, there’s rooms in here I still haven’t been in. Not that many.” She blushed a little. “But.. some.”

Hana pulled out a piano stool that had been placed underneath the keyboard, and sat gently on it. “Okay, I might be a little rusty.”

She closed her eyes and concentrated, and let her fingers do the playing. She played a soft, romantic piece, and was delighted to hear that the notes sounded perfectly in tune.

Afterwards, she looked up at Jen. “Sounds good, actually.”

“Oh Hana, you sound amazing. I knew you could play... but not like that.”

“Can you remember the time I played for you in Lythikos?”

“No...”

Hana giggled. “You’d had a lot to drink.. so it figures! You even played along with me.”

“Did I?”

“Yep. You didn’t do bad for a new player who’d drunk two bottles of wine to herself.”

Jen looked horrified. “That was.. *that* night?”

Hana looked curiously at her. “You did seem upset.”

“I was. I’d just realised that I was more interested in Maxwell than Rick.”

Hana laughed. “Oh, Jen. I know you had.”

“You.. what? Did I tell you?”

“Not exactly,” laughed Hana. “You were playing along with me, then you threw your face down on the keys, like this...” She demonstrated with a plonk. “And you just wailed. *Whyyyyyy did I tell him, Hana? Whyyyy? I’ve ruined evvvvvvverything.. He’s gonna haaaate me now....*”

Jen hid her head in her hands. “Oops..”

“I asked you who you were talking about, and what you’d done, but you wouldn’t tell me. Just kept apologising. And, it didn’t take a genius from that point to work out what you’d been referring to.”

“Huh. We never spoke of it again, you know. Well, not until we were together.”

“He probably thought you were having a joke with him.”

“I pretended I couldn’t remember saying it.”

“Oh, you sly thing.”

“Yeah. The next morning when he asked me if I could remember what had happened when we were dancing, I said I couldn’t remember a thing. Afterwards, when we spoke about it, he said he was so relieved when I said that because he had no idea what he was going to do!”

They laughed together a little longer, leaning on each other as they giggled.

Hana sat back up. “We should play together again. Do you want a go? And this time you could try not to have an emotional breakdown halfway through?”

“I’ll do my very best, Hana,” she saluted.

Hana began to play a tune, and gently pointed to the notes she wanted Jen to play each time she paused. Jen played them obediently, and together, they actually sounded pretty good.

Afterwards, Jen jumped up and clapped her hands. “I know! We should move this piano to your cottage!”

“Really?”

“Yes! We’ve got a grand piano in the ballroom, we don’t need two! It’s not like I can play, and.. well.. Maxwell says he can, but I think I’d much rather encourage him to concentrate on his guitar playing...”

“Maxwell plays guitar?” This was news to Hana.

“Ohhhh, yeah.” Although Jen was standing next to her, she was elsewhere. “Like a sexy naked rock god.”

“I’m sure.”

“Wait, I just said that out loud, didn’t I?”

“You did,” giggled Hana.

“Ohhhh...”

“Well, I’m sure your life is all the better for that prospect. But, really Jen, this is your piano..”

“Not anymore. I want you to have it. We’ll get it moved right away. I’ll get Christopher on the case.”

Hana smiled. “If you’re sure, Jen. And, thank you. I don’t deserve any of this.” She stood up.

Jen hugged her. “You deserve it all and more, Hana."

Breakdancing isn't in your job description

Maxwell had been out walking Chance one cold dark morning (ugh, December was miserable, Christmas couldn't come soon enough). On arriving back at the estate courtyard, he found a huge lorry parked up just the other side of the bridge.

"Whoooo, Chance. I think I know what this is..." Chance barked, and Maxwell rubbed his cold hands together. "C'mon buddy. Let's go and investigate."

As they got to the front door, they found Christopher talking to, presumably, the lorry driver and a couple of other guys who had come to help.

"Ah, Your Grace. These gentlemen are delivering the disco equipment and flooring for the ballroom annexe."

"Oh yeah..." Maxwell made finger guns at them all. "Gentlemen.. this way! This is where the magic is gonna happen.."

He was so happy that Jen had indulged his whim to install a disco in the ballroom.. or had it been her whim... whatever, it was going to make for some epic parties here. He was already putting together his NYE playlist, and selecting the cocktails that were going to be served up. It would effectively double up as their house-warming party, so it had to be immense.

As they all reached the ballroom, he heard a call from the stairway, and soon Jen was with them, in her black vest and jeans combo, a towel on her head. "I can't miss the installation of the legendary Beaumont-Jones disco!"

"Hey, sexy." He drew her in for a quick hug and a kiss. "I figured you could do with a lie-in. I didn't realise this was arriving *today*!"

She dropped her lip. "Well I *was* waiting for you to come and wake me up, but *then* I peeked out the window and saw the lorry...."

"Exciting!!" He jumped up and down.

"I know, I know!!" She joined him, putting her hands on his shoulders.

The men just looked at them as if they were weird.

Jen nodded, removing her hands from his shoulders and taking charge. "So the decks are going to go just over there... and the speakers here, and.... sort of here, I guess? Or do you do the flooring and the lasers first?"

"We've got it all planned out," one of the men said. "You can leave us to it. It'll probably take most of the day, but it'll be ready by late afternoon."

"Okay..." She looked at Maxwell, impressed. "We'll leave you guys to it! And.. thank you."

"I forgot about the lasers," he whimpered in excitement.

Together they headed into the drawing room.

“Do we get to test it out later on tonight?” he asked her.

“I would guess so.. we need to check it’s how we want it, don’t we?”

“Right. In that case, I’m off to find my laptop. You, my beloved, are in for a night of fun!”

Nine hours later and the inaugural disco was in full swing. Hana and Christopher were looking after the decks right now, obviously there was a good playlist set in place, and this Duke and Duchess were getting down.

“Been far too long since we did this,” Jen giggled, as they pulled apart for a moment.

“My thoughts exactly,” Maxwell declared. “And now we can do it whenever we like!”

The floor was so much fun, and he decided to jump from tile to tile just to see if it did really work how it was supposed to. It did, and every time he jumped onto one it lit up. “Imagine how cool this will look with a full dancefloor!”

“It looks pretty cool now..” The track changed. “Oh, tune!!!”

This was one of his staples, and after throwing her a sly look, he launched into one of his more audacious breakdancing moves, a deadman float followed by an elbow spin, and finished off with a windmill, to the soundtrack of the beats from the new speakers and Jen and Hana’s encouraging whoops. Eventually, his feet touched back down on the tiles.

“That was amazing! But I thought you were all out of practice?”

Hana raised her eyebrows. “What were we talking about the other day, Jen?”

Now he looked nervously between the two of them. “What *were* you two talking about the other day?”

Hana giggled. “That’s for us to know. But it may have involved a guitar..”

Jen looked mortified. “What Hana meant to say is that we thought maybe you had disappeared off to do some breakdancing practice.”

“Ha. Well. I can practice anytime now!” He struck a pose. “I can teach you some moves?”

“I think I prefer my own style of dancing,” Hana said politely.

“Yeah, I’m not so sure that’s my style either,” Jen said. “But I could watch you all night.”

“Christopher? Fancy some breakdance lessons?”

Christopher’s reaction was brilliant. “Ah, well, Your Grace... I am on duty.”

“You are! And your duty is to get down with the beat!”

Jen was creased up in laughter. “Don’t worry, Christopher. Breakdancing isn’t in your job description.”

“Ah, very good, Your Grace.” Christopher looked thankful for Jen’s input. “I think I’ll just stick to pressing the buttons..”

With that the track changed into a more mellow one, and Maxwell turned his attention back to his favourite person. “May I have this dance, Duchess Jen?”

She shook her head. “You, babe, are a man of so many talents, I just can’t keep up..”

He whisked her into his arms. “We both know you can.”

They waltzed together to the romantic song for a few minutes.

“We totally have to nail this for our party,” he said. “We need a move that’s gonna get everyone going *wow, what are they doing now?*”

“We could do a lift?”

“We could, but I thought I’d save that for Bertrand’s wedding reception. He’ll be horrified.”

She giggled. “Hana, any ideas?”

Hana came to join them. “I think you should go all out disco, to commemorate your new disco. We can all join in with that too.”

“Ooh, I like your thinking Hana! I can come down those steps all John Travolta...” He struck another pose. “And we can do Stayin’ Alive... Hey Christopher, drop a disco beat!”

“Uh..” Christopher scrambled to the laptop, but was obviously struggling.

Maxwell ran over and quickly put on the track he wanted. “Let’s go!” Switching the lasers onto another setting, and turning on the smoke machine, he ran back onto the dance floor to join Jen and Hana in some disco moves. This was an awesome night, he thought. Hey, they were having such a good time, that someone somewhere had to be having a crap night to make up for it.

Nobody's toy

“Get in here,” Olivia ordered Drake, as he wandered past the room where she tended to sit on an evening.

“A please would be polite,” he tutted, and made his way into the room, where she was sprawled on an ornate couch, watching some television footage of Rick and Hana at the Christmas Fete. “What are you watching this for? It was nearly a week ago.”

“What do you know about it?” She poured out two tumblers of whisky, and handed one to him. “I need to know everything.”

“Well, Rick just thought it would be nice for Hana to go with him, seeing as she was staying at the palace and all.”

“Oh really.” Olivia paused the television screen on an image of Rick and Hana standing together, exchanging an eager glance at each other. “Why didn’t she go home when everyone else did?”

“I don’t know, Olivia..”

Olivia narrowed her eyes. “You do.”

He sighed, and took a drink from his tumbler.

Olivia stood up, and poured the glass full again. “Tell me what you know.”

“Damn, Olivia. All I know is that she wanted to give Jones and Maxwell a bit of space, so she delayed her return to Valtoria.”

“I don’t buy it.”

“Well, that’s not my problem.” He drained his glass, and put it down on the table. “May I go now?”

“You’re going nowhere.” Olivia stood up and walked towards him, closing the door of the room behind him. “Look at this.”

She headed back to the table, and produced a copy of “Cordonia Now!” magazine from the shelf below it, throwing it in Drake’s face. “Explain this.”

The image of Rick and Hana that was on the television screen was also on the front of the magazine. The headline screamed, *King Rick’s next future Queen?*

Drake stared at it for a few seconds. “Oh.”

“Oh. So you didn’t know about this, I take it.”

He sighed, and threw down the magazine. He picked up his glass again, and refilled it.

Olivia retrieved the magazine. “Let me read you an extract. *Cordonia Now! was delighted to see that His Majesty King Rick had a new consort on his arm for the annual capital Christmas Fete. This important civic tradition has been attended by Kings, Queens and Crown Princes for many*

generations on an annual basis, and His Majesty's first appearance as King was made extra special by the presence of Lady Hana Lee, the daughter of Xinghai and Lorelei Lee. The two made a sweet couple and Cordonia Now! wonders if Lady Hana may have a chance to become Cordonia's next Queen."

As she continued to read, her tone became more and more bitter. *"King Rick of course has had a turbulent love life since ascending the throne, with his engagement to Countess Madeleine of Fydelia ending suddenly, following which of course he was romantically linked to Duchess Jen of Valtoria prior to her recent marriage to Lord Maxwell of Ramsford. Could it be third time lucky for our King?"*

She threw the magazine on the floor. "Ugh. It goes on. Full two page profile of Hana in there. They really seem to have got their teeth in."

"It's just the gutter press, Olivia. They don't know the truth." He sighed, drinking some more of his whisky. *Although, they weren't far out. Guessing Madeleine has been up to her old tricks and leaked this story.*

"I'm not so sure. No smoke without fire."

He took another swig of his whisky. "Anyway, what is it to you? What do you care?"

He looked at her, seeing pain on her face for a split second, then the smirk came to hide it. "I don't care."

"Olivia..."

"What your friend does is his business. I mean, he has to do what's best for Cordonia, right?"

"And you think he's moving in on Hana?"

She chinked her glass against his again. "Do you? And, what do you care? I sense you're rather protective of our little friend Lady Lee. I'm just trying to figure out why."

"Yeah. Good question."

"Hmm. Interesting answer."

She sat down again, and refilled her own glass. "Come on. Join me for another glass. Consider yourself off duty."

What the hell. He could handle Olivia Nevraakis.

He sat next to her, and she poured some more whisky. He reached for the magazine, and opened it up, reading some of the feature Olivia had mentioned. *Close friend of Duchess Jen of Valtoria, Lady Hana grew up in Shanghai but returned to Cordonia frequently with her mother, prominent noble Lady Lorelai Lee. Lady Hana was one of King Rick's suitors earlier in the year, and despite not being selected, it is believed that she has remained a close friend and confidante of the King. Recently she relocated to the Duke and Duchess of Valtoria's estate, but she has been spending more time in the capital recently."*

He groaned. "It was my idea for her to stay on. I thought Rick could use a friend about the palace while I'm away. So, if you want someone to blame, blame me."

“Why would I want someone to blame? It doesn’t bother me.”

“Olivia. We both know that isn’t true. And we both know what was going on between you and Rick the other week. He didn’t tell me, but I’ve known him long enough. Besides, the sneaking around the palace late at night gave it away. Followed by the interestingly timed divorce pow-wow up in Rick’s private quarters.”

She huffed, and threw her empty glass down. “It was just sex.”

“I don’t think so, Olivia. You two go back too far. It could never be just sex.”

She didn’t have a response to that, and filled up her glass again. Drake watched as she drew it to her mouth and her red lips parted to let the whisky in.

“Am I to understand that he didn’t want to continue your relationship?”

She laughed. “It was my decision, actually. I told him he needs to get over his last relationship before he starts a new one.”

“I would argue that if he’s fucking you he’s going in the right direction there,” he said, bluntly. He had to admit, she was pretty memorable. It had been a few years since their last encounter, but he wouldn’t say no if she put it on a plate again right now. *Wait, was that the whisky talking? Drake, get a grip.*

“But is he fucking her?”

“I don’t think so, Olivia.”

“You hope not, you mean.”

He held a hand up. “Okay, I hope not. I just don’t think that’s something that Hana would enter into lightly.”

“Oh. Right. So I’m a tramp but she’s virtuous. And that’s what this comes down to. I wouldn’t be a suitable Queen.”

He shook his head, and she kicked out at the table, making quite an impact with her seemingly delicate heeled shoe.

“I just.. why couldn’t he have chosen me to fill that role?”

“I don’t know, probably because you were here in Lythikos?”

“He could have called.”

“He’s probably trying to put some distance between you, if you rejected him as you say you did.”

“I said to him to come to me when he’s ready. Not go to whoever’s nearest at the time.”

“I think it’s debatable that he’s ready, Olivia.”

“I just.. ugh. Why would he start messing around with Hana when he’s got someone who loves him?”

Interesting. “You definitely just admitted to me that you love him.”

“Dammit, Walker.” She put two hands around his neck. “Don’t repeat that to anyone.”

He wasn’t able to repeat anything in that chokehold, and he was relieved when she released him. “Aren’t I here for your protection or something? I don’t think you need me anymore. You’re quite capable of protecting yourself, as you’ve proved time and time again.”

“Oh, Drake. If only you knew.” Her hands were now on his shoulders, and she slid them down his arms, and onto his chest. “You’re here for my amusement, not my protection.”

“In that case I’m outta here. I’m nobody’s toy.”

“Oh, but you could be. We could play a lovely game together, Drake.”

He pushed her off and stood up. “Listen. If you must know, Madeleine is behind all this.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Of course she is. That meddling little bitch.”

“She’s putting pressure on Rick to produce an heir. Putting ideas in his head. I don’t know what he feels for Hana, Olivia. If he feels anything. But he needs a strategy. And I’m now wondering if he’s feeling Hana might be a safer option. No emotions involved; no divorce necessary.”

“You’re right,” Olivia sighed, looking into the distance. “I think you just landed the sword on the bullseye right there.”

“It’s not what you wanted to hear, is it?”

“No.”

He sighed, and sat back down next to her. “Get your divorce from Anton sorted, and see where things go from there.”

She looked across at him. “I mean, Hana. She could probably wipe the floor with me at most things. But there’s one thing she could never compete with me at.” She stood up and, placing both hands behind her back, unzipped her little red dress, and let it fall to the floor.

Drake looked at her, agog. She was completely naked except for her shoes and her jewellery. He felt little Drake registering an active interest from inside his trousers. *No, little Drake. Behave.*

“Something wrong, Drake?” She grinned at him, and walked towards him. “You could never say no when it came to it. And I’m willing to bet you’ve got a lot of pent-up feelings in there you need to let out. I’m game if you are.”

She wasn’t wrong about that, but he had some semblance of restraint left in him. “Olivia…”

She landed in his lap, legs over the arms of his chair. “Oh, come on. I already feel so worthless. You wouldn’t reject me too, would you?”

“Rick didn’t reject you, Olivia,” he panted, as she writhed against him, her ample breasts brushing against his denim shirt. “You chose to come back here. You rejected him.”

She let down her red hair and shook it over her shoulders, and it was at this point that his defences turned to mush. He kissed her furiously, and pushed her down onto the couch next to him.

Olives and oranges

Maxwell was sitting in ‘bedroom 15’, the one with the bay window. The contents of this room were basically a colony of boxes, and had been ever since their trips to Ramsford and New York before the trial. Now that he’d sent off his final, final, final, even approved by the King of Cordonia version of *The Royal Romance* to his editor, who was just doing his final tweaks for him to read through and approve hopefully next week, he had found himself with not a lot to do today. Right now, Jen was meeting with the Duchy’s accountants for the first time, and experience had taught him that staying awake during such a meeting would be a challenge no matter how much coffee was available, so he decided to sit that one out. He’d asked Jen if she had any ideas for something he could help with around the house while she was occupied, and after some of his recent DIY disasters, she’d just smiled politely, patted his head fondly, and gone on her way.

This hadn’t deterred him too much, as he’d then had the superb idea of going through some of those boxes. By now it was late afternoon, and he’d managed to find homes for the contents of seven of them. All the little sentimental things like his school yearbooks and mixtapes and CDs and books and DVDs and photo albums and scrapbooks and sketchbooks and little notes from his mom and embarrassing attempts at poetry. He’d commandeered a small spare room for his guitar and his keyboard and other music related things that would still come in useful.

Now, there were only three boxes to go. But they were full of big things like speakers and decks and things that he probably didn’t need since the installation of the legendary disco. Maybe he’d try to flog them. He could maybe add anything he got for them to Bertrand’s *sorry for running off with our sponsored suitor* fund.

His eyes strayed to the pile of boxes on the far side of the room, that had come back from the New York storage centre. Jen had showed him some of the contents when they were there; he knew she wouldn’t mind him having a little browse through. He wandered over, and settled beside the first box he came to. There were lots of photo albums, he flicked through a few and his heart melted at baby pictures of his beautiful wife, a tiny, green eyed, fuzzy haired tot sandwiched between her parents (and if you squinted a little bit, her parents looked a little bit like him and Jen, if you ignored the cringeworthy 90’s fashions). They all looked so happy. It was something he didn’t really remember from his own early childhood, being that happy. He sighed.

Then he found a pile of schoolbooks, all labelled on the front in cursive handwriting.

Jennifer Jones

This immediately confused him. He’d never heard Jen refer to herself as Jennifer before. I mean, it made sense, but on her wedding certificate she was Jen... wait, on her *passport* she was Jen. Well, her secret was out. A sly grin crept across his face. Clearly she wasn’t keen on her full name. This was an excellent opportunity for him to pull a rabbit out of a hat. He’d obviously have to savour it for when it would have the most comedic impact.

“What you doing, babe?”

“Yikes!” His head swerved around to see her watching him from the door. “You crept up far too quietly! Look...” He sprung to his feet, pointing to the boxes on the other side of the room, and sang. “Today is the day when ten became three...”

She raised her eyebrows approvingly. “You have been working hard. Although if I open my drawers in the bedroom and find the greatest hits of Celine Dion nestled in with my panties, I won’t be impressed..”

“Have faith, my dear wife, all personal items have been stored appropriately.” He kissed her on the cheek. “And you may or may not have just caught me sneaking another look at your baby pictures, and can I say, you were an *adorable* infant..”

“You can,” she said with a beam.

He picked up the album and opened it up. “Just look at those chubby ‘lil cheeks! What a cutie..”

She looked at him hopefully. “Feeling broody are we?”

He gulped, and put the album back. Maaaybe. “Aaaanyway. How was your extremely boring accounts meeting?”

“Oh, it was anything but boring. Quite fascinating actually. I never realised all the different sources of income the Duchy has. I definitely need to spend some time trying to figure out how I can help to grow the income. I’m sure there’s some things we can both get involved in there. For instance. I knew about the olive grove, but did you know that we have an orange grove as well?”

“I did *not* know that.”

“Yeah. And I was thinking we should maybe open the menagerie to the public every now and then on the weekends. That would bring in a little bit extra. We wouldn’t have to charge a lot.”

He looked at her with concern. “Are you saying we need to do these things?” He’d always got the impression that Valtoria could sustain itself financially. After years of living off a duchy in debt, he’d found it quite refreshing not to have to count every euro the last few months. Perhaps things weren’t as good as he’d thought.

She looked back at him. “Well, not for the time being. But there needs to be a modernisation of the Duchy’s finances. It breaks even at the moment but that’s not enough. We don’t want to eat into the reserves. It wouldn’t be fair on our children..” Her expression suddenly changed, apprehension in her eyes. “I mean. If we were ever to.. I know you’re thinking about it, I’m not assuming...”

“I get it, Jen. What you’re saying is we can’t just whittle away the Valtoria fortune on our own whims. We need to make sure the Duchy brings in what we spend out.”

“Exactly. And we’ve got the capacity to do that. Duchy Valtoria’s not been run commercially for a generation or more. The accountants are really excited and willing to help. They’ve pointed me in the direction of some really helpful consultants.” She beamed. “And I just know you’ll be able to come up with some bright ideas. Which you can then splash all over Duchy Valtoria’s Pictagram page.”

“Well, you did approve my idea of charging people for having their photographs taken with my ancestor’s statue..”

“I can’t see the demand for that being *especially* high,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

“And why not?”

“If it was a statue of you and me, then maybe. *We’re* the celebrities here. We need to find a way of drawing people here. I mean, opening up the menagerie is a good idea, but..” She glanced down at her hands. “Ooh, I’ve got one. You could make some more twig jewellery, that we could sell for ridiculous amounts of money!”

“You little genius! I’ll definitely bear that in mind, Jen, when I get some free time. Also, we could hire out the disco! Hey, I could do DJ parties!”

She nodded. “Now we’re getting somewhere. While I mingle trying to sell olives and oranges to our citizens...”

“Oh man, I can picture you with a yoke over your back carrying them around the ballroom like an old farm lady...”

“Hey! Less of the old,” she said, but her eyes were encouraging him.

“Well, you will be one day.. and you’ll *always* be older than me..”

“Only by three months...”

“And a half. Three and a half...”

“Ooh, that all important half month..” She put her hands around his waist. “It just goes to show I’m the mature one in this marriage..”

“Says who?”

She looked at him, as if daring him to do something really immature, and hey, seeing as the opportunity was there...

Holding her gaze, he put one of his fingers in his mouth and sucked it for a moment.

“Maxwell? What are you doing?”

He withdrew the finger, still maintaining eye contact, and, grabbing her suddenly by the left shoulder, poked it in her right ear. “Wet willy!”

“EEEEWWW! You...” She squirmed away from him, giggling and squealing. “Just.. you.. wait...”

“Or what?”

“Or.. I’ll...” She started to tickle him furiously around the waist.

“You’ll.. ahha.. tickle... hee... me to death.. fffff...?” He shook his head as she paused, her hands on his hips, waiting for his next move. “Well it’s a good job I haven’t forgotten all those self-defence moves that Mara taught us... ha!”

He pushed into her with his arms and let his leg trail between hers to trip her, and she lost her balance momentarily, but didn’t fall completely.

“Hey! Oh, I can do better than that....” Now she pulled him into the starting position for the Cordonian Waltz, her eyes alight with mischief.

“Oh, we’re waltzing are we?”

“Yep, and I’m going to do what I did the very first time...”

“Fall in love with me?” He waggled his eyebrows at her in an attempt to be seductive.

“No not that, I meant stand on your FOOT!!”

OWWWWWWW... She proper stomped on it too. Next thing he knew, before he even had the chance to shout out in pain, she’d turned on her heels to run out of the room. With any luck, in the direction of their bedroom.

He ran after her, calling her from a few steps behind. “Where are you going, *Jennifer*?”

She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him. Her expression had dramatically changed.

“What did you just say?” She looked pale, almost as if she’d seen a ghost.

“Er...” What was his best way of getting out of this? He smiled what he hoped was an innocent smile. “I.. didn’t say anything!”

“No, you said...”

“Nope. Didn’t say anything. You imagined it. It was all in your head.”

He’d never seen the resulting look on her face before, and he never wanted to again. She then ran off down the corridor, leaving him in his tracks, confused. *Whoa. I figured she didn’t like her full name. Clearly she hates it. Well done Maxwell, how to kill a moment: Volume Two.*

He sighed, and wandered slowly in her direction. “Jen... wait up.. I’m sorry...”

But she wasn’t in the bedroom, which was where he had expected her to be. She wasn’t in the bathroom either. Or bedroom twelve. Or on the balcony. In fact, she wasn’t in any of the rooms she usually went to when she was sulking.

Puzzled, he headed down the stairs, where Christopher was just seeing some men in suits out of the main door. Presumably, they were the accountants who Jen had just met with. He stood and waited for a moment.

Christopher paused. “Ah, gentlemen, before you leave, you *must* meet the Duke of Valtoria. Your Grace, this is Mr Holmes, and this is Mr Ramsey. They are the Duchy accountants.”

“Great to meet you,” he said, extending his arm hopefully.

“His Grace is the younger brother of the esteemed Duke of Ramsford,” Christopher said with a smug grin.

“Your Grace,” said Mr Holmes, accepting the handshake. “But shouldn’t I be bowing..?”

Christopher nodded, with an exasperated sigh.

“Oh God no. You don’t need to bow to me. Just consider me and Jen to be regular clients of yours.”

Mr Ramsey was next to shake his hand. “Very pleased to meet you, Your Grace. Your wife has some real enthusiasm to turn this place around. She seemed confident that the two of you could come up with some great ideas to modernise the estate.”

“Yes, we were just talking about that.. until she ran off... have you seen her, Christopher?”

“I have a feeling she did just come back downstairs,” Christopher commented, looking behind him.

“Yes, I did just see Her Grace heading in that direction,” Mr Holmes commented. “She looked as if she was in a hurry.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

He wandered down the hall, into the ballroom, and still drew a blank. She wasn't in the drawing room, or the study where he found Chance curled up asleep, or the dining room. He even looked in the kitchen. *Oh oh. I've really upset her, haven't I?*

He pulled out his phone and contemplated sending her a message, but decided instead to call her. He didn't think she'd answer, but at least he might hear her phone ring if she was in close proximity. After a few seconds, he heard the faint recording of his own voice that he'd made for her to use as a personalised ringtone. “Pick up, little blossom. It's me, your beloved and extremely talented husband.. I mean it Jen, pick up, or I'm going to start singing...” He headed towards the sound of his own melodic crooning, but soon realised that she'd left her phone in Bedroom 15. *Crap.*

Hana. She'd probably gone to Hana's. He'd almost forgotten Hana was back.

He scooted back downstairs, out of the door, and round the estate grounds. But before long he noticed an important looking car outside Hana's cottage, and there was a man standing by her front door. A familiar looking man. *Wait, wasn't that..*

“Bastien? What are you.. doing here?”

Second opinions

“You have a lovely home here, Hana,” Rick said, looking around from where he was seated in the living room of Hana’s cottage, where she had a small table against the wall.

“Thanks,” Hana called through from the kitchen, where she was making drinks. “It’s certainly modest compared to the palace, even to the rest of the manor house. But Jen and Maxwell have been so kind. They’ve found me furniture and helped me decorate; even given me that lovely piano you can see on the back wall.”

“I am sure if fortunes were reversed, you would have done the same for them,” Rick said, looking at the small table and noticing that three people could fit around it. “Do they visit you often?”

“Oh yes. Sometimes we eat together here, if they fancy something a little more homely.” Hana brought two mugs of hot chocolate to the table and tentatively placed one down in front of Rick. “Here.”

“Thank you.” He looked directly at her, trying to convey his regret with his eyes.

She took the seat opposite him and looked back at him just as intently. “I’m listening, Rick. What have you come here to say?”

“Firstly, I wanted to apologise for the way I behaved last week when you were staying at the palace,” he said. “I may have said or done things that were inappropriate or that unsettled you, and if that is the case, I am truly sorry.”

She nodded. “Has Maxwell spoken to you? Or Jen?”

“No. I have just taken some time to reflect on the events of last week, and I regret some of the things I may have said and the way I behaved. The truth is, Hana, that I have been under considerable pressure recently.”

Her brown eyes softened. “Do you want to talk about that?”

“I feel it would be useful, yes.” He took a sip of his hot chocolate. “As you know, the expectation is that a Cordonian ruler is engaged to be married before ascension. With my engagement now broken off, I am not breaking any rules. But there is pressure on me to secure another engagement, in order to secure a heir.”

“I am well aware, Rick.”

“Madeleine spoke to me while you were at the palace. She suggested that you would be a suitable candidate, and I have to say, I thought about her advice quite carefully. I decided to test the water.”

Hana’s eyes were wide. “I see.”

“At first I wondered if you might be amenable to an arrangement. But, giving it some more thought, and having discussed it further with relevant persons, I realised that you were unlikely to want to marry me other than for romantic reasons, given your recent history and mine. So I then

thought about whether, if we did things together, we might grow to have feelings for each other. And it was for that reason that I invited you to be my consort for the Christmas Fete.”

Hana said nothing, just took a mouthful of her drink, and waited for him to continue.

“I very much enjoyed your company that afternoon. And I would probably have invited you to further engagements. But I can only deduce from the fact that you made the decision to return to Valtoria that evening, you did not draw the same enjoyment from the event.”

She shook her head. “It just felt... unnatural, Rick. I’m sorry. It felt forced and awkward. Had we had the others with us, it would have been fine. But.. you must have seen the way the press jumped to conclusions by now.”

He nodded. “Madeleine brought it to my attention yesterday. I think it was only then that I realised how inappropriate it had been to invite you. I really am sorry, Hana.”

“I appreciate and accept your apology, Rick.” She smiled.

“Would you have any advice for me in this situation?” he asked her.

She looked a little startled at first, then composed herself. “I would like to think that you and I will both, in good time, find happiness with a partner who we love.”

“I share that hope. But I may not have the luxury of time to find that partner.”

She reached out a hand and placed it on his arm. “Rick, I’m pretty good at picking up mutual attractions between people. I noticed it between Jen and Maxwell long before they did. And now, I notice it between you and Olivia.”

He sighed. “Olivia and I... our relationship is complicated.”

“Perhaps. But it is something you can work on. The attraction is there. You can’t manufacture that part. I suppose her marital status is part of the problem?”

“Correct. But that’s only part of it.”

“Are you joining us in Lythikos for Christmas? If you are, you may well get a chance to talk things through with her.”

“I plan to. And yes, I will take that opportunity. Thank you, Hana. I appreciate your advice. Although Madeleine is a useful resource to me, I feel that second opinions are important.”

“Rick, your friends, the other nobles, we’re all here. You can call on us whenever you need guidance. Be it personal, or in your role. You don’t have to do it all by yourself.”

This comment made Rick sit up in his seat and think for a moment. She had a very good point, and if he could formalise this somehow, it could be very valuable to him indeed. Perhaps a Royal Council of allies and advisors? It had been done before; although not in his lifetime, his father had always been keen to make decisions by himself, certainly in the latter part of his reign. Rick decided he would seek Madeleine’s views on such an arrangement.

“I hope you can find some sort of solution. I appreciate the main difficulty you have is securing an heir to the throne. Are there any other ways you can do that, other than the obvious?”

He sighed. “Not easily, no. There is a way that an heir can be appointed, rather than born. But the criteria for such an heir is very limited, and I don’t have the power to make changes to the criteria that will apply under my reign.”

“Can I ask what they are?”

“I can only suppose that the criteria have been set in case of infertility problems, in circumstances where the King would have to adopt. In any case, an heir can be appointed, but it would have to be an infant child less than six months old on the day of their anointment.”

“Ah.” Hana tutted. “A shame Bartie is a little too old. I am sure Bertrand would have been happy to help out. I imagine this is only until you have your own children?”

“I would have to check that. I am not sure in any case that Bartie would have been eligible, given that his parents are unmarried.”

“You never know, Rick. There may be other opportunities that arise.” Hana looked around nervously.

Of course. Jen and Maxwell will probably have children...

Why had I never thought of that?

But.. how would that appear? It might raise more questions than it answers.

“Rick?”

“Ah, just thinking,” he explained. It would not be appropriate for him to share his thoughts on this matter with her; Madeleine would have to be consulted on this too. “You have given me much food for thought, Hana. I appreciate it.”

“I have something for you,” she said. “One moment.”

She got up, and walked across the room, reaching behind the sofa. “Here.”

She came over with a canvas sketch. It was a portrait of him, he soon realised it was the piece she’d been working on at the palace.

“Hana, this is... quite something.” He had to admit, it was not only a very good likeness, but rather flattering.

“I hope you like it. Just a little gift to say how much I appreciate what you do for me, for us all. To celebrate our friendship.”

“I do, Hana. I will find a suitable home for it in the palace. Thank you.” He placed it against the wall next to him.

There was a knock on the door, and they both looked up curiously. At that, Bastien came through it, followed by Maxwell.

“Your Majesty. Lady Hana. Duke Maxwell to see you.”

Rick stood up to greet Maxwell. “How are you?”

“Ah, not all that great right this minute to be honest.. but forget about me, what brings *you* here?”
He hugged Rick as Bastien left the cottage to stand guard again.

“I needed Hana’s advice on a couple of important matters,” Rick said, as they both sat down at the table with Hana. “And I’m pleased to say that I think it’s been worthwhile. Thank you, Hana.”

He noticed Maxwell and Hana exchange looks; Maxwell looked a little wary, Hana shot him a look to reassure him that she had everything under control.

“Great! Is Jen here with you too?”

“No,” Rick said.

“Oh. Have you seen her this afternoon?”

“Not at all.”

Maxwell started swaying from side to side. “Oh. Okay. I was kinda hoping she’d be here..”

Hana was seated next to Maxwell and took his hand. “Hey, what’s happened?”

“Oh... I don’t know, Hana. She just went off, and I don’t really know why. We were just messing about, and I.. So I found some stuff that she brought back from New York with her name on.. did you know her name was actually Jennifer?”

“No,” Hana said, shaking her head. “But it’s not exactly a surprise.”

“She’s always been just Jen. Jen on her passport. Jen on her credit card. Jen on our marriage certificate.” He sighed. “Anyway we were just messing about and I threw a Jennifer in and she freaked. She went off and.. well, I don’t know where she’s gone. I’ve looked everywhere. I really hoped she would be here.”

“Have you looked in all the bedrooms, bathrooms, the duchy boutique?” Hana suggested.

“Yep. Searched *everywhere*. Welp, I know how she must have felt when I went off now. I’m so worried about her.”

“She’ll want you to find her, Maxwell,” said Rick reassuringly. “Do you want me and Hana to help you look for her?”

“I’m not sure you’ll be any help,” Maxwell sighed, running his fingers through his hair. “Unless you know the location of all the secret passages in the manor..”

“That’s it!” Hana jumped up. “I don’t know them all, but I know one! Follow me.”

She led the way out of the cottage, flanked by Rick and Maxwell. Naturally, Bastien followed them, along with a number of other members of the King’s Guard.

As they trailed into the entrance hall of Jen and Maxwell’s home, Rick noticed a tall, thin man running towards them, flustered.

“Your Majesty.” He bowed triumphantly. “I apologise. I had no idea you were visiting the manor today. Her Grace never tells me anything.”

“Please, I have arrived unannounced. No apologies are necessary.”

Maxwell did the honours. “Rick, this is Christopher, our new major-domo. Christopher, this is Rick, our..”

“I know my King,” Christopher said, starry eyed. “An honour to meet you, Your Majesty. Can I do anything to assist your visit?”

“What do you know about the secret passages here?” Hana asked him.

“I understand the need to keep them secret,” Christopher informed her.

“What, even to me?” Maxwell said, impatiently.

“Very well, Your Grace. There are three secret passages in the house. I can show you where they are.”

“There’s one leading from the ballroom, right?” Hana said.

“Correct.”

“I’ve been down that one before,” Hana explained. “On the night of the lantern festival. I think we should try that one first.”

Maxwell nodded. “Thanks, Hana. Thanks, Rick. I think I’ll do this on my own.”

“Of course.”

They reached one of the ballroom walls. Rick looked around, he couldn’t help but notice little changes since the last time they were here, not least that a disco and dancefloor had been installed. It didn’t take a genius to figure out whose idea that must have been.

Christopher put some pressure on one of the wall panels, and a gap appeared.

“Woah!” Maxwell jumped back. “So cool. So cool!”

“Yeah,” Hana agreed. “I think you’ll like this one. Hopefully, you’ll find Jen there.”

“Thanks,” Maxwell said. “You two, wait there. If I don’t come back straightaway, then make yourselves at home. Take Chance for a walk or something if you like. That was on my list of things to do this afternoon..”

“Okay,” Hana said. “Good luck.”

Maxwell disappeared down the passage, and the gap disappeared again.

“I’ll wait here to make sure he gets out okay,” Christopher stated.

“Thank you,” Rick said to him. “Perhaps we could do as Maxwell suggested and walk Chance? It’s a pleasant December afternoon out there.”

“Okay,” Hana said. “I’d like that. I’ll go and find him.”

She headed off down the corridor, leaving Rick with Christopher.

“So, Christopher. Are you enjoying your new role here?”

“Your Majesty. It is such an honour. I served Duchess Carmine for many years, under Gladys and her predecessors, including my parents. But she could be a difficult lady at times. It is a pleasure to serve the new Duke. I have always held the Great Houses of Cordonía in the highest esteem.”

Rick smiled a wry smile. “And the Duchess?”

“With respect, Your Majesty, I had my reservations when you appointed her. But she is a very inspiring lady. Just don’t tell her I told you that.”

Rick laughed. “You have my word, Christopher.”

Love you like that

Chapter Notes

Just a quick note to mention that this chapter contains a description of a toxic relationship in a character's past.

Where are you going, Jennifer?

You're mine, Jennifer.

Nobody loves you like me, Jennifer. Nobody ever will.

Nobody else could ever love you, Jennifer.

Nobody else will ever want you, Jennifer.

She could hear the voice so clearly in her head; almost two years had passed now since she had last heard it, but it still echoed in her mind when she doubted herself. If she was being completely honest, over the last nine months she'd very seldom heard it. But it was still there.

Wear this for me tonight, Jennifer. I love how sexy you look when you're wearing that.

Come on, Jennifer. You don't look as if you're having a good time. And that makes me look bad in front of all these people. And you don't want that, do you?

Jennifer, you need to smarten up, wear a little more make up. Lose some weight. You've lost the wow factor for me. You don't want me to lose interest, do you?

Don't cry, Jennifer. Nobody has any sympathy for you. Especially me. And I'm the only one here.

My Jennifer. Nobody else's Jennifer.

She shivered, rubbing her hands along her bare arms as she sat looking out over the dark lake from the gap in the stone wall.

It was cold down here in the undercroft, and it wasn't helping her state of mind. Remembering that cold, dark time in her life. The life she could still have been living if she hadn't grown stronger, and braver. Attributes that impressed her new friends and her soulmate, but she had never explained to any of them how her experiences had shaped her strength and her bravery. Perhaps it was time to let them in. Starting with Maxwell, of course.

She jumped as she heard a door slamming from above, followed by the sound of footsteps running downstairs, and she could just about make out the glow of a phone flashlight getting closer and brighter. She picked herself up, and locked eyes with her visitor as soon as he came into her line of sight.

“Jen. Oh, thank God you’re here.” He ran towards her and threw his arms around her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, not really knowing what to say.

“Listen, I’m sorry, I obviously said something really thoughtless, but.. you’ve got to believe me when I say I don’t really understand what, or why it upset you. I would never want to upset you like this. You’re my world.”

She sighed, looking up at him, feeling a hundred times better already.

He looked around, still holding her closely. “Hey, this is one cool secret passage! Look at that view...”

“Yeah. It’s a bit too dark to fully appreciate it right now, but when Hana and I came down here a couple of months ago when it was a bit lighter, it was amazing. I was going to wait until the summer to bring you down here. I was going to choose a warm night with a beautiful sunset, and I wasn’t going to let you go back up to the house until we’d made love at least three times.” She giggled.

It was dark, and his phone flashlight was behind her back with his hands, but she could just about make out his bewildered but impressed expression. “Uh, I’d like to think we could still do that...”

“Me too, Maxwell.”

“I’m happy to feign surprise when the time comes if it helps, of course.” He kissed her gently. “But first, I’d like to know why I upset you, so I can make sure I never do it again. If that’s okay.”

She nodded, and sat back down on the floor. He sat next to her, putting his phone on the floor between them, lighting up both of their faces just enough.

“It’s time I told you about Brad. You told me about Laura, after all.”

“Only if you want to tell me. No pressure.”

She took his hand. “I told you the bare bones of it after our first date in Castelsarrian, but I never told you the full story.”

“I’m listening.”

She sighed. “My life with him was not much fun. And my life afterwards.. was empty. Until I found you. Well, until you found me.”

“So I filled your life up?”

“In so many ways.” She leant into him. “But, you know all that. You don’t know about this.”

“I’d like to.”

She nodded, releasing his hand and fidgeting her two hands together, focussing on them. “I met Brad through Amy, my previous flatmate. When I went back to the US after travelling, I settled in New York because I’d always wanted to live there. Amy was there, she was one of my old

schoolfriends. She let me sleep on her sofa to start with. Eventually we got a two bed apartment. And it wasn't long after that that I met Brad. He was a colleague of Amy's."

"Was he older than you? Younger?"

"A year or two older. We went out, and for the first year, it was great. I thought I loved him. He proposed to me after a year. I said yes. I'd never felt happier." She looked at the floor. "But that was when things started to change."

"Change how?"

"Well, we moved in together at that point. And he started to take a real interest in who I was seeing, who I was talking to. He commented on conversations I was having with my friends, over social media or emails. I felt bad, so it was easier just to not have those conversations anymore. And so I started to drift apart from everyone." She sighed. "He didn't encourage me to make friends in my job. At the time I was working at a nightclub bar, and he'd often go along and sit there while I was working. I thought it was sweet at the time."

"I'm not picking up sweet vibes here, Jen."

"No. He was checking up on me. So I didn't make friends through work. And he didn't like it when I went out at all. It wasn't often, because I worked nights at weekends. But even if I went out for lunch with friends or something, he'd ask lots of questions. Make it seem like I was being unreasonable, going out without him."

"So you stopped doing that too."

"Mmhm. I just wanted to please him. He was so lovely to me most of the time then. It got to the stage where I would only go out with him and his friends. Because they were the only people I had left to go out with. I'd alienated everyone else."

"Even Amy?"

"To an extent, yeah. I did meet up with her, but only when Brad was with me too. He always said that she was his friend too and it wasn't fair for us to meet up separately, she'd want to see how happy we were."

"I see."

"But, we were happy then. At least, I thought we were. And once we got to that point, when I think we'd been together for a couple of years, things changed again. He kept telling me that he was all I had, and that Amy would leave me one day and go back to where she went to college to be with her college boyfriend, and then it would just be me and him and he'd look after me. *You need me Jennifer*, he'd say. He always called me Jennifer. Nobody else did really, it was his thing. And the way he said it.."

She shivered, and felt goosebumps forming on her arms again. As if on cue, Maxwell ran his warm hands over her arms, waiting for her to continue.

"I thought about changing my name after we split up, actually, but I didn't want to. My parents had always called me Jen. So, I decided to formally change my name to Jen. So.."

“Ahh. That’s why it’s Jen on your passport, and on our marriage certificate.”

“Bingo. Anyway, he was right in the end. I moved back in with Amy after we split up, but not long afterwards, Amy moved away to live with her boyfriend. She was under the impression that I would be fine, and I had to let her think that. I didn’t want her to stay just because of me.”

“Oh, Jen..”

“That was why I felt so lost when I moved in with Anita. It was like he’d proved me right.”

“But you’d split up by then?”

“Yeah.”

“So how had that happened?”

She took a deep breath. “So, we’d then been together for about five years. And all these things happened gradually, but in the end they were all happening. He’d gaslight me. making me feel as if I was going mad. That’s what threw me earlier.”

He scratched his head for a moment, and then it seemed to hit him. “*Oh*. Oh Jen, I didn’t know..”

“No. I get that. But that’s the sort of thing he’d say. You imagined it Jennifer. I didn’t say anything Jennifer. You’re losing it, Jennifer.”

He pulled his arms around her again, and waited for her to continue.

“He would get crazy jealous if I went anywhere without him, to the extent that he’d follow me to the bathroom when we were out. Then when we got home, he’d take my phone and look through my bag. He was rough with me..” She’d wanted to stay calm, but the tears were coming now. “He’d belittle me, all the time.”

“Did he hurt you? I mean.. physically?”

“Never. And he’d tell me that I was lucky that he wasn’t the sort of man who would do that to a woman.”

She heard his sharp exhale of breath. “Oh, he’s the lucky one, Jen. Lucky that I’m never ever likely to meet him and tell him what I think of him.” She couldn’t see his face, but she could hear from his voice that he was emotional too, and pictured his eyebrows making that (thankfully rare) Bertrandesque frown.

“But psychologically, yes. He did hurt me. He made digs at my weight, he told me I was funny looking. And he would always say that no-one else would ever love me like he did. And... I believed him, Maxwell.”

“Oh..” He pulled back, and she could see he was crying too.

She used a finger to dry one of his tears. “Hey, don’t cry. I’m okay now.”

“Couldn’t Amy see what was going on?”

“When I spoke to her later, she told me she’d known that something wasn’t quite right. But he’d distanced me from her, put a wedge between us.”

“How did you.. what did you do to get out of it?”

“I can’t even remember what it was that triggered it. I don’t think it was anything in particular. I’d just had enough. I had to get away. It was never going to get better. I contacted Amy. I rang her in the middle of the night when he was asleep. I begged her to come and get me, and she did. I went at three in the morning. When he woke up, I was gone.”

“What happened?”

“He was straight round Amy’s. We had to call the police to get rid of him. He said, *you’ll be back, Jennifer. Nobody will ever love you like I did, Jennifer.* I changed jobs, so he couldn’t find me at work. That was when I got the job in the bar where you found me. I met Daniel, made my first new friend, although it took me quite a while to feel confident enough to talk to him, befriend him. But when Amy moved away, I knew I had to move out of our flat, because I didn’t feel safe staying there, in case he ever came back.”

“I get that.”

“So, I went and got a new apartment with another roommate.”

“Neet.”

“Yep, Neet. I never saw Brad again after I moved there. I always worried I might. I guess he moved onto his next victim. I only wish I could help her.”

“C’mere.”

Again she sunk into him, burying her head against his shoulder, feeling safe and warm. There was no-one else she’d rather have told this story to, no-one else she’d rather be with right now.

“I’m sorry I never told you.”

“Hey. You’ve told me now. That’s the main thing. I’m proud of you. And I’m so, so honoured you trusted me with all this.”

“When you think you know someone, huh?”

“Hey, this doesn’t change the Jen I know. I knew all that spunk and wisdom and courage had to have been built on a difficult experience somewhere along the way. I hate that you had to go through all that, Jen.”

She nodded.

“He was right though.”

She looked curiously up at him. “Right about what?”

He moved backwards to look her in the eyes as he spoke. “That nobody will love you like he did ever again. A, because that wasn’t love, that was control. B, because you’ve got me now, and I’m

never going to love you like that. I'm going to love you the only way I know how. And, hopefully, you'll let me love you like that forever."

She sniffed, her tears of sadness turning into tears of happiness, knowing she loved this man as much as it was humanly possible to do so. "That *is* my plan."

A good surprise

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

Christmas was coming! It was never really a season that had filled him with excitement, but this year was different. This year, rather than spending it with a depressed Bertrand, he was going to be spending it with the love of his freaking life and all their amazing friends. So when he looked at the white twinkly Christmas lights lighting up the Valtoria estate, it brought a warmth to his heart that he couldn't remember feeling since he was a kid.

His Christmas shopping was all done, and he'd even splashed out on some festive squidwear for the occasion. He had so much to look forward to next year – awesome honeymoon, book launch, first time having birthday sex (somehow that had alluded him during his college years), all the anniversaries that were coming up (meeting Jen anniversary, kissing Jen anniversary, sexy-time anniversary, wedding anniversary..) and Stab Spectre 8 was coming out too. Yep, life was good.

As he strutted through the door of the mansion he noticed Christopher on a stepladder, taking measurements of the wall.

"Hey there, Chris."

"Your Grace." Christopher nearly fell off his ladder. "Back from your shopping trip?"

"Yup. My good lady wife about?"

"She and Lady Hana are in the ballroom, Your Grace, working on the indoor decorations."

"So what are you putting up there?"

Christopher looked guilty. "Ah, well, just.. measuring how much tinsel is required here."

"Riiight. I'll let you get back to it." He slid across the floor and launched himself into the ballroom.

"Honey, I'm hooooome!"

"Hey," he heard Jen call, she was standing on a chair putting baubles up on the tree. "Glad you're back, we need your help!"

He took it all in. "That is one big tree."

"Looks good, doesn't it?"

He had to say it did. It was in the back corner of the ballroom, with the lights all already in place, and surrounded by black bean-bag cushions to give a classy finish underneath.

“We could get some fake presents to go around the bottom if you like?” Jen had clearly followed his gaze.

“No, it looks awesome as it is. I thought you were putting the tree in the hallway though?”

“Well, I thought if we’re having the New Year’s Eve party in here, it would be nice to have it in here.”

“As ever, you are correct.” He kissed her on the cheek, and started to sing. “It’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas...”

“What did you think of the outside lights?” Hana asked him.

“Perfect. Like a little twinkly wonderland, where I still can’t believe I actually live.” He looked curiously at Jen. “What’s Christopher up to?”

“Measuring up in the hall,” Jen said.

“For what?”

Jen suddenly looked awkward. “For... tinsel?”

“Well, at least you two are consistent.” He winked at her. He knew she was up to something now. Well, if he could surprise her, maybe he’d let her surprise him with something too. That wouldn’t hurt. As long as it was a *good* surprise.

“I want to get all the decorations up today,” said Jen, getting down from the chair. “I need to write the Valtoria Christmas cards tomorrow, are you up for helping me with that?”

“Too right. What’s the point of being in charge of your own duchy if you can’t send out personalised Christmas cards. Hey wait... *that* is what we should do!”

Jen looked at him blankly.

“We need a nice Christmas picture of us for our Christmas cards! Otherwise, I bet it’s just gonna be a boring picture of the house, am I right?”

Jen strolled over to the box marked *Christmas cards* and looked inside. “Uh.. yeah. Pretty much.” She passed him a box.

“Ew. These are like from the 1960s or something. We can do better than that.”

“But we won’t have time to get new ones printed now, will we?”

“Of course we will. If we get a picture now, I’ll run it into Valtoria Town, there’s a printers there. I’m picturing a cute portrait of the two of us in matching Christmas pyjamas, tangled in fairy lights under the tree...”

“Aw, that would be so sweet,” Hana said. “You could see if you could get Chance in the picture too.”

“Wait, we don’t have matching Christmas pyjamas..”

He grinned from ear to ear. “We do now.” He ran back into the hallway, where his shopping bags were being brought in from the car, and grabbed one of them, rushing back into the ballroom. “Tadaaaaaah!”

Jen shook her head, but her grin was huge. “Looks like we’re doing this, Hana. Do you want to try taking the picture?”

“I can give it a go,” she said. “I’m not as good a photographer as Maxwell, but I did take a course of photography lessons as a child.”

“Of course you did,” sighed Jen.

“Cool! Did you get to develop negatives in dark rooms and stuff?” Maxwell wasn’t wasting any time, he took off his shirt ready to change into his new pyjamas.

“I certainly did,” Hana said. “Let me just go and get my camera while you.. yeah. While you do that.”

Jen giggled, walking towards him. “Gosh, you just don’t care who you strip off for anymore do you?”

“I like to think that I am more comfortable with my body than I was nine months ago, yes.”

“Can’t think why that would be.” With Hana now safely out of the room, she wrapped her arms around him and they kissed softly. She looked up and pointed. “Guess what I put up there.”

“Ooh, mistletoe..”

“So that means we better do that again, don’t you think?”

“You don’t have to ask me tw..”

She didn’t wait for him to finish, kissing him fully and passionately, wrapping her arms silkily around his waiting back. Mmmm.

He glanced behind them at the open ballroom doors, and pulled them shut, pushing a heavy box up against them, and throwing a seductive glance at his hot wife. “How long do you think it’ll take Hana to get her camera?”

Jen’s eyes lit up. “About four minutes... and we *do* need to be in our new pyjamas by the time she gets here..”

“That gives us three and a half minutes to get naked..” He let his hands wander to the bottom of her beige sweater and pulled it off quickly.

“Better get on with it then,” Jen sighed, scrabbling at his belt buckle. Soon they were both stripped down to their underwear, and he walked her back towards the tree. Her limbs soon tangled with his as he lowered her down so she was on her back on the stack of bean-bag cushions.

“Seems rude not to make use of these...” he commented, looking down at her adoringly.

“Mmm. Nice and comfy,” she admitted. “Could just sleep now..”

“No chance. Two minutes and forty-five seconds..”

“In that case..” With a wicked glint in her green eyes, she reached down and underneath his boxer shorts, doing exactly the right things. He couldn’t quite believe his luck; after twenty seconds or so he began to return the favour, revelling in her loud moans. It wasn’t long before she’d nudged his boxers further down, he kicked them off and wasted no more time; launching into her as she lifted up her legs and locked them against his, the two of them desperately seeking out the other’s satisfaction.

The urgency was such a turn-on and he soon heard her cry out distinctively and felt her contract against him, and the thought of how unbearably hot it felt to be able to give that to her, right here, right now on the ballroom floor, tipped him over too. He nibbled her shoulder to dampen his own groan, and she gasped again, pulling him tight as he was elsewhere for a minute and then returned to his senses, senses that were pretty unbeatable at the moment.

“Ooo. Where did *that* come from? Not that I’m complaining..” She licked her lips and kissed him gently.

He could hear footsteps from the other side of the door. “I may have to get back to you on that one because..”

At that there was a knock. “Hey, you two still in there?”

He put his hand over her mouth to muffle Jen’s giggles, and she very kindly returned the favour.

“Jen? Maxwell?” The door started to move, the box he’d barricaded it with jiggling about.

“One sec, Hana...” Jen called, grabbing her new pyjamas from where they’d been discarded and quickly putting them on. He did the same, suddenly glad he hadn’t chosen plain white pyjama bottoms (this pattern was forgiving). Then he kissed Jen on one of her flushed cheeks, and went to let Hana in.

“Hey, Hana. Oh, fancy me leaving that box there against the door so you couldn’t open it. How careless.”

Hana looked at him knowingly. “You two are just lucky I took my time. But, I have my camera now, so if you’re ready..”

Jen came running up to them, still glowing. “Hey, Hana.”

“This is perfect. You two have even perfected that just-out-of-bed look.” Hana winked at him.

“Come on. I know just what to do. You said fairy lights and Christmas tree? Okay, Maxwell you sit here just under the tree on that black bean-bag....”

He looked at Jen, and Jen looked back at him. If only Hana knew. Whatever, he did as he was told. “Nice and warm here for some reason..”

“Good. Now Jen you lean back into him... and the finishing touch..” She found a small string of coloured fairy lights from a nearby box, and first draped them around Jen’s neck, then her bare feet. It was adorable. “Perfect.”

“Hana, you’ve really got a talent for this..” Jen observed.

Hana stood back with her camera. “Say cheese...”

But there was no need for that. Maxwell’s giddy grin was fixed as Hana took the picture.

Appropriate and excusable

After they'd finally all collapsed into chairs around the rather impressive talon tree, Olivia's butler produced a tray holding six glasses of a warm, inviting beverage.

"This isn't some crazy concoction made out of talon sap, is it?" Maxwell piped up.

"Would you drink it if it was?" Rick asked him, clearly amused.

"Probably. Definitely. Yes."

Hana smiled, pleased that all was well between the two friends again.

"At least you'd die the way you lived," sneered Olivia. "Making questionable choices in pursuit of novelty."

Maxwell raised his eyebrows and looked to Jen for sympathy, as she snuggled reassuringly into him.

Hana took her glass. "Ooh, I can smell cloves!"

"It's mulled wine," Olivia said. "An old family recipe. I also have cranberry apple cider.."

"Mmm," Jen said, sampling the mulled wine.

"Delicious," agreed Rick.

Hana took a sip herself. It was indeed sumptuous, and warming after their adventure in the snow.

Jen perked up. "Now it's my turn to make a toast!"

"What to?" Olivia huffed. "My dismal attempt at a ball?"

"First, we should toast to Olivia," Jen said, standing up. "In the past year, you've proven your loyalty to Cordonias, and your strength as a leader again and again. And, I'm proud of you."

"Jen's right," Rick said, a respectful gaze in his eyes as he looked at Olivia. "No-one could question your character, Olivia."

"Judging by tonight's attendance, I think they already have.." Olivia looked away, sadness in her eyes.

Hana rose to her feet next. "Okay, but we don't. To Olivia!"

Maxwell joined her. "To Olivia! Still scary, but in a kind of endearing way."

Drake didn't get to his feet, or look at any of them. "To Olivia." Hana was definitely picking up on some awkwardness between Drake and Olivia today.

"And a toast to Lythikos," Jen went on. "This duchy has been through so much in the past year, but it's still here, thriving under a Nevraakis hand."

“Lythikos might have a dark history, but I have faith in its bright future,” agreed Rick.

“To Lythikos!” Hana added. “A winter wonderland!”

“And to its intimidating but surprisingly friendly people,” Maxwell sniggered.

Drake was still seated, unengaged. “To Lythikos.”

Olivia flushed as they all, with the exception of Drake, chimed their goblets against hers. “Thank you. Your support.. it’s more than I deserve. And I can only hope it will mean something to my people.”

“What can we expect from the rest of the holiday festivities?” Rick asked her.

“Tomorrow, assuming my own people decide to attend, we traditionally hold an outdoor festival. There’ll be the usual feats of strength, food and drink, music, games.. and..” Olivia stifled a yawn.

“Are you tired already?” Hana asked her.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” she sighed. “Worried about this party, I suppose.”

Rick put his hands on her shoulders protectively. “You should get some rest.”

Olivia looked at him softly. “I think I will.” She turned to the others. “As for the rest of you, I had the entire keep decorated when I still had hope of people actually attending my ball.. any of you might as well enjoy my efforts, if you’d like to.”

She headed up the stairs, leaving the five of them to enjoy the last few sips of their mulled wine. Hana noticed a couple of things that she found interesting; Rick was watching Olivia’s every move as she walked upstairs, while Drake was still looking at the floor.

“Who’s up for exploring, then?” Hana asked

“We do have permission!” Jen said, enthusiastically. Maxwell looked unusually thoughtful.

“I wouldn’t mind a look around,” Rick said.

Drake huffed dismissively. “Where do you even start in a place this big?”

“How about the keep’s infamous dungeon?” Hana suggested. She figured that would be fun; she was surprised Maxwell hadn’t already suggested it.

“Say no more,” said Drake, slamming his empty glass down on a table and standing up.

Hana led the way down the stone stairs that led down from the keep’s reception room. It was a windy stone staircase, and the corridors were lit by lights with a candle effect.

As she got to the bottom of the stairs, a long corridor lay to their right. “I think it must be a little further down here... any ideas?”

There was silence, although she was conscious that the others had followed her. She turned to see Drake and Rick.

“Oh, what’s happened to Jen and Maxwell...?”

Drake and Rick just looked back at her, and both shrugged nonchalantly.

“I thought Maxwell would have been all over this,” Hana said, disappointed.

“Huh. Guessing he’s planning on being all over something else,” Drake snapped.

“Oh. Okay. Well, he’s going to be so sorry he missed out on this little adventure,” Hana said, trying to steer their collective thoughts away from Drake’s suggestion. “Rick, have you been down here before? Do you know the way to the dungeon?”

“I do indeed,” Rick said. “And you’re quite right, it is in that direction. The other way leads to the armory.”

“Jen’s told me all about that,” Hana said. “Maybe we should go there next!”

“Oh? When did Jen get to see that?” Rick asked.

“On the unity tour,” Hana explained. “Remember when she and Maxwell disappeared for about three hours at the ball here? Apparently they were checking the armory out.”

“Of *course* they were,” Drake moaned.

“Well, let’s start with the dungeon.”

The three of them headed along the dark corridor in silence, Hana appreciative that Drake wasn’t too far behind her. Eventually they came to another area with the candle lights on the ancient walls; illuminating a path into the dungeon.

“Oh, wow...” Hana said. “Look at that.”

Rick nodded. “Quite a sight, isn’t it.

“Ooh, look at these cells!” Hana wandered into one of them. It was small but with two benches on the wall for basic seating.

“Comfortable accommodation for the middle ages,” Rick commented, sitting on one of the benches.

Drake sat on the other. “I might just sit here and wallow in self pity for a while.”

Hana looked carefully at him. “Well, I’m going to explore a bit more.”

She wandered out of the cell and around the edges of the dungeon, finding another row of cells behind the first, and tiptoeing in and out of each. As she headed into one of the cells around the other side, she was slightly taken aback to hear Rick and Drake’s voices, presumably through the wall, quite clearly. She decided to sit and listen.

“Listen, Drake, I know things have been a little awkward between us since we had that telephone conversation when you were last here. I could still tell something was bothering you when you returned, and it’s time we put it behind us.”

“Huh. It was two somethings, actually.”

“I’m listening.”

Hana wondered if it was right to eavesdrop. But if she could help them settle their differences by knowing more about their problems, perhaps it would be appropriate and excusable. Besides, she was curious.

“You know what I thought of your idea about getting involved with Hana. I didn’t like it one little bit, and I didn’t think it was the right thing for either of you.”

“And you were right,” Rick sighed. “Not too long before you returned, Hana left the palace and returned to Valtoria somewhat abruptly. I went over to talk to her, a few days later, to apologise for my approach. She had detected a change in the dynamics between the two of us, and she didn’t like it.”

“Hate to say I told you so, Rick..”

“I know, Drake.”

“That woman deserves so much better. She deserves someone who can love and cherish her.”

Hana tingled inside at his words.

“And so do you, Rick.”

“I am working on that,” Rick said, with what Hana could detect was an uplifting tone.

Drake made an exasperated sound. “I know. But listen. I have to tell you the other something.”

“Go on.”

“You know I left here abruptly, just as suddenly as Hana left the palace?”

“It wasn’t long afterwards, as I recall.”

“Correct. I told you it was because Olivia said she didn’t need me and she could look after herself.”

“Which she’s confirmed... I don’t follow?”

“It wasn’t just that reason, Rick.” He sighed. “She and I... *Hell*. It was once and it shouldn’t have fucking happened.”

Oh. No. No.

There was a long, long silence. Hana sat by the wall, shaking with.. not *anger*, that was the wrong emotion. It was something between shock and disappointment.

Eventually, Rick spoke. “I appreciate you telling me, Drake. I should have been more honest with you. Olivia and I slept together a few times, when you were all at the palace for the trial.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You *knew*?”

“Nobody told me. It was pretty obvious.”

“And you still...”

“Olivia seduced me, Rick. She got me punch drunk on whisky and she played me. She knew *exactly* what she was doing. And I’m guessing she’s going to delight in telling you all about it, the next time you and she get that close. She used me to make you jealous. And I had to tell you, before she did.”

There was further silence.

“I really do appreciate your honesty, Drake. Really. Thank you.”

“We good?”

There was no response. Hana sighed, sad for both of them. No doubt Rick would be seeing this as another friend choosing a woman over their friendship, although it was never as simple as that. Drake must be carrying an incredible guilt over what had happened; it seemed to Hana as if Olivia was the one in control of both Rick and Drake here.

She sat down, closing her eyes, trying not to picture the image in her head of Drake and Olivia together, in a candlelit room like this perhaps, writhing and moaning together. They would make a striking and fiery couple and she’d always known it. But she’d really thought there was hope for Rick and Olivia.

Perhaps there still was.

“Of course we’re good, Drake. You can’t undo what happened, but it doesn’t sound like you had much choice in the matter. I know only too well how... *persuasive* Olivia can be.”

Drake sniggered. “Well, if it helps, I’m convinced she only did it to get your attention. Like I said, I reckon she’ll be telling you all about it very soon.”

“I wonder whether I should tell her I know about what happened between you first. Why should she have the upper hand? Do I have your blessing to confront her? Tell her you told me?”

“Absolutely.”

Hana nodded. Those two were going to be alright. But individually, they were both going to need some support. And that was where she came in.

She left the cell and wandered back around to the entrance of the dungeon, eventually coming back to the original cell where she found them. “You two still in there?”

They both looked up at her, startled.

“Come on, there’s far more to see than the inside of one cell.”

Rick stood up. “Hana’s right. Come on, Drake, we should move on from here.”

“I’m all for it,” Drake said, and the two men exchanged a look of resolve. Hana beamed at them both.

No jurisdiction

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little bit NSFW.

Olivia was the last one of the group to bed on Christmas Eve. Of course the lovebirds had gone up first, sickeningly chasing each other up the stairs with their mutt in tow before ten. No doubt they'd be the last ones up tomorrow as well. She'd made sure to accommodate them in a far corner of the keep so as not to nauseate her other guests with their persistent friskiness. It was a wonder Jen wasn't pregnant yet.

Rick had said his goodnights at around eleven. At this time, Drake had just poured another whisky. Hana had seemed strangely determined to stay up until he'd finished it, and he wasn't in a rush. Olivia liked to think that Hana was paranoid about leaving her and Drake alone together. Whether Hana had got to know about their little bit of fun last month, Olivia wasn't sure. But it confirmed one thing, that the whole Hana and Rick thing had crashed and burned. Good.

When they all called it a night just before midnight, Olivia headed for her room and readied herself for bed. She found this whole thing so frustrating. Rick was just across the corridor; easily accessible and frustratingly seducible. She'd seen the looks he'd been throwing her over the last couple of days. It made a refreshing change from the incessant pining over Jen, which finally seemed to have ceased. But she had principles. She was waiting for him to come to her, when he was ready.

The whole Drake thing had been a bit of a disappointment all round. Frankly, she'd remembered him being a little more capable, although that was a little while ago and of course she'd had a number of utopian experiences with his best friend to draw on since then. She'd thought the frustration inside him might have intensified things, but it had seemingly just shortened the whole sorry episode. Or had that been the alcohol? Probably a combination.

But the real disappointment was the fact that there'd been no explosion between Rick and Drake as a result. Rick didn't seem to be displaying any signs of bitterness or jealousy towards his friend. He either didn't know, or he didn't care.

She just wanted him to care.

She got into bed and checked her weapons were in their usual places under the mattress and in the drawer, placing her emergency dagger on her bedside unit.

She sank into the mattress, and it wasn't long before thoughts of Rick's muscled body, considerable package and flawless technique flickered through her mind, making her draw her hands in a specific direction. Just knowing how exasperatingly close he was made it all the more intense as she writhed and sighed with pleasure, capturing the memory of their last encounter at the palace, remembering the things he said and the way he held her as she....

There was a gentle tap at the door.

Fuck. Olivia sat bolt upright, reaching for the dagger on her bedside with her other hand. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Olivia.”

Confused, she took a moment to get her breath back, released the dagger, wiped her other hand on the bed and stood up, pulling her nightdress into place. She made her way to the door and let him in.

“Not interrupting anything, I hope?”

She hoped she didn’t look too flushed. “Other than my beauty sleep?”

“Olivia, I heard you come up, so I know you’ve only just retired. I thought we might benefit from a.. discreet chat.” He was only wearing pyjama bottoms.

She huffed. “Well, you’d better come in.”

He sat down on the bed, she leant against the door, scoping him out.

“So what is this, you thought you’d play Santa or something? I told you, we don’t welcome him here.” She gestured to her bedside dagger. “We fight him.”

Rick chuckled. “That wasn’t my intention. I just wanted to speak to you. In private. We haven’t had the opportunity.”

Smart. She’d deliberately been avoiding having to spend any time alone with him, making sure there had always been someone else about. “I didn’t invite you here to get private time with you, Your Majesty.”

“That might not be so, but I feel the need to establish where we currently stand. I can’t continue with this evasiveness.” He sighed, putting his hands together. “Listen, Olivia, I know we’ve had a... tumultuous relationship across recent months. I appreciate you giving me time to work things out. And... I know about what happened between you and Drake. He told me.”

“When?”

“A few days ago. Drake, Hana and I went to investigate the keep dungeon, and while Hana was exploring, he and I were reconnecting. Things have been a little difficult between us recently.”

“I can imagine. Don’t think he took too kindly to you perving all over his precious Hana.”

Rick looked taken aback. “I’m sorry?”

She laughed. He might be the King, but he wasn’t as all-knowing and all-seeing as he liked to think he was. “Don’t tell me I’m wrong.”

“He wasn’t happy about the way I’d handled things, no. I’m sure his concern came as a mutual friend rather than anything more.”

“You think that if you like, Rick. I had similar concerns.”

“And I understand that, Olivia. Drake and I have spoken and we have come to the conclusion that your seduction of him might have been a retributive ploy to, well.. make me jealous.”

She didn’t have an answer for that, because it was the truth. She just looked at him.

“You didn’t need to do that. You know how I feel about you.”

“Do I?” She walked towards where he sat. “As I recall, the last time we spoke, you told me you were *fond* of me. Are you *fond* of me, Rick? Is that how you feel about me? And if not, how do I know..”

But somehow his lips were on hers, and his hands were on her back, pulling off her nightdress. She wasn’t going to protest, and she soon wrapped her naked legs around him, so that her toes touched behind him, and leaned back as he banqueted on her breasts.

When he finally pulled away, she looked intensely into his eyes. “You might be the King, but you have no jurisdiction over me. I’m in charge here. You know that.”

His face wore no expression. “I know that.”

“Good. Then lose the pyjama bottoms.”

She released her vice-like grip long enough for him to comply, then returned, letting their bodies connect, knowing he would provide the inevitable release that her earlier thoughts of him had triggered.

Maxwell's Christmas wish

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little bit NSFW.

Now with new art scene from @artbyainna!

As Jen came around from what had been a most satisfactory slumber, she thought she could hear the jingling of festive bells. Surely she had to be imagining it? She stretched, and opened one eye.

“Merry Christmas, little Christmas blossom,” she heard an unmistakable, gentle voice say.

She rolled over to face him, and giggled as she saw he was wearing a Santa hat. “Hey, you. Merry Christmas.” She leant in to kiss him, and realised afterwards that she hadn’t been imagining the jingling. “What have you got there..”

He grinned, and, shaking the little bell rattle he’d found from somewhere, he started to sing. “Sleigh bells ring, are you listening? In the lane, snow is glistening..”

She nudged him playfully. “Hey, Santa’s been, y’know. Look here.” She reached under the bed and produced a perfectly wrapped parcel. “Look who it’s for... oh.. it’s for the best boy in Valtoria, Chance Beaumont-Jones!” Jen wriggled her feet in an attempt to wake up their corgi who was asleep at the bottom of the bed, but it didn’t seem to have any effect. “Aw, maybe he can have it later..”

Maxwell looked at her with big eyes. “Any more presents under there?”

She reached playfully downwards. “No, definitely not. Oh.. hang on... what’s this one?” With a grin, she handed him a small, soft present.

He looked a little shocked. “Oh... I got you something too, but it’s... uh... I put it under the talon tree...”

She pulled a face. “Is that what I was supposed to do? Cordonian Christmases are all a bit new to me...”

“It doesn’t matter,” Maxwell said. “As long as you don’t mind waiting until later...”

She bit her lip. “Well, your main present is going to be waiting for you back in Valtoria. This is just a.. token, I guess?”

He took the present from her, and read the label. “To my seven pointed snowflake. From your little blossom.”

She blushed as he looked back up at her lovingly. With his eyes still on her, he unwrapped the gift, and then looked back down at what he was holding. “Oh. *Oh!* You actually do listen to the rubbish I come out with!” He held up the scarf proudly. “Where did you find this?”

“I may have had it specially made,” she giggled. “I knew it was top of your Christmas list. Well, it was before our conversation the other day.”

“I love it. And I love you, Jen Beaumont-Jones.” He wrapped the scarf around both of their necks. “Squid scarf forever. It’ll come in useful here today. It’s still so cold...”

“Well, maybe we can get wrapped up and take Chance for a walk if he ever wakes up, now the blizzard seems to have died down...”

“Or maybe we can just snuggle up here together a little bit longer,” he suggested.

“Hmm, I like your plan better than mine,” Jen conceded, resting her head on his chest. “So, here we are. Our first Christmas together.”



“I wonder what today will bring,” he said. “More swords? More secret passages? More.. tablecloths?”

“I don’t know,” Jen sighed. “It’ll certainly be different from what I’m used to. Last year I worked the morning shift, then spent the rest of the day slobbering out in my pyjamas eating chocolates and watching Christmas films.”

He pulled a face. “Last year... oh yeah, it was just before Bartie was born, and I was desperately trying to send parcels to Savannah during the Christmas rush.. it wasn’t ideal, and Bertrand really wondered who I was sending all these presents to..”

She giggled. “Aw. You sweetie. What did you tell him?”

“Nothing. I maintained an air of mystique.”

“What did you two do on Christmas Day then? Last year?”

He looked quite sad. “Not much. Played Scrabble...”

“*Scrabble*. I thought you two knew how to party. Did you have a big Christmas roast?”

“We had a modest one. You know how things were. We’d been to the palace a few days before for a big Christmas party. So, we weren’t all that hungry on the day.”

She ran a finger along his shoulder and arm. “You fibber. I bet you could’ve eaten a lot more than you did.”

“Ah, yeah, maybe. But, Bertrand wasn’t really in the mood for a party last year. I’m hoping he’s having a better time this year. It’s a shame they didn’t join us here though. It would’ve been nice to catch up with our little nephew on his first Christmas, don’t you think?”

Jen nodded happily. “Well, we’ll get to see him soon enough. Maybe we could call in on the way back through to Valtoria. But at least we’ll see them at the New Year party.”

“Yes. And we have so much to plan for that. We need to get back to Valtoria tomorrow so we have plenty of time to...”

“...slob about in our pyjamas and eat chocolate and watch Christmas films? Too right. That’s my plan for when we get home tomorrow until New Year. And I’m making it your plan too.” She pointed a finger at his chest. “You know it won’t take you long to plan a party. This little break has been nice, but we need some quality time...”

His face reddened slightly. “I won’t argue, but I think we’ve been quite resourceful at finding alone time opportunities whilst we’ve been here... I mean take the glamgloo, for example..”

Jen giggled. “I wish you’d seen Olivia’s face when she realised we’d both spent the night in there..”

“Honestly? I’m glad I didn’t.” He put his arms around her back. “I might have dropped down dead.”

Jen laughed. "If looks could kill!" She grinned giddily at him. "Going back to last Christmas though, I might have been lonely and pathetic, but I did make a Christmas wish. I wished that next year I'd be waking up on Christmas Day with the man of my dreams. So. Looks like Christmas wishes do come true, after all."

"You clearly don't dream as big as I do," he said modestly.

"Don't sell yourself short," she chided him, kissing him on the cheek. "I dreamed that I would find you. I just didn't know who you were, or where to find you then."

"And I found you!" He tickled her on the waist, and she squealed. "To save you the job."

"That you did."

He pulled her closer, and she closed her eyes in bliss as she listened to him speak. "Well you might have seen this coming, but last year I never even thought in my wildest dreams that the following Christmas I'd be waking up with the most beautiful sexy lady in my arms as I am this morning. I guess that Christmas wish must've come true, even if I wasn't brave enough to make it."

She kissed him softly. "What else would you have wished for, if you'd been brave enough?"

"Hmm, I guess my thoughts would have gone along the lines of what this beautiful sexy lady might want to do to me to help warm me up on a cold Christmas morning..."

She sniggered. "Perhaps you should ask her."

As she dipped under the sheets, she could still hear him speaking. "What would you like to.. *ooh*." The words dropped off at that point, but she had a feeling she'd just granted him his Christmas wish.

Appealing enough

"I thought Olivia would have been up and about by now," Hana commented, as she and Drake strode out of the keep for an early morning walk. They'd both been up for an hour, however none of their companions had yet emerged from their bedrooms, so they'd decided to go for a walk.

"Why's that?" Drake asked her.

"This evening's celebrations. I know it means a lot to her to make a success of it, after the disappointment of the first event."

Drake looked at his watch. "It is still only nine, Hana. I'm sure by the time we get back she'll be stomping around barking commands at all the staff." He had a theory that Olivia was probably in Rick's bed. Or, that Rick was in Olivia's. Whatever, it would only have been a matter of time before they stopped resisting each other. And it was Christmas, after all.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Hana sighed.

He looked at her carefully. She looked a little apprehensive.

"Everything okay, Hana? You seem.. preoccupied?"

"Oh, it's nothing really." She sighed. "It just feels a little odd, being away from my family for Christmas."

"Huh. Your first time?"

She nodded. "Yeah. And I know things are getting better between us now, but.. I still don't think I'd want to be spending Christmas with them, so I don't really know why that feels like such a bad thing." She looked at him. "What I'm trying to say is, Jen, Maxwell, Rick, Olivia, *you*. You're my family now, and I feel like I belong here. But, it still feels strange."

"Give them a call."

She nodded. "I will. They're probably eating dinner right now. I'll give it another hour."

As they walked through the snow, he looked at her again. He wasn't convinced that was it.

"Come on, Hana. This is me you're talking to. There's something else, isn't there."

She looked at him, her eyes darkening. "I know about what happened with you and Olivia the last time you were here."

The anger inside him built up very quickly. "That bitch! I can't believe she told you."

"No, wait, Drake. She didn't tell me."

His eyes flared and he huffed out a number of expletives. "So Rick told you."

She shook her head. "No. *You* told me. I overheard you and Rick talking in the dungeon."

“Shit.” Not good. “Hana.. I didn’t want you to find out like that.” He felt truly awful. He’d hoped he could protect her from finding out what had happened. He knew she had feelings for him, and he didn’t want to think of her hurting. “Still, it’s out there now.”

She nodded. “Do you feel better for it being out there?”

“Not really.”

She sighed. “So. She’d got you drunk. That was your justification.”

“There’s no justifying it, Hana. I was weak. She was lonely and desperate.”

“And you were lonely too.”

“Hell, I.. yes, Hana, I guess I was. I was lonely and frustrated and.. confused, and.. I think we both were. Which didn’t help.”

He watched as her gloved hands played with her long dark hair, which sat delectably underneath her matching bobble hat. “You don’t have to be lonely. None of us should be lonely. We all have each other.”

She made a good point, but it wasn’t that easy. “Well, it won’t happen again. I’m not gonna let myself get into that position again. If she still wants an extra security guard in the new year, she can hire another one. I’m going back to the capital with Rick, and I’m staying there.”

“Good,” Hana said firmly.

“You going back to Valtoria?”

“Yeah,” she said, thoughtful.

“How’s that going?”

“Fine,” she said. He threw a look of challenge at her. He wagered she felt like a prize gooseberry there sometimes.

“No, it is.. I mean, there are occasions when it can get a little.. awkward. But generally, it’s fine. They’re still Jen and Maxwell, even though they’re married now, you know.”

He wasn’t going to let her leave it there. “Examples, Hana. I know you have some.”

She smiled, and laughed. “A few weeks ago, we were trimming up the ballroom. They wanted a picture for their Christmas cards, so I offered to take one. I came back with my camera a couple of minutes later.. let’s just say the sounds coming from the ballroom suggested they were *occupied*.”

Drake cringed. “Woah... I know I said I wanted examples, but you could have spared me from *that* specific mental image..”

“I came back a few minutes later and it had gone quiet, so I knocked on the door. Made out I’d only just got back to spare their blushes. It was hard to hide mine though.”

“I’ve got to go to a party in that ballroom next week. I hope they’ve cleaned the floor in there.”

Hana giggled. "I'm certain Christopher will have seen to that. He's pretty thorough."

With the mood lightened, they looped to walk back in the direction of the keep.

"But, it's okay," she went on. "I like it there. I feel at home. I have my own space, and I get to spend lots of time with two of my best friends. You should visit more often, you know."

"If I hadn't been banished off to Lythikos. I would've, Hana."

"Well, we'll obviously see you at the New Year party, and then maybe you can come visit again?" She beamed at him. "My cottage always welcomes visitors. Perhaps you could come over when Jen and Maxwell are away on honeymoon?"

He nodded. "I'd like that, Hana. Maybe I could come and have a hot chocolate with you."

"There may be a bottle of whisky in the kitchen cupboard with your name on it."

"Damn, Hana, now you're talking. You suddenly made your invitation a hell of a lot more appealing." Although, if he was honest, it had already been appealing enough.

How the most beautiful things can bloom

“Hoo, mama. I am *stuffed*.” Maxwell threw himself down on one of the comfy sofas in the drawing room of the keep, after they’d all consumed an unfeasibly large but delicious Christmas dinner.

“Gonna need a whole new exercise plan in the New Year to get some of this timber off of me from all this fantastic festive food.”

“I don’t think you’ve got too much to worry about,” Hana commented, as Jen sat down beside him. “You strike me as one of those people who can eat anything and stay slim.”

“Nope,” Maxwell said, exchanging a look with Jen, who knew full well that Hana had made a rare misjudgement. “Any excesses have to be carefully contra’d out with additional dancing opportunities.”

“Yeah, Hana, you should have seen him when he was younger,” Drake commented. “Maxwell’s basically a fat kid hiding inside a thin man’s body.”

Hana shot a warning look at Drake, as Jen draped an arm around her husband. “Well, babe, I was thinking I should check out what I should do to help me lose some weight for our honeymoon. Maybe if I find something, like an exercise class or a plan, you could join me.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “Exercising with you, now you’re starting to make me think bad things.”

“Get a room you two,” Drake moaned. “Some of us are here to watch Rick’s speech. Where’s he got to, anyway?”

At that, Rick and Olivia walked into the room together, along with a member of Olivia’s house staff, who switched on a large television on the wall and began to search through channels.

“It’s time,” Jen said to Rick. “How are you feeling?”

Rick nodded. “Surprisingly calm.”

“I can’t wait,” Maxwell said, fidgeting about in his chair excitedly and tapping on Jen’s knee as she relaxed into him. “This has gotta be the *best* thing about being King, huh Rick?”

Rick sighed. “It’s a big responsibility, delivering a Christmas message to an entire nation...”

“Shhh,” said Olivia. “It’s starting.”

Rick appeared in front of them on the screen, accompanied by fading regal music. He was dressed informally, in an outfit similar to the one he was wearing right now, and standing in one of the palace drawing rooms.

“Twelve months ago, my father Constantine, delivered what was to be his final Christmas message to you. At the time, none of us, except perhaps him, had any idea that it would be his last message. This year has been one of great change for my family, and for Cordonian. And we have not met these changes without overcoming significant challenges.”

“Hear hear,” Olivia called out.

The video cut to an image of Rick and Constantine at the Royal Regatta, greeting the press and some of his suitors. Jen caught a glimpse of herself and Hana standing in the background. Rick’s voice narrated. “Over the social season, preparations for my reign were in full flow. My father was working hard to pass on all the wisdom and diplomacy he had obtained in serving as your King for four decades. And although I was sorry that he felt he had to stand down for health reasons, my duty to Cordonía enabled me to rise to the challenge.”

The next video was from the Coronation Ball; clearly after Jen had made her unplanned departure. A sombre looking Rick was accepting congratulations from various nobles, Madeleine smiling smugly on his arm. “My Coronation was a very proud event. And as soon as I was able to, I toured our kingdom to meet the people I seek to protect and serve, and visited our allies in other countries to reinforce the connections we share.”

“So, we’re not calling it the engagement tour anymore?” Maxwell asked. Jen prodded him.

The next image was from the Italian dinner, and immediately Jen was back in that restaurant, feeling all the things she’d been feeling that evening. She took Maxwell’s hand and squeezed it, as she watched the footage of Rick talking to Francesco and some other important looking people. Then, all of a sudden, they were back in New York, at *that* party, as Rick was greeting the dignitaries, and Jen was there and then as well, which was a much more welcome thought.

“Watch out for flying bruschetta...” Maxwell said nervously, and she kissed him on the cheek, wondering exactly where they’d been and what they’d been doing at the moment that this video footage was taken.

The camera panned back to Rick. “On my return to Cordonía, as you all know, we faced a string of terrorist attacks, which shook my family and friends, as well as all of you. We did not let them frighten us, and we continued with our plans.” The camera zoomed in to his defiant face. “And I would send this message to any others who might be tempted to strike at the heart of Cordonía. We will not let you win.”

Jen and Maxwell applauded at this point, and the others joined in, as Rick smiled slightly.

The next shot was from the gallery event in Castellsarrián, and while Jen caught a glimpse of herself and Drake looking at a painting in the background, Rick could be seen talking to Hakim and Joelle in the foreground. Again, Rick’s voice could be heard overhead. “We refused to allow the shadowy threats and underlying tension stop us from celebrating, and bringing unity to Cordonía.”

The camera panned back to Rick. “The second attack on the palace resulted in the death of my father.”

The next shot was one of Constantine’s funeral, and the dreadful image of Rick and Leo’s stricken faces at the head of the coffin as it made its way down the cathedral’s aisle could be seen again. “Had he not passed away from his injuries sustained that evening, it is still likely that he would not have been here today to hear me deliver my first Christmas message as your King,” Rick’s voice declared. “He was very unwell, and in some ways, his death came as a blessing. I refuse to let our enemies take any satisfaction in the outcomes of their actions.”

“Ouch,” Olivia said. “Well played, Rick.”

The camera cut back to Rick. “October brought a happier event, with the marriage of two of my closest friends.”

“Oooh, it’s us!” Maxwell squealed.

She smiled, and was delighted to see the next video sequence, footage of the two of them after the ceremony, kissing for the cameras then making their way through the crowds and into the waiting carriage. “Cordonia’s newest Duke and Duchess serve as a reminder of how the most beautiful things can bloom in the darkest, most difficult times.”

She turned to Rick, choked. He nodded back at her, as Maxwell celebrated.

“I’m on TV! I’m on TV! Uh... *we’re* on TV?”

The image was Rick again now. “On that very day, we caught and apprehended those responsible for the campaign of terror against Cordonia, and I am pleased to report that they have all now been charged and sentenced for their crimes. No leniency was shown.” He stood up and walked across the drawing room. “In summary, my first months as your monarch have been difficult for us all. But I could not have done what I have without the support of my close friends and fellow nobles. I cannot take all the credit for our emergence from the difficult days. Cordonia’s future is my priority right now, and I am aware that there is some speculation over the future of the monarchy, which I will seek to address in the next few months.”

Jen looked curiously around the room, noticing an awkward expression on Hana’s face.

“I will also continue to seek the support and the guidance of those around me in order to protect Cordonia and champion what is right. It is a different approach from that of my father, but I feel that it is the right thing for Cordonia. After all, I am here to serve you, not the nobility, not the wealthy. Each and every one of you watching this broadcast today. It is my honour, and my privilege. And I hope that I will do you proud in the years to come. Merry Christmas.”

As the credits began to roll, there was more applause, and Chance began to bark by way of appreciation too.

Rick smiled. “So, you liked it?”

“It was *wonderful*,” Hana said.

Jen was emotional. “Perfect.”

“I got chills, Rick. *Chills*,” Maxwell said, turning to face him.

“Not bad for a first attempt,” Drake pointed out.

Olivia crossed her legs haughtily. “It could have been improved with an acknowledgement to your other favourite Duchess, but other than that, it was wholly appropriate.”

“Thank you all,” Rick said. “I have to say, I’m relieved it has been broadcast now. It was a nerve-racking experience, writing and filming it, more so than I had envisaged.”

“Well, you did an awesome job,” Maxwell said. “I’m so, so proud to be your friend right now.”

Jen's curiosity was getting the better of her. "What was that you were saying about the future of the monarchy?"

"A reference to all the pressure he's under to choose a wife and start procreating," Olivia huffed.

Rick exchanged a glance with Olivia. "Yes, in part. But there is more to be discussed. A discussion for another day. Today is Christmas Day, and if I'm not mistaken, we have a Winter Ball to prepare for."

Olivia stood up. "You heard the man. Let's go and make a start. Hopefully, our guests will be arriving soon. Especially after that rousing message from their leader." Jen noticed her look fondly at Rick, then look away.

A fine specimen

“Okay... just keep going... a few more steps...” Jen was leading a blindfolded Maxwell into the entrance hall of Valtoria, and it was proving to be an amusing but satisfactory experience so far.

“This is so annoying! Now I know why you always want to peek...”

“There will be no peeking! Right, I just need you to wait here for a couple more minutes while I.. prepare something...” She laughed with the anticipation of his reaction. “Christopher will make sure you don’t look while I’m gone, won’t you, Christopher?”

Christopher had just appeared. “Your Graces. I trust you had an enjoyable Christmas break in Lythikos.”

“We did, Christopher, and as you can see, it’s time for Maxwell to see his Christmas present from me! So if you wouldn’t mind supervising him for a moment while I... deal with the final touches..” She looked at Christopher enquiringly.

“Ah. Something else came for you.....”

“Where is it?”

“Just in the first room on the left.”

“I’m on it,” said Jen, and dashed off in the direction Christopher had pointed, chuckling to herself. Sure enough, on arriving in the small room that Christopher used as an office type base, she spotted a parcel addressed to her. She ripped it open and let out a little shriek of glee. Closing the door of the room for a moment, she quickly changed outfits; the tights took a little while to negotiate, but her costume change was soon complete. There was no mirror in here, but she took a quick (s)elfie... yes, that was perfect.

She trotted out, making sure her hat was on straight, and tried not to giggle at Christopher’s reaction to her attire.

“Very good, Your Grace.”

“It is, isn’t it?” she said, doing a spin.

“Quite. Should I.. ah.. leave the two of you to it?”

She nodded. “Thanks, Christopher. I think Chance could do with a quick walk after being cooped up in the car all the way from Lythikos, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” said Christopher, bowing to them both and making himself scarce.

Jen giggled. “I love that he still bowed to you even though you can’t see him.”

“Wait, what’s that jingling sound?” Maxwell asked.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased.

“Yes, actually, I would, because I’m now getting a teensy bit impatient..”

“Babe, you were a teensy bit impatient ten minutes ago. You’re now at the stage where you probably can’t remember what patience feels like.” She leant in for a cheeky kiss. “Okay. Ready?”

“Uh, I could go for another one of those kisses first, if I’m completely honest..”

She obliged, allowing his hands to explore her a little as they kissed again.

“Hang on, what are you wearing?”

She laughed. “Go on. Have a look.”

He threw off the blindfold. “Oh my god, Jen. You actually..”

“Yup, I was straight on to Amazon after our picnic conversation,” she giggled. “Ta-dah. You now have your very own little Christmas elf!”

His face was a picture. “And somehow this prospect is even better than I imagined...”

She kissed him again, playfully, and laughed as he jingled the bell on the end of her hat. “Reminds me of the jester hat.”

She giggled, reminded of that day. “Aw. My court jester.”

“My Apple Queen,” he sighed. “I still don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“By being you,” she smiled.

“Well, this is a *great* present,” he said, his gaze on her costume still.

She laughed again. “I feel like we’ve had this exchange before, but *this* is not your present..”

“It’s not?”

“Nope. I just thought I’d dress up for the occasion. *That* is your present.” She pointed triumphantly to the massive fish tank on the back wall of the entrance hall which she had no idea how he hadn’t noticed yet.

He stared ahead for a few seconds. “You got me... a *squid*?”

“Yup! I know Chance is cute and all that, and Lenny and Lucy are fun, as are the peacocks.... But I just thought you should have one of these fellas to add to our menagerie. After all, this hallway has quite a House Beaumont theme to it already, don’t you think, with the statue, and the sword..”

He grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up, spinning her around furiously. “You. Are. The. Best. And. I. Love. You. So. Much!”

Giggling as he released her from the lift, she ended up collapsing into him as she reconnected with the ground, and they kissed again. She got the impression that he liked it.

When they finally drew back apart, he rushed over to the tank. “He’s a fine specimen!”

“He comes with very strict care instructions. But Christopher and his team have got all that covered. Obviously, it’s up to you if you want to help out with it all!”

“Has he got a name?”

“Nope, I thought you might like to do the honours there.”

“Can I put my squid statue that you got me from Lythikos in his tank to keep him company?”

“Uh... I guess so?”

“Can you imagine the look on everyone’s faces when they see him when they come to the party?”

“I’m sure you will have lots of fun showing him off to everyone..”

“You do realise that you’ve now completely upstaged my Christmas gifts to you, don’t you..?”

“Being married to you is the best gift any girl could ever have, Maxwell. I really mean that.”

He looked as if he was welling up. “This is...”

“Come here,” she said, dragging him into a warm and comforting hug. “Anyway, Christmas isn’t over yet... I’m sure you can show me just how grateful you are in other ways...”

“I’m suddenly really glad to be home,” he said. “Don’t get me wrong, I know we had some fun in Lythikos..”

She raised her eyebrows, memories of the fun they’d had on the vanity table in their guest room still refreshingly fresh in her mind.

“But I like having you all to myself.”

“Well, now we’re home, I thought we could have a couple of days just hanging out together upstairs in our new Christmas pyjamas, watching some Christmas movies...” She drew herself into him.

He looked at her as if in a trance. “Sounds... inviting....”

“And then I’m guessing you’ll want to get on with planning the New Year’s Eve party?”

“Oh! Yes! We need to make sure everything is perfect for that...” His revived expression soon transformed into a smirk. “But that can wait a few more days.”

“You know, I never used to know what to do with myself on these funny nothing days between Christmas and New Year,” Jen said. “But, this year, I’m *full* of ideas.”

Something comparable

Chapter Notes

Bonus mid-week chapter seeing as I'm off this week. (It's only short!)

“So what are we watching next?”

Jen had the TV remote in one hand, and an empty tub of cookie dough ice-cream in the other hand, and she had her legs stretched out with her bare feet resting on his knee.

They'd set this little room up as a lounging-around-in-your-pyjamas-to-watch-TV-and-eat-ice-cream-room especially for the purpose of watching Christmas films together, and he thought it was his favourite room yet. It was something they hadn't really got into the routine of doing so far because they'd only moved in about six weeks ago, and other evening pursuits had always seemed more pressing, but hey, there was no reason to assume they couldn't multitask from now on. Netflix and chill!

“Well, you know me so well, you've already chosen all my favourite Christmas films...”

“I don't think anyone would have to know you that well to guess that Elf would be your favourite Christmas film...” she sniggered. “I mean, you and Buddy are practically clones of each other.”

“Yeah, but Muppet Christmas Carol was a little less obvious...”

She giggled, shuffling up so she was closer to him, which was never a problem. “Let's have a flick through. Hmm. How about The Grinch?”

He pulled a face. “Are we talking Jim Carrey?”

“Nope. New cartoony one.”

“Oh god no. Next.”

She moved on. “A Christmas Prince?”

They looked at each other, and both started to laugh.

“Nah, I didn't think so either. I'd much rather have a Daily Duke.”

He had to grin. “Good to know.”

“Ooh. How about Love Actually.”

“Not seen that one...”

She sat up and looked at him in shock. “Ohmygod Maxwell. We need to correct this oversight immediately. You will *love* this one.”

“What’s it about?” He knew really.

She shook her head, and grinned back at him. “Love, actually.”

“Oh. Sounds like I could dig it if I was watching it with you.” He snuggled into her, breathing her in. She was his miracle.

“That’s settled then.” She hit the play button. “It’s about lots of couples falling in love. At Christmas.”

“Oh, it’s a romcom! Drake’s favourite movie genre!”

“Yeah, I’m sure Drake will be secretly all over this one. But I reckon you’ll like it too.”

“What’s not to like about hanging with you in my pyjamas watching Christmas films? It’s perfect.”

She lay back against him. “Ahhh. You know the only thing that could make this moment better? If I had a bag of Hershey’s miniatures to munch my way through. Damn, I miss those things.”

His moment had come. “Hold that thought. Maybe I can get you something comparable?”

“You can try, babe..”

He stood up and dashed out of the room for a moment, along the corridor to his writing room, and quickly went through the desk drawers. *Bingo*.

He headed back into the room, holding his bounty behind his back. Her eyes flickered away from the screen. “So what have I got?”

“Something... *comparable*.”

She paused the film. “Bring it.”

He paced over to her, slowly. “You have to ask nicely.”

She stood up, wrapping her arms around him and pulling him into a tasty kiss. But then, just too late, he realised that it was a ruse to feel what he had in his hands behind his back...

“A-ha!” She pulled away, although her hands were still behind his back. “You.. how did you... how did you know?” She was unwrapping the bag already. “Oh, you are such a clever, clever husband..”

“You told me they were your favourites when we were in New York. You said you liked eating them at Christmas in front of Christmas movies. But you *didn’t buy any*. How could I possibly not sneak back to the store when you were snoozing the next morning and buy a stockpile?”

“I have never loved you more than I love you right now, Maxwell Percival Beaumont.” She removed one of her hands from behind his back, having obtained a chocolate, which she now placed in her mouth. Probably not *intentionally* seductively, but this was Jen we were talking about.

I never thought

“Can I open the doors now?”

Maxwell was hopping around impatiently from foot to foot, wired like a strip of sparkly Christmas lights – in fact, he *did* have a strip of sparkly Christmas lights around his neck. He was wearing his squid suit (and how could she possibly overrule that, the memories from the last time he’d worn it were far too delicious) and a gigantic grin.

She turned to Hana, who was standing on a chair putting the last of the decorations up. “Ready?”

“I think so, if the welcome drinks are all ready?” Hana gestured towards the door.

Jen marched across to where Christopher was preparing the welcome drinks. “Ready?”

“Yes, Your Grace...”

“Don’t forget to leave a few bottles back for Maxwell’s party tricks at midnight..”

“Noted, Your Grace.”

“Okay then. Music?” She turned back to Maxwell.

“Oh! Crap!” Maxwell hare-tailed it in the direction of the disco room, in order to commence his playlist. “Knew I forgot something..”

Jen giggled, as Hana stepped down. “Thanks for your help. Hana. I think the room looks great.”

“Hopefully everyone will agree with you,” Hana said with a smile, moving the chair back to its place by a table. “The buffet table is all decorated ready for the food later too. And you look stunning in that blue dress, Jen..”

She smiled. “Well, it’s my Valtoria dress. It reminds me of our first night here, so it seemed appropriate. Plus, it matches his suit, so..”

Loud music began to pump into the room.

Jen exchanged a glance with Hana. “Now it’s a party,” she said quietly, knowing this was coming,

Maxwell reappeared. “Now it’s a party!”

Hana laughed.

“Can I? Can I?”

“What time is it, Christopher?” Jen called.

“Eight thirty-one,” Christopher stated.

“Then be my guest,” Jen said to Maxwell, gesturing to the door.

“Woo-hoo!” He headed in that direction, and she smiled fondly after him. She knew how excited he was about tonight’s party, so she was going to leave all the hosting to him. No doubt when they hosted their first formal ball here, the focus would be on her. Tonight was for their close friends and family to see in the New Year together, essentially doubling as their house-warming party.

She sighed, remembering his promise by the fountain to throw her the best house-warming party ever on the night of the Homecoming Ball, by the fountain. That precious conversation, in Jen’s mind anyway, during which they had finally crossed the thin line from friends-who-had-kissed to something more.

She heard him shout in excitement as he flung open the doors. “Welcome, one and all.... To the inaugural Beaumont-Jones New Year’s Eve Extravaganza!”

There was a long pause, followed by some gentle laughter and sarcastic applause.

Jen wandered over to the doors, to see Drake and Rick standing by them, with Maxwell. “Oh. Hey guys. Are you the only ones here?”

“Not exactly,” Rick explained. “The others are, let’s say, distracted by the exhibits in the hallway..”

“Ohmygod. I forgot!” Maxwell sped off into the entrance hall.

Jen looked apologetically at Rick and Drake. “You’ll have to forgive him. He’s a little... *enthusiastic* this evening.”

“And so he should be,” Rick said. “Hosting his first function as Duke of Valtoria is a big deal for him.”

“Clearly,” sighed Drake. Jen watched closely as he and Hana made eye contact. “Hey, Hana.”

“Hey, Drake,” Hana said, with a confident smile. “So, what have you two been up to since we got back from Lythikos?”

“Not a great deal,” Rick acknowledged. “Taking some time out. How about you?”

“Other than helping Jen and Maxwell prepare for tonight, I’ve been practicing my piano playing,” Hana said. “And putting my Christmas gift to good use in composing something.” She looked at Drake as she said this.

“Really?” Jen’s face lit up. “You never said!”

“I’ll play it to you some time when you visit,” she said. “It’s not exactly party music.”

Christopher passed out flutes of champagne to Drake and Rick, but did a double take as he realised who he was in the presence with. “Oh. Your Majesty.” He bowed, stiffly. “I apologise. I did not appreciate you had arrived.”

“Thank you,” Rick said. “But no need for such formalities. I’m here for an informal evening visiting two close friends.”

“This is Christopher, our house manager,” Jen explained. “Christopher, you of course know Rick. And this is Drake Walker.”

Christopher nodded, as if waiting for further information on Drake.

“As you were,” Drake said to Christopher.

“Oh. Quite.” Christopher stepped away. “Your Majesty. Your Grace.”

Jen giggled. “I think he was waiting to find out what your title was.”

“Then he’s in for a disappointment,” Drake scoffed.

“You know, it’s a running joke between me and Maxwell that Christopher thinks Maxwell’s his boss, not me,” Jen said in a lowered voice. “He’s such a snob. He can’t get his head around the fact that I’m not from a noble line. He practically worships Maxwell, in comparison.”

Rick laughed. “Oh, I’m sure Maxwell loves that.”

“Speaking of, had we better go and check he hasn’t spontaneously combusted with excitement?” Hana suggested.

Jen nodded. “I’m curious to see who else is here anyway. Come on.”

The four of them made their way into the entrance hall, where they found Maxwell, on horseback behind his ancestor in statue form, waving Jen’s sword of Valtoria. “Behold, the party to end all parties hath commenced!”

“*Maxwell Percival Beaumont*. Get down from there before you embarrass our house any further...” Bertrand had his head in his hands, while Bartie was giggling in his mother’s arms next to him.

“Nonsense,” Olivia said. “You make as much of an embarrassment of yourself as you like while Penelope is recording it for Pictagram.”

Penelope put her phone down. “I’m not... I wasn’t..”

“Relax, Penelope, you’d be doing him a favour,” Jen said, glaring at her.

“Oh... umm.. hey Jen!” Penelope went bright red.

“Hey. So, have you brought Zeke with you tonight?”

“Yes, he’s with Kiara, looking at the squid..”

“Good,” Jen said, raising her eyebrows. She hadn’t forgiven Penelope for her little indiscretion last week at Lythikos. “Maybe you can dance with *him* later, then.”

“Um.. maybe. Yes. I’ll just..” Penelope snaked off.

“I think you handled that well,” Olivia commented. “Considering last week you were all for ripping her head off.”

“Thank you, bestie,” Jen said with a straight face.

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” Olivia responded, with a smile in the corner of her mouth.

Meanwhile, Maxwell had dismounted the statue and approached them, along with Drake, Rick and Hana. “Guys, you gotta see my Christmas present from Jen!”

“You got a name for him?” Hana asked as they wandered to the opposite end of the hall.

“Well, the little statue that Jen gave me in Lythikos is called Cute-thulu, which I’ve put in his tank to keep him company by the way, look, but I was kinda leaning towards... Squidward.”

“Never change, Maxwell,” sighed Rick, as they crossed the room behind him. “Never change.” Jen suddenly noticed Rick’s face light up. “Leo?”

“Little brother!”

Rick and Leo grabbed each other and pulled each other into an embrace. Jen noticed a pretty brunette standing beside Leo, and shot a welcoming smile in her direction.

“I didn’t know you were coming!” Rick said to Leo.

“Well, we thought we’d surprise you for New Year, but...” Leo looked to Jen. “Seems that the party’s in Valtoria this year!”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “And you can guess whose idea that was..”

“LEO! You made it!” Maxwell had run back to greet him with a fist bump. “And.. this must be the lovely Yolana?”

“Hi,” said Yolana. “Lovely to meet you all. And great to see you again, Rick. I’m so sorry I couldn’t make it for your father’s funeral. I was suffering from severe morning sickness. I couldn’t have travelled that far.”

“Oh..” said Jen, noticing a slight bump complementing Yolana’s petite figure. “Congratulations! Did you know, Rick?”

Rick clearly hadn’t known, as he shook his head. “I... I’m going to be an uncle?”

“Welcome to Club Uncle,” Maxwell said to Rick with a grin. “It’s a good club, huh Drake?”

Rick hugged Yolana gently. “Wonderful news. Do you know if you’re having a boy or a girl?”

Yolana looked at Leo, who looked at Rick. “Both. We’re having both.”

“They’re having twins!!” Maxwell said, jumping on the spot.

Jen looked at him suspiciously. “Did you know about this?”

He looked at her innocently. “I know *nothing*...”

“Nah. You knew. You wouldn’t have worked that out so quickly.”

He sighed, and held up his hands. “You got me. Leo told me when he was here for the funeral. Swore me to secrecy.” He knelt to the ground. “Please forgive me for keeping this from you, Rick..”

Rick smiled, and shook his head. "Get up, Maxwell. You know I've forgiven you for far worse." He turned to Yolana. "Have you met our friends, Yolana?"

"Not yet," she said shyly. "But I'm guessing I'm in the presence of the infamous Duke and Duchess of Valtoria.." She smiled at Jen, as Maxwell stood up.

"Well deduced," Maxwell said, putting his arms around Jen's waist. "What gave it away?"

"I was warned about the squid suit," Yolana said with a smile, and Jen laughed.

The party had been pretty lit so far, with plenty of good food and funky dancing on the new and legendary dance floor, but it was rapidly approaching the midnight hour, and the time for toasting had come. And of course, it was his duty alone to welcome in the New Year tonight. The guests had been summoned to the staircase, close to the statue, and he stood a few steps up. He was planning to put the Sword of Valtoria to good use, but if anyone else fancied climbing astride Maxwell Senior's horse, then he wasn't going to discourage that.

"Ladies. Gentlemen. Bartie. Chance. Poodles...."

Eventually, after some cheers, the group fell silent. All eyes were on him. *Oh-oh. This bit seemed like a good idea when you planned this thing out..*

Come on. You did fine at the wedding. Although, you had imbibed significantly less champagne that day. Just picture them all naked. Apart from Jen, obviously. That would be a bad idea. Hang on, isn't it about time we snuck off for some alone time?

He looked at her lovingly, as she mouthed the words he needed to hear. "You got this."

I have got this.

"So, last New Years' Eve, I was in the hottest club in Ramsford.."

"The only club in Ramsford," pointed out Leo.

"It's not even a club, it's a wine bar.." Drake heckled..

"Yeah, okay. I was there, and none of you were with me. I was smashed out of my head on cheap champagne, and trying to ignore the fact that the people I was partying with were mainly total strangers, and that my life was, actually, pretty empty. I didn't have much in the way of aspirations for the coming year. I didn't even bother making any resolutions. All I had to look forward to, was our trip to New York for Rick's first bachelor party. I was gonna sneak in a night out for my birthday too, but in the end only Drake could make that one. Thanks, buddy." He nodded to Drake, who nodded back. "Once that night was over, and I have to say it was a fun night, but not really that memorable, I didn't really have any expectations for the year from that point. I didn't really see anything changing in my life. Then..."

He looked at Jen, and watched her smile light up the room. "Then this beautiful, amazing lady walked into our lives, and all of our lives changed beyond recognition. Especially mine. I never thought, last New Year's Eve, I'd be seeing this New Year in so happy, and that my empty life would have become so full. So this year, please could you all join me in a toast to my gorgeous

wife, Jen. I honestly can't imagine where we might be this time next year, Jen, but I know it'll be amazing. And my resolution for this year, is to be the best husband I can possibly be, for you."

She was welling up, and there was applause from their guests as he reached his arm out for her to join him. She did so, and they kissed softly.

"Guys, only thirty seconds to midnight," warned Drake.

"Oh! Right!" Maxwell jumped to attention. "Quick. Get your sword, Jen!"

Jen passed him the sword and he smashed open a champagne bottle with a flourish. "Please charge your glasses and toast the new year in with us!"

Christopher hurriedly filled half of the crowd's glasses, as Jen filled the other half with the bottle he'd smashed open.

He led the call. "Ten, nine, eight..."

By the time they all got to two. Jen had joined him on the step with a glass of champagne.

"One!"

He chinked glasses with her, and she giggled as she raised her glass to his lips. He returned the gesture, and they both took a sip from each other's glasses.

"Happy new year, babe," she murmured.

"Not sure how I top the best year of my life," he said. "But we can give it a go. Happy new year, little blossom."

He kissed her again, and afterwards the two of them watched as their friends below them celebrated in their own way. Bertrand and Savannah were kissing gently. Rick and Olivia were nodding at each other respectfully, and Hana and Drake were awkwardly hugging. Leo had one arm around Yolana, his other hand was placed on her belly. Penelope and Ezekiel were all over each other (thank goodness he was here, last week had been awkward) and Madeleine and Kiara were sulking at the back, arms folded.

He turned back to Jen. "I love you."

"And I love you."

"I know."

"Good."

"Is it time to sneak off for some alone time yet?"

"Maybe give it half an hour to be sociable.."

"Okay. I can work with that. Besides, we really don't want to miss the trapeze artists and the glitter bombs."

"The what now?"

Maxwell waved his arms and pointed towards the ballroom. “Everyone. Ballroom. Now!”

Man of Zumba

Chapter Notes

A bit of much needed light relief for us all!

Zumba is obviously a trademark, but please don't sue me Beto, I've been to lots of your classes, I promise!

Jen was relaxing in the drawing room after having taken Chance for a long walk, when Christopher came in with a pile of paperwork.

“Ah. Your Grace. Today’s post.”

“Thank you,” she said, taking it from him. “How are you getting on with the great ballroom cleanup, by the way?” She’d tasked the staff with de-Christmassing the manor as well as restoring the ballroom to its usual state following the mayhem of Maxwell’s New Year’s Eve party.

“Well, we’re onto the third day now and we’re still finding quite a lot of glitter,” he sighed.

Jen giggled; she’d actually found some on her body in the shower that morning. Maxwell had definitely meant it with those glitter bombs.

“In any case, the Duke has been a great help this morning. We’re almost there.”

“Very good. Thank you, Christopher.”

She opened an intriguing looking envelope, which looked unusually formal. Inside was what looked like an invitation. She held it up and read it aloud. “His Majesty King Rick of Cordonia invites the Duke and Duchess of Valtoria to the Cordonian Palace on the second of February at 6pm. Dress your very best. Shirts and shoes mandatory.”

She was puzzled. “What?” That last comment had to be aimed at Maxwell, surely? Then she clocked the date. “Wait, that’s the day before we... *aww*..”

Maxwell came striding into the drawing room. “What are you hiding in here for?”

“I figured seeing as you were the one who made most of the mess, you could be the one to help them clear it up,” she giggled. “Hey, look at this. What do you make of this?” She held it up to him.

He peered down at it. “As if I’d not... ohh, this is *Madeleine* all over.”

She smiled. “What do you think this is all about? Is it one of the routine balls I just don’t know about yet?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so..”

“And it’s the day before we go on our honeymoon, look.”

“That’s a pain,” he acknowledged. “Although, I guess we’ll just have to take our cases with us and leave from the palace.”

“And talking of honeymoon,” she sighed, “I need to start getting a bit more active to lose a bit of my seasonal timber. I want to look better for you in my bikini when we get there.”

“Not possible. You are always a delight to my eyes, Jen.” He leant down and kissed her quickly. “Seasonal timber or no seasonal timber.”

She put the invitation down and picked up the rest of the post, some of which was junk mail. “Oh. What’s this? New class starting 10 January, Valtoria Town Hall... oh!”

She grinned up at him, a fantasy fluttering through her head. “You know you said you needed a new exercise plan yourself, do you fancy joining me for this?”

He snatched the bright pink flyer from her. “What the funky squid is Zumba?”

“Trust me,” she said with a wry smile. “You’ll love it.”

**

A few evenings later, Jen, Hana, Maxwell filed into the Town Hall ready for the first class, Mara following closely behind them.

“I’ve never done Zumba before, but I’ve done my homework on it,” Hana stated, clad in a simple tracksuit. “It was created by aerobics instructor Beto Perez in 1998 in Colombia, after an incident in which he forgot his regular aerobics class music so used his Latin dance music tapes instead.”

“I don’t think you need to know the history in order to be able to join in,” Jen giggled. She was sporting her favourite black vest and a pair of pink leggings.

“Someone said dance, so I’m in,” Maxwell said. He was wearing his New York casual outfit, minus the squid necklace, and attempting to disguise himself with a ridiculously large pair of sunglasses.

As the three of them wandered into the main hall, a lady wearing brightly coloured sportswear made a beeline for them. “Oh my God... Duchess Jen?”

“Hey,” Jen said. “We’ve come to try your class out. I used to love a good Zumba workout back home.”

“That’s.. wow!” The instructor was clearly stunned. “I mean.. Zumba has only just arrived in Cordonia, but I didn’t think.. this is amazing!”

“Well, we like to support our local community,” Jen said. “We thought we’d give it a try, show the locals how much fun exercise can be.”

“I just want to learn some new moves,” Maxwell added, removing his sunglasses. “I’m always down for that. I have quite the repertoire, but every day’s a school day, right?”

The instructor’s already starstruck expression intensified somewhat. “Oh... Duke Maxwell, I didn’t realise... wow! Welcome! And Lady Hana...” She looked completely overwhelmed.

“Hey, we’re just here to get a workout,” Jen said reassuringly. “Don’t feel like you have to put on a special show for us. I’ve got my honeymoon in a few weeks, I need to tone up.”

“We’re just ordinary people, like you,” Hana added.

Jen raised her eyebrows. “Well. Me and Hana are. Can’t make any promises for my husband. You might want to keep an eye on him.”

“Well, we have plenty of guys who come to our classes,” the instructor said, although looking around, Jen couldn’t see any others amongst the fifteen or so people. “This could be a good opportunity for me to try and encourage some more to come along, if you don’t mind me spreading the word that you all came tonight?”

“Not at all,” Jen said.

“And we brought security, just in case we get mobbed by adoring fans,” Maxwell pointed out.

“Oh. Well, okay. I hope you enjoy the class. Just follow what I do. You’ll soon pick it up! And if any of you ever fancy joining me and the girls up on stage.. please feel free!”

The instructor grinned and ran to the front, where she hopped up onto a stage, and put some loud music on. There were a couple of other ladies up there with her, and they started to dance.

“Ooh,” Maxwell hollered. “I like this groove.”

**

Three weeks later, Jen and Hana were diligently completing their workout at the back of the hall, because there wasn’t much space at the front. The room was packed and most of the participants were as close to the stage as they could get.

This might have had something to do with the fact that the Duke of Valtoria and his dance moves were on the stage, somewhat stealing the thunder of the instructor. Although, she didn’t seem to mind, considering the room was full to bursting and as a result so was her cash tin.

Jen had known that he’d love this, she just hadn’t realised just how much. Days after their first class, a large parcel had arrived full of brightly coloured ‘zumbawear’ and although some of it had obviously been bought with her in mind (old habits died hard), the majority of it was not. Right now he was wearing a multicoloured tanktop, with neon yellow shorts, high top trainers, and a smug smile, as he energetically shuffled his way through a reggaeton version of Ed Sheeran’s Shape of You in front of an appreciative audience.

He’d spent a lot of time watching YouTube videos and perfecting the various styles, which had been a real treat for Jen as she pretended not to be interested. Back when she’d lived in New York she’d seen some of the so called ‘men of Zumba’ in action on social media and she’d kind of wished she’d had a hot instructor like that. Now, she had her very own.

“Does it bother you? All those other women watching him like that?” Hana asked Jen, in-between tracks, as cheers filled the room again.

Jen laughed. “Not one bit. Besides, I know I’ll be the one getting a *private* dance with him when we get back.” She raised her eyebrows at Hana. “After all, we both find ourselves in need of a

shower after all this exercise..”

“I’m going to just pretend I never asked that question and you never answered it,” Hana sighed.

This isn't really the place for plot spoilers

There had been a conversation, when they were all at Lythikos over the Christmas period, surrounding his obsession with squids, and wouldn't it be more appropriate for him to have a squid tattoo, and to be honest, it was something that had never *ever* entered his mind before, but the answer was yes times a billion. He'd gauged Jen's reaction to this proposal carefully, of course she was vocally supporting the idea of him getting one, but he got the impression it wasn't just talk and she *really* did like the idea.

That same conversation had also referred back to the conversation they'd all had in the spa after the barn raising when Jen had seen his tattoo for the first time and commented that she wanted a matching one, and he'd threatened to take her to the tattoo parlour to get one when everything was settled. Of course that hadn't happened yet – but she'd since admitted that she wasn't really all that keen on the idea of getting a tattoo of her own, she'd just said that to hint how she felt about him (man, those hints had been *far* too cryptic) and that the tattoo was *his* thing, however she liked the idea of him getting another one.

So, always one to make the most of the element of surprise, Maxwell took the opportunity to tie in a visit to said tattoo parlour on one of his book related visits to the capital, timed carefully to coincide with Jen's *ladies week*. He was big and brave, he had nobody to hold his hand this time – plus he was completely sober – but it wasn't like this was something that he hadn't given serious thought to.

He'd thought the tattoo guy (and it *was* the same tattoo guy, who actually remembered him from nearly ten years ago, although this was probably helped by his recent rise to celebrity status) might find his request weird, but nope, he simply regaled many tales of even more bizarre commissions and more painful sounding locations which made Maxwell's eyes water.

It wasn't until after he'd left the tattoo studio that he realised the error of his ways – he now had to sit through a two hour meeting regarding the formatting, printing, production and distribution of his masterpiece, when sitting was going to be unthinkably painful.

Once he arrived, he bounded straight into the already full meeting room, sporting a large coffee and a pack of paracetamol, and gingerly sat down in his usual spot, doing his best not to wince.

"Maxwell," said his publisher. "Glad you could join us. We were almost wondering if you'd gone home for lunch?"

He looked at his watch in alarm. "Shoot. Did I get the time wrong again?"

"So far we've discussed the cover imagery and font, author bio, and the expected release date.."

His eyes popped wide. "All things I need to know about!"

"Exactly," sighed his publisher. "So." He flicked back a few slides on his presentation. "This is the cover we're going for."

"Hooo yeah," Maxwell declared. "I like that. Sophisticated."

“Of course, we were rather hoping for some cover art with the Duchess, but given your request that she doesn’t find out about the book until the first printed copies are available, that makes things a little difficult.”

“Could be worth considering a second edition cover when the paperback version is released,” someone (and he had no idea what this someone’s job was) pointed out.

“Ah, good plan,” his publisher said. “How does that sound, Maxwell?”

He sniggered. “I know Jen’s gonna be pissed that she’s not on the cover, so I think you’ll be fighting her off not to be on the cover of the second edition, to be fair.”

“Okay. Then that’s decided. Obviously if this book sells as well as we anticipate, we might find that a second edition could tie in nicely towards the end of the year, as we come up to Christmas. We may even consider a signing tour at that point, if we think it will generate more sales, so if you could get the Duchess involved by that point..”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure she will be down for that.” In excitement he fidgeted on his chair, and the resulting burn in his left buttock made him flinch and grimace in pain.

“Everything alright, Maxwell?”

“Oh, yeah sure. Just.. huh.. overdid the old exercise last few days... you gentlemen should all give Zumba a try you know, it’s not just for ladies.”

“Alright. Well. We’ve drafted a cover bio for you, not sure if you want to have some input..”

Maxwell’s editor, who was sitting next to him, passed him a piece of paper, and he started to read.

“Gosh, this is boring, can I rewrite it?”

“Well, we’d need it doing now... as we need to go to print as soon as possible..”

“No worries. Okay. This is what I had in mind. *Duke Maxwell Beaumont of Valtoria, Lord of Ramsford, dance master extraordinaire and all-round nice guy, was born almost twenty-nine years ago, the spare heir to one of the Great Houses of Cordonia. His otherwise less than remarkable life was changed forever just after his twenty-eighth birthday when... well, just read the book, and you’ll find out all this and more! Normally at this point you’d get told about what he does now and where he lives etc etc, but hey, this isn’t really the place for plot spoilers.* How’s that?”

There was silence around the table for a few seconds. One of the publisher’s assistants was frantically scribbling.

“I think we can work with that,” his publisher eventually said.

“Cool.”

“So, onto the distribution and release date, we’re looking at getting the initial print run completed by the middle of next week, with the first hard copies available by the first of February. When do you leave for your vacation, Maxwell?”

“Vacation? Huh, it’s gonna be so much more than a vacation.” He sighed, picturing a blissful beach scene, cocktails with little shades, Jen in minimal clothing, the sun slowly setting... He was roused

from his daydream by a cough from opposite him. “Uh, yeah. Think it’s the third of February we go. Something like that. Soon, anyway.” Not soon enough.

“In that case, I would reckon we’d be able to get a copy to you just before you go, with the first copies hitting the shops about mid-February. Does that sound acceptable?”

“That sounds perfect.”

“We’ll then have a launch party when you get back, and we’ll talk about where we go from that point on once we get the initial sales figures. Now then. Printing and distribution.”

Maxwell grabbed his coffee and slouched into his chair, clenching his buttocks at the resultant sting. He’d really thought a squid wouldn’t hurt a fellow squid, but hopefully this was only temporary.

Kiss it better

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW. *sounds sexytime klaxon*

Jen was in the drawing room, trying to get a minute's peace, browsing through her phone for ideas of a wedding present to get for Bertrand and Savannah.

"Your Grace, the surgery just called with an appointment reminder for yourself for next week," Christopher called in. "Did you want to rearrange?"

"Oh!" She'd completely forgotten she was supposed to have a pill check. "I'll have to. Can't miss our honeymoon for that. But you'll need to make one for very shortly after I get back, if that's okay." She was due to run out of pills at the end of February, having got a six-month prescription when they were in New York for the engagement tour.

"Of course, Your Grace."

Christopher left the room and Hana wandered in.

"Hey Jen," she said.

"Hana. What are you up to?"

"I was just about to head into town, and I wondered if you needed anything?"

"No, that's okay Hana. Are you walking?"

"Yes. I thought it would be good exercise. I really don't think the Zumba is for me."

Jen giggled. "You don't have to keep going, Hana, but I'm kinda committed now."

"Okay, I'll see you later."

Jen continued to browse her phone, but then a phone call came in. She sighed.

"Hello, Madeleine.."

"I got your RSVP for next week. Just to confirm the times, your presence will be required from three pm onwards, not six as it said on the original invitation."

Jen sighed. "We're supposed to be flying out in the early hours of Saturday morning, Madeleine, so it's not ideal..."

"Your commitments to your country and King should take precedence to frolicking in the sea while drinking cocktails, Duchess Jen, and you know it."

Jen sighed. “Okay, Madeleine, I get that. We’ll just have to stay over at the palace and go straight to the airport from there, if Rick doesn’t mind.”

“I won’t bother His Majesty with irrelevant details of your social schedule. I will organise that. I look forward to seeing you and the Duke then.”

“Bye Madelei...”

But she’d already gone. Jen sighed again and looked back at her phone display. What had she been doing? Ah yes. Wedding presents. She was conscious that by the time they got back from their honeymoon (six sleeps and counting now, she was grinning from ear to ear just thinking about it) there wouldn’t be a lot of time until the wedding, and she wanted to be organised. She’d just ordered some little presents for herself and Maxwell to take away with them, top secret of course. She couldn’t wait to just be there, on that island, with *nobody but him*.

“Heyyyyyyy!”

She didn’t need to look up from her phone. “You’re back.”

“Yup. Chance has been fully exercised for the day. Man, you won’t believe this though..” He headed towards her, and as she looked up at him, she noticed an obvious limp in his gait.

“What have you done to yourself, babe?”

“I was halfway home and my leg just.. went! It’s killing me. Never known anything like it!”

She stood up. “Oh... that’s weird?”

“I know, been years since I had any sort of dancing injury...”

She raised her eyebrows. “All that Zumba is using muscles you haven’t used for a while, clearly.”

“Yeah, but it’s up here..” He put a hand on the inside of his leg to demonstrate.

“Where?”

Before she realised his hand was coming towards her, it was already up her skirt and between her legs. “Right there inbetween my legs and it kills!”

She smiled, realising he hadn’t even thought about what he’d done. “Using me as a prop are you? I like it.”

He pulled his hand away. “Oh. Whoa. I did not just mean to put my hand up your skirt like some perv.... I just wanted to show you where it hurts, I didn’t even think about it like that...”

“Damn shame,” she sighed, drawing close to him, loving how flustered he could get when he was embarrassed. “I liked it. So, now I know *exactly* where it hurts, do you want me to kiss it better?”

He laughed. “That is not why I wanted to tell you...”

She sank to her knees, and let her lips brush against where his jeans covered inside of his leg. Even through the fabric this seemed to do the trick; he let out a little guttural groan, and she giggled.

“Oh, best not. Don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

She stood up, and looking back at him seductively, grabbed her phone and headed upstairs as quickly as she could without appearing obvious. She knew he would follow, mainly because it had been a good few days since their last intimate moment due to her time of the month, and she giggled as he set off in her pursuit.

Once she got into the bedroom, she leant with her back to the mirrored wardrobe, and waited.

He chuckled when he saw where she’d gone, closing the bedroom door. “Did you just feel like posing in front of the wardrobe, or...”

She silenced him with a kiss as soon as he got close enough, savouring the feel of his lips and tongue on hers as if it was the first time.

He giggled. “Hey, I know it’s been a few days but..”

“I want you now,” she sighed. “I *need* you now.”

“How do you need me?” he asked with a sly smile, as if he had something up his sleeve.

“I’ll let you work that one out for yourself,” she murmured.

“Hmm. Well, I seem to think we started down here..” He let his hand wander up her skirt again, and this time it wasn’t quite such an innocent touch, wandering further, beyond and below her underwear, so that she couldn’t help but emit a gasp. “Then what happened?”

“Then?” She slowly lowered herself to her hands and knees, and kissed the fabric of his jeans again, afterwards reaching up to undo his belt. She made light work of pulling down his jeans and boxers, and soon was able to kiss the area more freely, placing her hands gently on the sides of his legs as she did so.

“Ohh, do not stop...” he begged her. His forehead made contact with the mirrored door as his composure began to droop.

She drew away and whispered against his skin. “What if I stopped kissing you here.. and kissed you someplace else?”

“In that case... stop...”

Giggling, she began to move her lips further up and then along his length, until they reached the head at which point she took him into her mouth, still teasing with her tongue as she moved in bursts.

“Ohhhh.. now don’t *ever* stop... mmm..”

She continued, waiting until his repertoire of sounds of ecstatic approval grew more fervent, then slowly released, trailing kisses back up.

"But didn't I say..."

She laughed, speaking breathily against him. “Ah, when you say one thing, you generally mean another...” She hunched herself back up, taking in his starry eyes, and lifted up her arms, pulling

off her dress.

“You know me so well, Jen.”

She placed a hand against him, taking in his obvious renewed pleasure as she did. Next his lips were on her neck, against her bra, pretty much everywhere. It wasn't long before her bra was on the floor and one of her breasts was being teased by his fluttering tongue, while his dancing hands worked on her underwear. She moaned, wondering what it would be like to see this reflected in the mirror like he was able to, and decided to grab his butt and flip the two of them around so he had his back to the mirror.

Two things happened as she did this. First, something felt.. different... about one of his buttcheeks. Secondly, he winced, but not with pleasure.

“Uh.. babe?” She looked questioningly at him.

He laughed, a mischievous glint in his eyes, and stepped away from the mirror.

Her eyes drifted in the direction of her reflected hands, and as she moved her hands away she saw it.

She laughed too. “Oh my god, Maxwell. When did you...”

“Three days ago. So be gentle with him.”

“Oh, man. Guess you're going on top huh?”

“That was my hope.”

She twisted him around to fully take it in. His left buttcheek was now the proud owner of a cute little baby squid tattoo.

“You like it?”

“Love. I love it. And I love you. And there you go. That's what I wanted to say last time. But I had to stop myself.”

He sighed, hungrily. “I have never, and I will never, love anyone like I love you.”

“Prove it.”

“Yes ma'am.”

He dropped to his knees now, and it was the turn of Jen's forehead to meet the mirror as he pulled one of her legs over his shoulder and launched into her, just how she liked it best. She couldn't take this for too long, as she was hoping for a simultaneous climax, and made herself pull away, throwing herself back first onto the bed.

He dived onto and into her in pursuit, and she smiled tenderly up at him.

“Do your worst.”

“You know me. I always do my *best* where you're concerned.”

She let herself sink, clamping her legs around him but being careful not to make contact with his new body-art, instead pulling his existing tattoo close to her lips and lavishing it with kisses. At some point she completely lost the plot of what she was doing, crying out and holding on to her soulmate so tightly she thought she might actually hurt him, but that didn't sound like a cry of pain to her.

As his release matched hers, she relaxed, letting her grip loosen and her hands wander, gently to where his new tattoo sat, and she brushed it tenderly.

“Oooch... Jen...”

“Few more days and that won't hurt, am I right?”

“Theoretically...”

“I had wondered why you were sleeping on your side the last few nights you know. Oh, how's that pain in your leg now, babe?”

“Gone,” he said, still breathless. “Magically healed by little blossom kisses.”

She chuckled, pulling him close. “Good to know.”

I would choose you

Chapter Notes

This chapter is NSFW.

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

She'd left His Majesty naked in the royal suite, fully spent after a night of mutual pleasure followed by a further early morning reprise. She'd crept out to her allocated guest bedroom and dressed, and now was making it her mission to find out exactly what was going on.

The invitation had seemed so formal, It wasn't merely a *come spend time with me because I need your body* type of invitation, although she was quickly getting to know that this was indeed the case, and it did actually give her a sense of satisfaction knowing the power she had over Cordonia's king, especially in his bedroom.

But there was a sense of foreshadowing around the palace. As if an important event was in the planning, like one not seen here since Jen's wedding. She'd heard Madeleine talking about a guest list yesterday; threatening her, although it had been fun, had failed to yield any useful information. Her plan, therefore, was to search for evidence in Rick's study, the nerve centre of Cordonia.

A knowing nod to the security guard was enough to clear her access to the secure wing. Picking the lock effortlessly with a hairpin, she slunk into the room, closing the door behind her. Her first task was to obscure the security cameras. She'd been in here seldom, but often enough to know exactly where they all were. Soon they all had sticking plaster all over them. The camera which had seen her enter had experienced a little accident. She'd get it replaced later today.

Unsure where to start, she poured some whisky into one of the tumblers on the desk. Yes, it was early, but inspiration was needed. She made her way through each of the drawers but found nothing that she wasn't already aware of. Eventually, she found a memory stick which intrigued her. Turning on the PC, she guessed his password at the second attempt (Eleanor2) and slotted it into the USB port.

She began to read. *Ugh. What is this ridiculous twaddle?* It didn't take her long to realise exactly what it was. *Ah, so Beaumont's written a tell-all book. Bully for him. I haven't got time for this.* She pulled out the memory stick and threw it back into the drawer in disgust.

A few more drawers were rummaged through. A dossier on current threats. The Unity Core's response to recent events. A large file on Auvernal. *Goodness, I'd put those awful people out of my minds.* Another dossier on Monterisso. *Rick's always had a thing for that Amalas. I need to keep an eye on her now that she's back on the market.*

Nothing useful. She turned her attention to the photograph on the desk. Previously, he'd had a photograph of his father there. This had been replaced with a group photograph. Six faces, four smiling widely, two frowning questioningly. She'd remembered Savannah taking the photograph for Rick at the New Year's party at Valtoria. She hated such forced photo opportunities, she'd rather

be captured in a portrait, but now she felt a little sense of satisfaction that the King's desk housed an image of her. Amongst others, obviously. But it was a start.

The door opened, carefully. She froze.

"Ah. I did wonder if I might find you here."

She sneered up at him from where she sat at his desk. "That's not the best photograph of me, and you know it."

He wandered closer to her. "It's not noon yet, Olivia, and you're drinking whisky. If I didn't know better, I'd say that was Drake's influence."

"Well what else is there in here? He's the only one you cater for, seemingly."

"I could change that. I'm sure a bottle of Lythikos Nog next to it could complement it nicely."

"I prefer champagne when in the capital. Nog isn't the same in this climate."

He poured himself a whisky and chinked her glass. "Cheers."

She nodded.

"Am I right in thinking you're looking for answers as to what's happening later today?"

She glowered at him. Why was he so infuriatingly insightful?

"Any leads so far?" His amusement was obvious.

"Nope. Although I have read the first chapter of what looks like the most stupid manuscript in history."

He laughed. "Expect a big reveal on that shortly. Not a word to Jen in the meantime. She doesn't know."

"Pff. If she's got any sense, she'll be getting in the queue for a divorce lawyer behind me when she reads that embarrassment of a memoir."

"I would suggest that is highly unlikely, and I would wager you would agree with me, if you're honest."

He was right again, and she huffed.

"Are you going to continue to search? You won't find anything." He had that awful fond look on his face that she found both demeaning and electric.

"Rick. Answer me this. What do you want from me? I mean, really?"

He looked at her, startled. "Olivia..."

"I mean, is it a Queen? Or is it the drama of a secret lover? Or is it just the sex? Because I know I'm good at that, and a King deserves the best of everything..."

"It's none of those options, Olivia. It's..."

She shook her head. “Don’t give me that. You want a suitable Queen. The pressure is on. But I want to be more to you than a suitable Queen.”

“If I wanted a suitable Queen, I could have asked Hana. I could have stayed with Madeleine. The only woman I’m interested in...”

“Yes, I know, went off with your so-called friend and had the nerve to ask you to officiate at her wedding...”

“Shh, Olivia. You’re not listening. The only woman I’m interested in is *you*. I want you for you, Olivia Nevraakis. For so long I just assumed it was inevitable. I went into that Masquerade Ball thinking, well this is it, this is where Olivia and I finally formalise things. I thought my future was planned out for me. Jen shook me up. How I fell for her, how her story played out. It made me realise that even a King can marry for love. And she might not have been that love, but she made me reappraise the people around me. And I realised, afterwards. I’d been a fool. You were always there, and... I *would* choose you, Olivia. Out of everyone.”

She was determined not to let him have the satisfaction of seeing her cry, and so she shot up, pulled him towards her, and kissed him furiously.

Before long he was laid out on his desk, she astride him. They didn’t waste time stripping layers off, they just got straight to business. He always felt right inside her, and she knew from his strangled groans that the feeling was mutual. The photograph dropped off the desk due to their energetic pounding, and not many minutes passed before she was seeing stars and looking wide eyed at the only man she’d ever loved.

Normally as soon as she’d got what she wanted out of their arrangement, she’d move away and finish him off manually. But this time, something convinced her to stay, and she watched his face contort as he found his own release within her.

“God. Olivia. I love you. Marry me.”

“I’m sorry?” She glared down at him. Her instincts told her to go, but she stayed exactly where she was.

“Marry me.”

“I’m still married, you fool. Ask me again when you’ve finally got my annulment sorted.”

She hopped off the desk and headed to the corner of the room to straighten herself out. He was soon with her, his trousers refastened and his hands on her waist.

“I will.”

He was standing behind her, and because she was confident that he couldn’t see her facial expression, she allowed herself a victorious smile.

“In the meantime, you should rest. Your presence will be required in the boutique at three pm sharp.”

“Oh?”

“That’s when the others will be arriving.”

She groaned and spun to face him. “Oh no. And here I was thinking I was the guest of honour.”

“Of my heart, you are. Stay for a while. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ll think about it.”

She stomped away from him, removing the sticking plaster from each camera before she left the study, as Rick stood motionless, watching her every move.

Chapter End Notes

If you're reading this - thank you for getting to chapter 67 of a 70 chapter work! This really has been a bit of a labour of love, but as you might be able to guess, we're rapidly approaching the end of the Valtoria Diaries. Since two of the last three chapters are very much retold ground from the final chapter of TRR3, I thought I would publish them all next week. I might also post the first chapter of my new WIP next Saturday...

You can say that again

“All I could get out of Madeleine was that, and I quote, under the circumstances it would be prudent for us to bring our luggage with us from Valtoria for onward travel to the airport tomorrow morning,” Jen sighed. “I don’t know anything more about any of this than you do.” She was a little annoyed to be honest. All these weeks she’d spent counting down the days until they finally (*finally!*) got to go on their honeymoon and, days before, they’d received a formal invitation to the royal palace, the day that they were due to fly out.

“Well, obviously Rick knows we go tomorrow, given that it’s *his* personal island,” Maxwell reminded her. “His personal, secluded, private, tropical island...”

Jen allowed herself to smile a little. “Mmhmm..”

“So he won’t want to hold us up from that. Maybe he just wants to catch up with us before we go. Life has been... *different*, since the wedding.”

She raised her eyebrows. Maxwell was right. Life had been a whole world of different and she’d never known it could be as much fun. For so long, well, ever since they’d met, life had been lived at a fast pace, never sleeping in the same bed for more than a couple of nights in a row, always travelling on to the next place. It had been fun, but it was only when it all stopped that she’d realised how exhausting it had been. Now? For the first time, certainly since she’d come to Cordonia, maybe for the first time in her adult life, she had a *home*.

And whilst all of that was amazing beyond belief, it wasn’t the best thing about her new chapter. *That* was sitting next to her as they pulled into the palace driveway in their limo, and had just happened to be the best thing about the previous chapter, too. Not becoming a Duchess, not becoming Cordonia’s national hero, not being proposed to by a king, not getting her own personal mansion. The best thing that had ever happened to her was, simply, Maxwell.

“You can say that again,” she said with a grin.

“Life has been...”

“No matter,” she said, holding a hand up. “Looks like we’ve arrived. Is the limo staying here with the cases?”

“I guess.”

“Well, let’s go and see what’s going on.”

They headed into the palace, followed closely by Chance, and towards the boutique, which was where they had been instructed to report.

“It’s been a while since we headed down *this* corridor together,” she admitted. “I seem to think we’d just done something quite important... hey, what have you got there?” He was carrying a... man-bag?

“Nothing... well, it’s not nothing.” She hadn’t seen his worried face for a while.

“*Maxwell.*”

“It’s... err.... Our passports! I didn’t want to leave them in the limo.”

“Oh, okay. Wouldn’t they have fitted in my bag? Save you...” She glanced at it. It did actually quite suit him. “It’s not a problem, you know. Just never seen you with a bag before... and I have seen rather a *lot* of you, don’t you think, babe?”

He grinned. “I’d say by now you’ve seen all...”

“Jen! Maxwell!”

They were interrupted by Hana, who came running out of the boutique. “I thought I heard your voices!”

“Hey,” said Jen, hugging her friend. “What are you doing here?”

Hana produced an envelope. “Well, I got this invitation...”

“You got one too?” Jen looked at Hana’s invitation. “Aw, Hana, I wish I’d known. We could have shared a lift from Valtoria! How did you get here?”

“I took the train,” Hana admitted. “It was nice. Just like old times! And I didn’t know if you two would be invited, so I didn’t want to say anything...”

“Those etiquette lessons don’t always pay off,” Jen reminded her. “We could have saved you a train fare!”

“Oh well. It’s nice to spend a bit more time with you before you go away on your amazingly perfect honeymoon... Wait, I thought you were going today?”

“Yeah, we *are*,” said Jen, dropping her lip. “After whatever this is.”

“You got any clue what this is about?” Maxwell asked her. “Because we haven’t.”

“You got the message too, huh?” Drake meandered down the corridor behind them.

“DRAAAAKE!!”

The three of them pounced on him, to his obvious irritation. “Hey, calm it down...”

“Sorry, but having gone from seeing you like every day to not seeing you for about, what, is it five weeks?” Jen giggled.

“We miiiiissssed youuuu!” Maxwell wailed.

“Okay, keep your hair on,” Drake said, clearly enjoying the attention more than he wanted to admit. “It’s good to see you all.”

“And here I was hoping this would be a solo appointment,” came another familiar voice, stepping out of the boutique. “Although I see your usual timekeeping still prevails, Jen.”

“Olivia!” Jen ran to greet her. “It’s great to see you. How’s Lythikos?”

“It’s okay,” she said, a little guarded. “I’ve been here for a couple of days, since I got the invitation.”

“And how are you?”

“I’m okay,” she said. Jen smiled at her. She imagined that Olivia, a little like herself, had got a lot to process now that the trial was behind them. After how well they’d all bonded over Christmas, she must have felt a little isolated in comparison in Lythikos on her own afterwards. Although, Olivia would never admit that bond. She was her own worst enemy.

“All the gang’s together!” Maxwell said, jumping up and down. “Oh, wait, except Rick..”

“Whatever this is, I think Rick is in on it,” Drake explained. “I saw him coming out of the royal armoury the other day, but he wouldn’t tell me what he was doing in there.”

“Now that you mention it, I heard him talking to Madeleine yesterday about some kind of a guest list,” Olivia mentioned.

“Ooh, what if it’s a surprise party?” Maxwell suggested. “Or some kind of a drill... A surprise party drill?”

“I don’t think you’re far wrong there,” Jen said to him. “I guess we all just have to wait and see. Right. Come on. What am I wearing?”

I'll always be in your corner

“Well, that’s how I see it anyway.” Drake was giving Rashad some advice about how to use his surplus land to benefit the public. “That way, there’s usable space for all types of people, not just the kids and the dog walkers.”

“I hadn’t even considered that aspect. You make a very good point.”

Hana wandered over in their direction, and Drake beckoned her to join them. As good as it had been to be useful in this situation, he was getting a little tired of the conversation.

“Hello, Duke Rashad. Hello, my fellow Guardian of the Realm.” She curtsied to them both.

“A remarkable ceremony, and very well deserved both of you,” Rashad said. “Your bravery a few months ago is definitely to be commended. I understand the two of you snuck into enemy territory together?”

“We were only doing what we thought was best to help our friends,” Hana sighed. “We weren’t being watched, not like Rick and his guards were. We had to help Jen and Maxwell. And Olivia, of course.”

“I am not so sure I would have been so brave in your position,” Rashad said.

Drake looked at Hana, and she smiled at Rashad. “We’re all very close. Their lives were at risk, and we’d gladly risk ours to help them.”

“A noble attitude,” Rashad said. “I meant to catch you, Lady Hana, to say thank you for your help in making that connection with the Portera Group. It’s been more lucrative than I’d even hoped.”

“It was nothing,” Hana said. “I’m very glad I could help.”

“I was talking to your father a little earlier too. I have to say that our business relationship is working well, despite my initial concerns. So, it was a win win for all concerned.”

“Definitely,” said Hana with a smile.

Drake was trying not to indicate how bored he was, but seemingly he’d not been trying enough, as Rashad looked at his watch. “I must go, leave you two to what is probably important Royal Council business. Thank you both.”

Hana smiled at Drake knowingly as Rashad walked away.

“Christ, I thought he’d never go.”

Hana giggled. “You did look a little trapped in a corner. So.” She toyed with her plaited hair; she always looked at her most attractive when her hair was up like that. “How does it feel to be a Guardian of the Realm?”

“No different than when I woke up this morning.”

“Come on. I know you better than that. Your dad would’ve been so proud, you know.”

“Uh, I guess. Bastien just told me, apparently my dad was a Guardian of the Realm too.”

“Wow. I wonder why Jackson never told you?”

“He didn’t like to blow his own trumpet.”

“A little like someone else I know.” She giggled, in that innocent way she had about her that he just adored. “Talking of parents, Jen and I just had a little chat with mine.”

“Friendly or unfriendly?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Somewhere inbetween. My mother was demanding I play piano for Godfrey and Adelaide.”

“Ugh. Not a fun prospect.”

“I told her I don’t play for just anyone.” She looked into the distance. “I mean, I played for Jen. And.. I would play for you.” She blushed. “And, Rick and Maxwell, obviously.”

“Thanks for clarifying that,” he said with a smirk. “I’d love to hear you play. Don’t forget, you invited me over while Jen and Maxwell are away. Maybe you can play for me then.”

“I didn’t have you down as a classical music enthusiast, Drake.”

“Hey, I have hidden depths. So? When were you thinking?”

Her face lit up. “Really? I mean, how does next Saturday work for you?”

He scratched his head. “If it doesn’t bother you it being Valentine’s Day and all...”

“Oh... I see... I’m sorry. I couldn’t ask you to come then. Perhaps some other time...”

“I’m kidding, Hana. I haven’t got any plans. And it would be nice to spend some time with you at Valtoria. Assuming you’re free, of course...”

“Of course.” She smiled at him for a moment, but then her face fell again. “I suppose, if things had gone differently, I could have been spending Valentine’s Day with Rick this year.”

“Know what? I’m glad things didn’t go that way,” he said.

“Me too.” She sighed. “Although, I wonder what my parents would have said if they’d known I’d turned down that opportunity.”

He frowned, feeling like he just wanted to take her away from all that. “It’s none of their business.”

“I still feel that I’ve let them down. If my mother knew...”

“You’re better than all that, you know Hana. Don’t let your mother have that power over you anymore. If she doesn’t like this new, brave Hana, it’s her loss. Can you honestly say you’d have been happy if you’d gone along with Rick’s little idea just to impress your mother?”

She bit her lip. “No. After tonight’s announcement, I feel confident that I can make a contribution to Cordonía in other ways, like I do already in Valtoria, and that’s given me some identity I guess. But emotionally – I don’t know where to be. I know you guys are all in my corner, though.”

“I’ll always be in your corner, Hana. Don’t let anyone give you any crap. They’ll have me to answer to.”

“What are friends for, hey?” she asked him.

He looked at her; she back at him, her dark eyes shining with silent promise. An electric charge seemed to ignite between them, as he inched oh-so-slightly closer to her.

Suddenly they were both knocked out of the moment by a blue blur.

“There you two are!!”

Drake could have merrily swung for Maxwell at that moment, as he launched into the pair of them, a hand on each of their shoulders. “Come on! I have an announcement to make in the hallway!” He was gone as quickly as he’d appeared.

He rolled his eyes. “Give me strength...”

Hana giggled. “We’d better go and see what he wants.”

“Mmhmm,” he sighed in defeat. “We better had.”

Hope for love

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It had been an emotional and exhausting evening for Cordonía's newly appointed Champion of the Realm. She realised how late it was getting, and decided it was time to check in with her favourite newly appointed Guardian of the Realm. After all, she hadn't seen him for over an hour; this was far too long for her liking and had to be rectified immediately. And he'd been talking about making an announcement, too - well he was running out of time if he wanted to announce anything before their limo would need to collect them to go to the airport.

She soon found him; at the bottom of the grand stairwell, with Bertrand, Savannah and Bartie, who was amazingly awake for the time of the evening.

Savannah was laughing. "See, Bartie, Uncle Maxwell's got Daddy's nose!"

"Maxwell, remove your hand from my face this instant..."

Maxwell obliged. "And... where'd his nose go?"

Bertrand frowned as he spoke to his son. "Do not allow yourself to be fooled by such tricks of the eye. My nose is *right here*."

"And.. it's back! Jen!" He put his arms around her waist and kissed her gently on the cheek, giving her a happy glow inside. "You arrived in time to see me remove and reattach Bertrand's nose. Honestly, I think I missed my calling as a surgeon."

"Trust me, you didn't," she said, looking at him suspiciously.

Bertrand leant over and straightened Bartie's clothes. While he did this, Bartie squeezed Bertrand's cheeks. Through his son's grubby hands, Bertrand smiled. Jen couldn't help but smile too.

"How go the wedding plans for the happy couple?" she asked.

"We can't replicate the splendour of your wedding," Savannah sighed. "But we're thinking of something courtly."

"We'll use the entire royal stable if we have to," Bertrand said.

"I don't think we'll need *that* many horses," Savannah pointed out. "We can start with four?"

"Jen, I want to thank you," Bertrand said. "This wouldn't have happened without you."

Savannah beamed. "Because of your help, I received the fairy-tale proposal I've always wanted... romantic singing, horse rides, and an adorably awkward Bertrand."

"I thought I was rather dignified, given the circumstances..."

"In your own special way, dear," she said to him, the expression on her face betraying exactly how happy she was.

“Think nothing of it,” Jen said.

“On the contrary,” Bertrand said, his arm around Savannah. “We’ll think everything of it for the rest of our lives.”

“You two deserve each other,” Jen said.

“As long as she’ll continue to have me.”

“You goof,” Savannah said. “We’re getting married. That means, I’ll always continue to have you.”

Jen glared at Bertrand. “Bertrand, don’t mess this up, or I will find you...”

“I... er... understood. If I ever need help expressing my true intentions, I’ll consult you.”

“She’s the best at this sort of thing,” Maxwell said, with a twinkle in his eye. “Trust me.”

Jen smiled, leaning against him. “And Savannah, just call us if he ever *Bertrands* too hard. We’ll sort it.”

“Gladly,” Savannah said.

“Savannah, even if House Beaumont’s fortunes aren’t what they once were, I promise to give you and Bartie nothing but the best,” Bertrand assured her.

“That’s all we need,” Savannah beamed.

“As your sister in law, I can pitch in if you need any help?” Jen suggested. “Our fortunes are tied together now.”

“Thank you, though I don’t think it’d be right to ask for anything,” Bertrand said. “I’ve found embracing the truth to be far less exhausting than attempting to give the appearance of wealth. Besides, we have enough money to stay afloat, and for the first time, I can say I’m truly happy.”

Now this was a turnaround. “Aww, Bertrand, does that mean no more grand claims about upholding the prestigious legacy of Barthelemy Beaumont?”

“I will *always* uphold the great legacy of my father, because I’ve learned that our legacy can carry on in other forms.” He smiled at Savannah and Bartie. “I can declare with absolute clarity of meaning that everything I do now will be for House Beaumont.”

Maxwell grinned. “Then I hope you’re not disappointed that I’ve found the key that leads to the vault that leads to the *other secret hidden vault* that solves all our financial troubles...”

Jen and Bertrand both looked at him in puzzlement.

“I was waiting for the right time to tell everyone... and I think this is it! Jen, have you seen the others on your travels?”

Ah, so this was the big announcement. “I can... find them?”

“No matter! I’ll go! I have to go and get it... *something*... anyway. You just stand right here and look as stunningly beautiful as you always do...” He rushed off towards the boutique.

“They won’t be in there,” Bertrand called after his brother.

“Ah,” Jen said, twiggling. “Whatever this is, it’s got something to do with the fact that he had a bag when we first got here. He must have left it in the boutique.”

“Ooh, so what’s in the bag?” Savannah pondered.

“Yes, what is my dear brother up to?” Bertrand asked Jen, frowning.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she sighed. Maxwell had been out a lot over the last few weeks, with little in the way of explanation, other than *wait and see*. So, she’d known he was up to something, but the specifics still escaped her. “So, Savannah, are you and Bartie still settling in okay at Ramsford?”

“We are,” she said, with a smile. “It’s far grander than my last two apartments, that’s for sure. I’ve always liked the place, but to be able to call it my home – well, I couldn’t be happier.”

Jen smiled sympathetically. “I loved staying there. Until we moved to Valtoria, it was the only place in Cordonia that ever felt like home. I’m so grateful for your kindness back then, Bertrand.”

Bertrand raised his eyebrows and sighed. “Perhaps things would have turned out differently if we’d found you alternative accommodation.”

She laughed. “Nope. I don’t think they would. And anyway, just so we’re clear, that was well before anything...”

She was interrupted by Drake. “Where’s the fire?”

Hana was with him. “Maxwell told us to come find you here.”

“It seems he has an announcement to make,” Rick said, striding over to join them all.

Maxwell came running through the hall to the staircase, with his bag on his shoulder. He stopped, and, pausing dramatically, pulled out a book and presented it to Bertrand. “This, my brother, is the solution to all of your problems.”

Bertrand examined what he was holding out. “A simple book?”

“Indeed! I present to thee, my humble friends, the laborious flowering of my secret diary, unsuccessful bullet journal, and awkwardly taken scrapbook photos. A story so inspiring that it could only be written during nights of caffeine-induced delirium. *This* is the definitive tale of the rise of Jen and her lovable companions!”

Jen was dumbstruck. This explained... a lot! But... how...?

“Go on, read some of it!” Maxwell handed a second copy to Hana, who immediately turned to the first page and began to read aloud.

“Chapter One – That Fateful Night... It all began one night in a New York City dive bar. Rick was looking for an inconspicuous location to celebrate his bachelor party. Now, I’m not one for unremarkable party locations. The more spectacular, the more memorable has always been my *modus operandi*. But there comes a time in a man’s life where he must choose between his trusted

ways and the needs of a trusted friend. Rick was that friend, and by god, we were going to find an unassuming dive bar.”

Drake laughed and nodded. “Yep. That’s about right.”

Jen was so overwhelmingly proud of her clever, amazing husband right now, that she couldn’t speak.

Hana continued to read from the book. “With my intrepid guidance, we arrived at the bar and took our seats. My sour assistant and second in command, Drake, could not contain his demands for whisky as the manager seated us...”

“Is that right, Drake?” Jen giggled. “No wonder Kieran was moaning before I even got to you!”

Hana read some more. “That’s when the future Cordonian sensation walked into our lives. Radiant, friendly, and smelling like she just took out the trash.”

“What?” Jen looked at Maxwell. “How could you know...”

He looked at her, puzzled. “Are you saying you *had* just taken out the trash?”

Jen said nothing, just shook her head in bemusement.

Hana continued. “While I cleverly kept up our commoner ruse by ordering steaks, Rick walked in, and he and Jen laid eyes on each other. I’ve seen a lot of fireworks in my time but the look those two shared in that moment would put even the greatest fireworks finale to shame. In that moment, I knew this girl in the ill-fitting waitress uniform would become House Beaumont’s salvation, Rick’s freedom, and Cordonia’s hero. But what I didn’t know was how Jen’s love would change along the way.”

Jen and Maxwell exchanged a smouldering glance. Neither of them could have known in that moment how their lives were going to change as a result of that chance encounter.

Hana closed the book. “Maxwell, this is *amazing!*”

“My editor and I really worked on focusing the writing style. Pretty neat, huh?”

But Jen had noticed something that irked her slightly. “Wait. *Your* face is on the cover of *my* story?” She took hold of the book, to the sound of their friends’ laughter.

“Well...”

“You see *this*?” She pointed to her face. “*This* is the adorable face that should be on the cover!”

“About that... I did write it!”

“*Maxwell*, fix it!”

“It can’t be changed, lest it compromises my creative vision...”

“*Maxwell!*”

Drake elbowed Hana and Rick. “The honeymoon’s over before it even began...”

“Don’t worry, little blossom. The publishers are very keen to get you on the cover of the second edition.”

“Glad to hear it,” Jen said with a triumphant grin.

“So... you’re an author now?” Hana asked, diplomatically.

He nodded. “A soon-to-be famous, world-touring author...”

Rick looked concerned. “But... you’ve been named to the Royal Council...”

“In my new life as a jet-setting elite, I will remotely carry out my duties as royal party planner. Picture me, flying over the Himalayas taking a call from some stumped advisor.”

Jen looked at him, a little worried. Was he joking? He had to be, right?

“You’re there too, of course,” he said to her. “So, the advisor is saying, *how do we make this party a success, Duke Maxwell?* And I say, *wheel in a flamethrower trojan horse full of horse archers with flaming arrows*. Hang up. Job done. Easy.”

“I’ll make sure to wear flame retardant clothes to future parties,” Jen said, appraising the suitability of her favourite dress. “Ooh, did you add in the part where I defeated twenty assassins?” She flicked through the pages.

“But that’s not...” Bertrand interjected.

“Shh. If I can’t be on the cover, I want as many flattering embellishments as possible.”

“I promise that you come out great in this version,” Maxwell said with a beam, “But I need to save some material for the action-packed spin off...”

“Just how action-packed are we talking?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Bertrand’s a fork wielding ninja, who always defeats his foes with proper etiquette, and I’m the Chosen One who’s meant to bring balance to the world with the power of the beat.”

“Perfect. Pitch me the others.”

“Hana’s a perfect model of kindness and empathy, who defeats her enemies with the power of love. Her power increases with the length of her magical transformation sequence...”

Jen and Hana exchanged an amused glance.

“Drake’s a rugged super spy with a heart of gold who’s nearly impervious to bullets. And Rick leads his country by day, but at night dons the mantle of The Crowned Crusader to patrol the streets of Cordonia out of a sense of duty and justice. And Olivia’s basically herself. But with even more knives.”

She sighed and held him close. “You’re a genius, Maxwell.”

“Thank you. Thank you. I try.”

“How is this good news for House Beaumont?” Bertrand asked.

“Well... I’ve earned an advance for writing the book, and proceeds from pre-orders. Once sales total up... and the *movie deals* roll in, we’ll have a licensing empire! Anyone who’s *anyone* will be talking about *The Royal Romance*!”

Bertrand folded his arms in satisfaction. “So, you’re saying...”

“Money, my dear brother! Lots of money! And don’t worry, *everyone* involved in the story will see the *royalties*.”

“That’s generous of you,” Hana said.

“What can I say, I’m a benevolent media mogul. And Bertrand, I’d like to give you most of my share to pay you back for the odd purchases you know about... and the ones you still don’t know about...”

Bertrand frowned at him. “No.”

“Huh?”

“You’ve been such an asset to running the house while I’ve focused on childcare. You deserve a reward. And a chance to manage your own funds responsibly.”

Maxwell did a little dance. “That’s the first time you’ve ever used the word responsibly to describe me!”

“I didn’t say you *were* responsible yet, just that you should have the chance to be...”

“Bring it in, big brother!” Maxwell wrapped Bertrand up in a huge hug.

“Yes, well. I’m not much one for sentiments, but I do love you, little brother. Now don’t let it go to your head.”

“Too late!” As Maxwell released Bertrand, he tapped a button on his phone and recorded a memo. “It was the first time in my life that I realised I was no longer the tragic screw-up of the family. In my brother’s eyes, the only eyes that mattered, I was a man.”

“Maxwell...”

“It was then that I knew that while parties and peacocks would come and go, brothers last forever.”

At that, Bartie yawned and slumped over in Savannah’s arms.

Savannah gestured to Bertrand. “I think that’s our cue to step outside to let Bartie nap.”

“Yes,” agreed Bertrand. “It seems there’s a fine line between Bartie is sleepy and Bartie is a screaming banshee without reason or remorse...”

“And we prefer to stay on the good side of that line. Congratulations again, all of you,” Savannah said, repositioning Bartie as she started to walk away.

As the three of them headed for the palace doors, Jen pulled Maxwell to one side. "I can't believe you kept this book a secret from your own wife!"

"Am I in trouble? Because I really don't want to be in trouble..."

"No, not at all! It's brilliant! And it explains a lot. Now I know why you always used to disappear off to bed so early..."

"Like I said, caffeine was my friend..."

"...And why you were always so reluctant to stay the night with me on the Unity tour..." She dropped her lip.

He sighed. "I had to keep on top of things then, because I knew once we were married, I wanted to be with you *every* night. It's just... I really wanted this to be a surprise. It took all of my cunning."

She nodded. "Babe, I knew you were up to something, but I never expected this."

She looked at the cover one more time. "When you do the second edition though, we need a sexy couple cover.. you know like Mr and Mrs Smith style..." She beckoned for him to turn around, and leant her back against him, giggling as she knew he was turning to look at her. "Yeah. Perfect."

"Mr and Mrs Beaumont. I like it."

She turned back to face him. "So do I. Although, I still can't believe you've managed to pull this off."

"I think you'll understand as you read it... if you want to read it of course... but, it's kind of our love story." He blushed ever so slightly, his little smile showing his dimples off.

She melted. "Aw, come here, you." She pulled him into a kiss. "Of course I want to read it. Put a copy in my suitcase. Holiday reading, here I come."

"Already done..."

"Or, maybe you could read it to me? It is your story, after all..."

"Now I like that idea..."

"I could get a bedtime story... every night?" She threw him her best come hither look.

"Heh... you could..."

At that, Jen felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to see Mara.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Your Graces, but I thought you'd want to know that your carriage is here. Your honeymoon awaits."

"Carriage?" Jen asked her. "I thought we were going to the airport in the limo?" She looked at Maxwell, who looked equally thrown.

Rick was not far behind Mara. "All part of the service. The limo will follow with your cases. I really hope you both enjoy your stay on the island."

“Thanks Rick,” Maxwell said. “I think it’s safe to say we will...”

Jen grinned. “Well, at least I have something to read now...”

Rick laughed. “Come on, as Mara said, your carriage awaits.”

Mara escorted them outside where the court were gathering on the palace lawn to say their goodbyes.

“I wish you two all the best,” Regina said.

“Even I have to admit, you’ve earned a chance to enjoy yourselves,” Madeleine said.

“Bon voyage!” Kiara called out.

“Hope you have the most amazing honeymoon ever,” Penelope shouted.

“We’ll try!” Maxwell replied, as they hurried towards the carriage.

Mara pulled Jen back for a second. “Just watch your back out there, Mrs Beaumont.”

Jen smiled at her. “Always.”

The rest of the court cheered as Jen and Maxwell crossed the lawn. Savannah and Bertrand waved to them from the front of the crowd. Bartie stirred in Savannah’s arms and rubbed his eyes.

“Bartie, you woke up just in time, look who’s leaving! Uncle Maxwell and Auntie Jen!” Savannah said. “Say goodbye sweetie.”

Maxwell gave Bartie a quick cuddle. “Aww, I’m gonna miss you little guy!”

“We’ll bring him back some souvenirs,” Jen said.

“Just please, for the love of god, make sure they’re too large for him to chew on,” lamented Bertrand. “And... try to do plenty of things that I wouldn’t do.”

Jen raised her eyebrows. “Are you giving us permission to have *fun*?”

“For such a special occasion, yes,” Bertrand told her.

“Jen, Maxwell.” Olivia stepped up beside them. “I hope you’ll both find happiness. You truly deserve it.” She held out her hand to Jen in a gesture of respect.

“Nah. You’re not getting away that easily..”

Jen pulled Olivia into a hug, but instead of resisting, she hugged her tightly back. “Should you ever need it, you’ll always have a friend in Lythikos.”

“And you’ll always have one in Valtoria,” Jen echoed.

Their closest friends were waiting beside the carriage.

“Safe travels, you two,” Rick said.

“Have fun out there,” Drake agreed.

Hana was emotional. “See you both soon!”

“Oh, you guys..” Jen held out her arms and all their friends stepped up to pull her and Maxwell into a group hug.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” Maxwell said, making finger guns at them all.

“That’s a promise,” Jen smiled, as Maxwell held out a hand to help her into the carriage.

As the carriage started to carry the two of them away from the palace, Chance chased after it happily, barking in farewell.

“Be good while we’re gone, boy!” Jen called to Chance.

As the carriage rolled through the streets of the capital, still empty before the day’s bustle began, they found themselves smiling at each other.

“It’s weird to think that all of us, our wedding, me becoming a duchess, saving the country.. it all started that morning in New York.. when a cute nobleman I’d only met the night before offered to sponsor me at court.”

“Well, at least you thought I was cute,” Maxwell said, putting his arm around her. “To be honest, I told myself that invite was for Rick’s sake. But even back then, I was hoping to see more of you. Like I told you, by the stream that time. I looked at you, and I saw hope.”

“Yeah, I remember. Hope for Cordonia, hope for Rick..”

“Not just that. I saw hope for *love*, Jen. Hope for *happiness*. I dared to dream that I *could* have love in my life, for the first time. It was a dream I’d given up on, a long time ago. But, you gave me back that hope. I just never dared to dream that you would *be* that love.”

“Oh...” She was welling up. “That is so beautiful, Maxwell..”

“You changed my whole world, Jen. You were always so confident and brave, and you made me want to be more of those things too.”

“You’ve always seemed confident to me,” Jen told him. “Bertrand might say *too* confident..”

“About stuff that’s in my wheelhouse, sure. But when I’m with you, I’ve always felt like I could do *anything*. And now look at us. Champion of the Realm, and a soon to be best-selling author, Duchess and Duke of Valtoria..”

“When you put it like that, it feels like the sky’s the limit,” she said, resting her tired head on his shoulder.

“I have no idea where we’ll be in a few years from now, but I do know that it’s going to be awesome,” he promised her.

“We’ve already saved one kingdom. Our career as international crime fighters is only beginning!”

“Honestly, if you said you were about to fight an alien invasion, I’d sign up in a heartbeat. There’s nothing my amazing wife can’t do. And no matter where you go, I’m gonna have your back.”

“That’s why we’re the dream team,” she sighed. “Perhaps we’ll be writing our fifth novel together. We’ll be a literary power couple, taking the novelverse by storm!”

“I’ve already got a working title for the next volume of our memoirs.. Jen and the Beaumonts. Are we a band? A superhero squad? An ancient and awesome noble family? People’ll have to get the book to find out.”

“And when they get to the part where I single handedly save you from Bertrand’s evil clone, they’ll be begging for a sequel!”

“Hey, no spoilers!”

She laughed. “If I know one thing though, in five years’ time we’ll still be wonderfully and obnoxiously in love. We’ll be kissing each other on street corners and getting moaned at by strangers..”

“They’ll say get a room, and we’ll say, this duchy *is* our room!”

“And we’ll know they’re only teasing us because they’re just jealous..”

“I’d be jealous of me too if I wasn’t already married to you.”

Maxwell leant in to kiss her, perhaps seeing the invitation in her eyes. He pulled her into an embrace, and his lips met hers in an electrifying kiss. It left her breathless, tingling, giddy. When Maxwell pulled back, he was smiling warmly.

“Whatever, I can’t wait to see what our future looks like together. I love you, Jen Jones.”

“I love you too, Duke Maxwell Percival Beaumont of Valtoria, Lord of Ramsford, Guardian of the Realm..”

He laughed.

“Having said all that.. I *still* like you better as a Maxwell,” she giggled, watching his reaction as he processed the same memory she just had.

“Oh, you really made my night when you said that..”

“If only I’d known that at the time,” she sighed. “Still, here we are. On our way to our romantic honeymoon on a tropical island..” She reached up to touch Maxwell’s cheek and he pulled her close, tilting his head to press a tender kiss to her lips. She smiled against him, and felt him smile too.

“So, is your happy ending as good as you dreamed it would be?” he asked her.

“No. It’s better.”

This concludes the Valtoria Diaries! Thank you so much for reading if you've got this far :) If you enjoyed this, you might like to know that I plan to continue Jen and Maxwell's story throughout "The Royal Heir" period at some point! Until then, please feel free to check out my other works :)

The Valtoria Diaries 2 - Extract!

Chapter Summary

I just wanted to let those of you who have subscribed to The Valtoria Diaries know that I have just published Ch1 of The Valtoria Diaries 2! You can find it in my work listing.

The Valtoria Diaries 2 will be my attempt at making sense of The Royal Heir and TVD2 will cover books 1-2 of the TRH series.

Chapter Notes

I wouldn't want to post an empty chapter, so here is the first part of Chapter 1. Hope you like it!

"Whoo." Maxwell slouched back on his chair, looking around at the paradise he currently found himself in. Beautiful sunset, endless ocean, sexy wife in a hot new sundress sitting opposite him. "Doesn't get much better than this, right?"

"Wrong!" Jen piped up, looking at the ominous ripples of water bubbling alongside the pier they were on. "Because this is *exactly* where the sharks want us to be!"

He jumped to his feet, not wanting to relive *that* experience. "Abort! Abandon pier!"

She called him back. "Maxwell! I was kidding! I'm pretty sure there's no sharks in these waters. You're quite safe!"

Such. An. Idiot. Fell for it. Again. He stopped in his tracks. "Yeah. Of course. I am *also* joking! Hahahahahaha!" He turned on his heels and sauntered back to his seat. Jen's face was a picture of suspicion.

"Out with it," she said, arms folded.

"With what? *Oh*. Why, Jen, that's very forward of you, but the staff are still here.."

"Not that," she giggled, pelting a beautifully folded napkin at him. "I mean, this shark story. Or stories. I still haven't heard them, even though you *referenced them in our wedding vows...*"

Ohh boy. "You'll have to ask Leo sometime."

"I'm asking you now. And we don't have secrets. Do we?"

He laughed nervously. "Right-o. So. There's actually two shark adventures. The first one was about three, four years ago? I went on holiday with Leo and Rick to Florida. Last minute deal, just a guys

holiday. There was this one time we were all trying to impress this girl... well when I say all... I mean... uh... it was mainly me..”

Jen simply raised her eyebrows.

Start with a compliment. That'll work. “I mean, she wasn’t anywhere near as beautiful as you, Jen, but this girl had the biggest knockers I’d ever seen! I mean, size isn’t everything! Yours are perfect! Hers kept getting in the way when we....” *Oh dear. Not helping.* “Aaaaaaanyway...”

“What did you do, Maxwell?”

“Well, Leo had told us that this beach we were on was shark infested waters. And this girl’s been flirting with us all for a few days now, and Leo and Rick know I’ve got the serious hots for her, and she’s like, I dare you guys to go surfing in the shark infested waters. If you do, I’ll make sure I make it worth your while. You know.”

Jen folded her arms. “Oh, I know.”

“See! Now you know why I never told you this story! Anyway, Leo, being the heir to the Cordonian throne at the time, strangely thinks this is a brilliant idea! Rick, on the other hand, is having absolutely none of it! So Leo’s all, oh well, that’s probably for the best Rick, if I die today, have a nice reign! And he grabs his surfboard and off he goes. Rick’s having a coronary, Leo’s having a great time, this girl is fluttering her eyelashes at Leo, and when he comes back, she’s all over him. I’m not impressed. I thought I was first in line for her affections! A flash of bravado runs through this very heart..” He imitated an exaggerated heartbeat. A small smile was creeping up Jen’s mouth. “I grab the surfboard, and I’m in! I didn’t even know how to surf.”

Jen laughed. “Oh, no...”

“But you know me.” He winked at her. “What’s surfing if it’s not breakdancing on the waves, right? So now I’m holding my own. The guys on the beach are all totally in awe at my unexpected dominance of the sea! But... that’s when they came...”

She gasped. “No..”

“Yup. Three of the things. Started to circle me. I was about twenty-five yards out at the time. I’ve never screamed so loud in all my life, and you know that’s saying something. I was praying to the squid gods to save me! Ended up battering one of them over the head with my surfboard! But, somehow.. I made it back to the sand intact!”

Jen applauded. “I’m sure Big Knockers was suitably impressed!”

“Well, here’s the thing...” He shook his head. “That’s when Leo admitted that they had all cooked this up between them just to see if I would be stupid enough to do it! And the waters weren’t really shark infested... they were *dolphins!*”

Jen howled with laughter. “Babe, did you murder a sweet innocent dolphin with your surfboard?”

“Hey, dolphins are dangerous, I’ll have you know! Apparently they can kill people!”

She sighed. “Oh well. So the moral of this story is?”

He grinned. "If you think you're putting your life in danger, even if you're not, it might still get you laid. So do you want to hear the second shark story?"

"Let's leave it at that, shall we? Otherwise you might well be putting your life in danger right now!"

He raised his eyebrows. "I'm so still getting laid though, right?"

She had that defiant look on her face that meant *you're so right but there's no way in the world I'm admitting it to you at this exact moment.*

Winner, winner.. wait, what was this dinner?

Their waiter had just put a plate of with two spoons of intriguing looking orange goo in front of them. They both looked at him.

"The chef has taken the liberty of sending out an amuse-bouche," he explained.

Well, that was game. He grabbed his spoon and ladled it down his throat. Ooh. Fishy. "Yummmm."

As Jen lifted up her spoon, the waiter went on. "Fresh cut pineapple aioli with tuna sashimi, straight from the ocean only an hour ago and.. oh no..." He grabbed the spoon out of Jen's hand. "Best you don't, Your Grace."

"Ack," Maxwell protested. "It's too late for me!"

"I'm so sorry, Duchess Jen," the waiter went on. "This is unforgivable. The mercury levels.."

He coughed and spluttered. "Ohmygod, ohmygod, I'm gonna diiiieeee..."

They both looked at him.

"Babe, chill. You're fine." Jen then turned to the waiter. "Just give us a minute, would you? And thanks for your concern, but there's really no need to worry about any dietary requirements I might have. *Really.*"

"I see. I do apologise, Your Grace." The waiter bowed, and scuttled away, his head held low.

Jen put her head in her hands. "I don't know whether to laugh or cry right now..."

"I don't get it? How could it poison *you* and not me?"

She sighed. "The waiter just made a pretty big assumption right there. He thinks I'm *pregnant.*"

Crap! "You're not, are you?"

"No!" She laughed, and smiled. "You'd be the *first* to know if I was. But hey. I guess that's what he thought. That or he assumed I was trying to get pregnant. Because that's what people do on honeymoons. Although... not us." The smile disappeared.

Gulp.

Still, he'd been trying to work out when to bring this topic up. Why not now? It would definitely get him back in her good books after the whole *big knockers* misjudgement. He knew he should have left that bit of the story out.

"Yyyeah. So I've been meaning to talk to you about that."

She looked up at him, startled and hopeful.

"I know we had a little chat about this back at Valtoria not so long ago. Remember? Just before we had that s.."

"Well aware of what we did afterwards," she interrupted. "Your point?"

He looked into the distance. "It's just.. I can see what a great mom you would make. I mean, you're *amazing* with Bartie. And you give me so much courage, Jen. Just by being you, just by the very fact that you choose to be with me, and by the way you believe in me? You've given me courage to think that I could actually do the whole dad thing one day, yeah? And possibly even do a slightly-better-than-awful job of it?"

She reached for his hands across the table. "Hey. I get that your relationship with your dad was a bit tricky when you were a kid. But that doesn't mean that you'd be a bad one. I think you'd make an incredible dad."

"Mostly though, Jen, I just want to make a new life with you. A beautiful bouncing baby Beaumont! It just feels like the natural thing to do." He looked up at her. "And I know it'll make you happy...."

She was grinning from ear to ear. "Now come on babe. I need to be sure you're not just doing this to make *me* happy."

He squeezed her hands ridiculously tight. "Jen, it's gonna make me super happy! Just watching Bertrand and Bartie over the last few months – it's precious, isn't it? And the thought of a little Maxwell junior just fills me with joy. We should do it. I'm ready to do it. Sooner, rather than later."

She squealed with delight, and jumped to her feet, running round to throw herself into his waiting lap. "I can't believe it! I'm so happy!"

"I can't believe it either! I never thought this time last year I'd be planning a family in the next twelve months. And I don't think *anyone* would ever have believed me if I had thought it! But, Jen, you turned my life upside down for all the right reasons. I love you."

She kissed him hard, something else went hard too, and she'd obviously noticed due to the resultant giggles.

"Whoa, Maxwell!" She patted him gently in the affected area. "Down boy! Not before dinner! We have this amazing posh meal about to be brought over to us..." She looked over. "Ah okay. Maybe they're waiting until after we finish our little moment."

"We can keep them waiting a *bit* longer..." He winked, and she was mush, moving in for another smacker to the lips.

Afterwards, she stood up and wandered back to her seat, grinning from ear to ear.

“Guess I’m forgiven then for that story?” He thought he’d better check.

“Oh, babe. There’s nothing to forgive. I was teasing you. I love hearing these crazy little stories from your past. I mean, this is a great example that just illustrates the things I love about you. You knew what you wanted, ie the big knockers, and you did a crazy and dangerous thing to get it. You never stop believing that anything is possible.”

“I still don’t get why it doesn’t make you jealous,” he said, and then suddenly realised that sounded like something a controlling asshole might say. “I’m not disappointed. Just.. curious.”

She smiled. “How can I be jealous of a girl who got her, admittedly big, knockers out for a man I didn’t even know existed at the time? The main thing is, we’re here now. The past is the past. You’re my present, and you’re my future...” She couldn’t hide a beam. “And that future, although it would have always been amazing, now looks a hundred times better..” She was almost tearing up.

He reached over to touch her face. “So why are you crying?”

“I’m not! I’m just...”

“Got something in your eye, yeah? I can relate.”

She giggled and kissed his hand as it lingered onto her lips. “I just can’t wait to do this. I mean, I can wait. As long as you need to. But, I can’t wait. Now that I know it’s what you want too.”

“Well, there’s no immediate rush I guess, let’s just see what happens shall we?” he said to her. “Let’s enjoy our honeymoon, and talk about it again when we get home.”

She raised her eyebrows seductively. “We have to do more than *talk* about it to make it happen, right? And I have to say, I’m rather relishing that part of the procedure..” She reached across to tug at his shirt buttons.

“Hard same...” He glanced at the sea, now nice and calm. “Say, how about we go for a skinny dip on the beach when we’re done here?”

She shot him a look of challenge. “But what happens if we encounter dangerous dolphins?” She burst out laughing again. “Oh, I can’t wait to get Rick’s take on that story.”

“Pretty sure you’re more likely to get actual sharks here, Jen.”

She giggled, rubbing her hands together. “Then it looks like we’re in for a fun evening!”

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