

Be My Royal Romance

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/22774804) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/22774804>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/M , Gen
Fandoms:	王子様のプロポーズ Be My Princess (Visual Novel) , The Royal Romance (Visual Novel)
Relationships:	Liam/Main Character (The Royal Romance) , Roberto Button & Reader , Edward Levaincois & Reader
Characters:	Roberto Button , Edward Levaincois , Liam (The Royal Romance) , MC , OC - Character
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-02-17 Updated: 2020-09-05 Words: 18,845 Chapters: 13/?

Be My Royal Romance

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Summary

Gwendolyn Graham is just like every other student at Charles University. Except that her best friends happen to all be crown princes from six neighboring kingdoms. It's not always easy being the grounding force between her friends but it is almost always interesting. One afternoon Princes Roberto & Edward approach Gwen asking her to act as a cultural liaison between the six union kingdoms and an outside kingdom, Cordonia. Would Gwen have agreed to attend the gala if she'd known she would fall in love with Cordonia's dashing and charming King Liam?

Casual Visit



Twenty-five-year-old Gwendolyn Graham blinked several times as her eyes adjusted to the sunlight. She'd just stepped outside of her university's history and social sciences building. It had been a long morning hopping from class to class and the glowing fluorescent lights inside were no match for the crisp natural sun streaming through the courtyard that afternoon. Gwen began walking towards the gates of the school grounds where she knew a car would be waiting to take her back home.

"Hey, Gwendolyn?" One of the guys from her last class tried to get her attention. Gwen turned to him, indicating she was listening. "Those guys over there are looking for you. Do you know them?" He pointed over to the school's gates.

"Gwen! Hey Gwen!" Shouting her name and waving wildly was her friend Roberto. It looked like Roberto had brought along another of their friends, Edward. Edward and Rob stood out from the rest of the university crowd milling around the school grounds partially because they weren't students at Gwendolyn's school, but mostly because they were Crown Princes of their respective countries.

"Yeah." Gwen adjusted her backpack on her shoulders uncomfortably. "That's my housemate and his friend." She answered vaguely before running off. It wasn't exactly a lie, she was currently living at Villa Altaria, Prince Roberto's palace.

"Roberto, you're drawing quite a lot of attention." Edward, the more dignified of the two, quietly commented. "That was not part of our plan."

"Aw c'mon Ed!" Roberto chuckled loudly, even though he knew Edward was not a fan of nicknames. "I haven't seen Gwen in forever! I'm just excited." Edward didn't ask how it was possible to live in the same palace as someone but never see them. He knew all too well how

busy the life of a crown prince could be and he knew exactly how much preparation it required to clear even an hour or two out of ones schedule.

Trying to avoid drawing more unwanted attention Gwen quickly made her way over to her friends. She noticed even from a distance that they were both dressed as casually as princes could. For Edward that meant cool grey slacks, a white button up shirt and a navy and white striped a Cardigan. He stood straight and regal next to Roberto who'd taken to leaning on a nearby gate pole. Rob wore a pair of fitted dark blue trousers, a white t-shirt, a blue silk ascot tie, and a chocolate brown blazer that complimented his eyes. The pair of them were quite a sight.

"Prince Edward, Prince Roberto." Gwen greeted each of them with a respectful nod in place of the traditional bow or curtsy. "What brings the two of you all the way out here?"

Gwen knew from their casual state of dress that the Princes weren't at the school for official business, so she could only assume they were there to see her. She noted the careful expression on Edward's face and the never wavering smile on Roberto's as she waited for her friends to explain themselves.

"We wanted to extend you an invitation." Roberto explained, seemingly unaware of the attention they'd gathered around.

"Perhaps we could discuss things over tea?" Edward suggested. Unlike Roberto he was very much aware of all the eyes on their small group and the hushed conversations happening around them. "That is if you're free to travel with us Miss Gwendolyn?"

"I've already finished my classes for the day." Gwen supplied. "Plus, I've made it a rule to never turn down tea at Edward's secret garden."

"Then our chariot awaits!" With a flourish of his hand Edward gestured towards a limousine on the other side of the university gates.

Gwen noticed the flags of Altaria, Roberto's kingdom, posted at the front of the limo, so the car belonged to Roberto. Two figures stood by the car. Roberto's Butler, Alberto, was waiting outside of the car impatiently. He stared at his watch painstaking visualizing the seconds tick by. Alberto was the type of person who appreciated efficiency and timeliness, neither was something that Roberto held much stake in. Edward's Butler, Louis, was also standing outside of the car. He kept a watchful on their surroundings as two Princes and their friend walked towards the car.

"Miss Gwendolyn, lovely to see you again." Louis commented when she was close enough to the car that he didn't need to shout the friendly greeting. Alberto looked up from his watch at the mention of their newest guest.

"Yes, hello. Into to car if you wouldn't mind, Miss Gwendolyn. We have a tight schedule to keep." Alberto opened the back door of the limo and waited expectantly. Gwendolyn nodded to show that she understood. She quickly removed her backpack and climbed into the limo. Roberto and Edward soon slid in after her. Alberto got behind the steering wheel and Louis

sat in the passenger's seat beside him. One of the butlers pulled up the partition separating them from their passengers.

"As always, it's nice to see both of you." Gwen told her friends with a smile. "I'm sorry that I haven't been available lately. School's been a bit much."

"It's understandable." Edward commented. "No one could fault you for valuing your education and our own schedules haven't been easy to manage either, have they Roberto?"

"That's right." Rob nodded. "Ed and I have been busy with official Prince duties." He frowned. "And the parties aren't nearly as fun without you."

"Well, the semester is nearly over. Maybe I can make time for a party or two soon." Gwen propositioned hopefully. "Now are you really going to make me wait till we get to the palace before you tell me what's going on? Like I said I'm thrilled to see you both but neither of you come to meet me at the school very often. Usually when that happens you've either got bad news or you're planning a party. So, which is it?"

"We're almost at the palace." Edward announced. "I think it would be much better to discuss matters surrounded by the sweet delicate scent of flowers and the warmth of the sun on our faces."

Edward was right, they were almost at his palace. Edward was the crowned Prince of Charles Kingdom, the very same Kingdom where Gwen was a student. So it was a very short car ride before the enchanting Charles Palace came into view from inside the limo. Of the castles that she'd been lucky enough to visit, Gwen thought that Charles Palace reminded her the most of a fairytale. With the exterior being constructed mostly of limestone, the palace featured several towers topped with twisted spires. Large banners bearing the Levaincois family crest were proudly displayed at the front gates of the castle.

Alberto drove the limo along a stonework driveway. An intricate zig-zag pattern of limestone that had been laid down centuries ago. The driveway was lined on both sides with rose bushes. Gwendolyn tried to name each variety as their vehicle cruised by. She inhaled deeply, believing she could smell the flowers despite all the windows on the limo being sealed up tightly. The car came to a stop at the end of the driveway. Louis opened the door and the three friends piled out of the car. While Alberto drove the limo off, Louis guided the group to Edward's secret garden.

The Secret Garden

Chapter Summary

Prince Edward invites Prince Roberto and Gwendolyn to his secret garden where they can discuss their plans for the Union and Cordonia.



Prince Edward's secret garden wasn't just secret in name. It was truly a private garden open only to Edward and anyone he sought fit to invite in. Hidden behind high walls of hedges near the west corner of the castle was the garden's entrance protected by a curtain of ivy. The secret garden was a vast collection of the most beautiful flowers imaginable. The first time Gwen had been invited inside Edward had taken her on a detailed tour and pointed out every flower or piece of foliage by name. She regretted that she couldn't remember all their names now, but at least she could identify the small patch of bushes proudly growing delicate pink roses. This variety of blush colored petals was the rose often associated with the Levaincois family.

Within minutes a table filled with treats and a warm kettle of tea had been set in the garden. Gwendolyn, Roberto and Edward sat together, the host pouring the tea. Once again Louis and Alberto stood separate from the group. They were chatting quietly but their attention, at least part of it, never strayed from their Princes.

"Alright, now that we're settled properly," Edward set the sugar bowl he'd been holding down on the table and smiled. "I'm ashamed to admit that you've seen through our ruse Miss Gwendolyn. There is a party that we wish to invite you to." Gwendolyn smirked. She enjoyed being right and both Edward and Roberto knew this about her. She held her teacup in her hand and waited for Edward to continue.

“I’m throwing a small gala here at Charles Palace.” He explained. “All the usual guests will be there. Prince Robert of course, and the others from the union. Prince Glen, Prince Keith, Prince Josh, Prince Wilfred and representatives from Noble Michael will be invited as well. But I’ve also decided to include nobles from outside of the union on the guest list.”

Gwendolyn was surprised to hear this. The union that Edward spoke of was based on a peace and trade treaty for six kingdoms who shared borders one way or another as well as a seventh kingdom, Noble Michael, in the center which bordered all six of the other kingdoms simultaneously. Because of this treaty the seven unified kingdoms were able to operate with little to no involvement from other countries around the world. It wasn’t as if they weren’t allowed to visit or interact with other kingdoms, it was just very rare.

“I thought this might interest you as you yourself are not from a union kingdom.” Edward smiled. The possibility that she may be the only person Edward knew who wasn’t from a union kingdom had crossed her mind before, but Gwen hadn’t thought about it since she’d first become friends with the princes. “You would be doing me a great favor if you were to attend the party as a cultural liaison.”

“Me?” Gwen put her tea down carefully. The last thing she wanted was to spill her tea or worse break one of Edward’s teacups. “I mean I’m honored, Prince Edward, but I’m not sure I’m qualified to…”

“Don’t be silly Gwen!” Roberto insisted. “You were able to get all of us to understand each other. If it weren’t for you, we’d never know about Josh’s love for rice balls or, well, anything about Wilfred. Your good with people.”

“All I’ve ever done is listen and be supportive.” Gwen countered. “It was easy enough to become good friends with the two of you, but some of the others took time. It definitely wouldn’t have happened at a single gala.”

“Perhaps I should explain further.” Edward suggested. “The intended purpose of this gala is to invite other kingdoms to see how things are done here. Monarchies are few and far these days. It would be nice to get to know some of the royals we’re not as closely associated with.”

“Are you looking for allies?” Gwen asked. “More kingdoms to join the union.”

“Potentially.” Edward nodded before taking another sip from his tea.

“We’re interested in one country in particular, Cordonia. They’re a pretty big kingdom and they’re financially stable.” Roberto told her.

“How do the other princes feel about this?” Gwen wanted to know.

“They’re reluctant to relinquish any power.” Edward confessed. “But they understand that the extra capital could help us all.”

“Forgive me if this is a rude question but what exactly makes Cordonia so rich?” Gwen realized her tea was beginning to get cold. She picked up her teacup again and sipped from it

for the first time. Instead of the usual sweet floral taste of Edwards signature rose petal tea, it was a spicy herbal flavor.

“Apples.” Roberto explained watching her confused expression. “That’s what’s in the tea.”

“Yes, Cordonian’s primary export.” Edward nodded. “I thought a bit of Cordonian apple tea would be appropriate for our meeting. But it’s not just apples that contribute to Cordonian’s success. They have several duchys that seem to run almost independently much like your United States. The truth is we don’t know much about Cordonian.”

“That’s where you come in.” Roberto chimed. “Ed was telling me all about his plan to invite the Cordonian King to a party and he said he was having trouble researching Cordonian. I told him that your great at research. You spend so much time at your school library and the one at the villa.”

“Well, yeah, but doing research for a paper is a little different than doing research for I don’t know, political intrigue.” Gwen shrugged. She was honored that her friends had thought of her for such an important task, but surely, they had someone more qualified for something like this. Charles in particular was a kingdom that celebrated knowledge. It was one of the reasons she’d chosen to study there in the first place.

“Listen, I wasn’t going to say anything until we were on the way back to Altaria but the only way Keithster and Wills agreed to this whole plan was if you came to the party.” Roberto confessed.

“Prince Keith, said that he wanted me there?” Gwen raised her eyebrows in surprise. She had a good relationship with all six princes, but Prince Keith was the most abrasive of the group. His kingdom, Liberty, valued freedom most of all and this often left Keith under the impression that he could speak his mind whether his opinion was constructive or not.

“Liberty has been hit with a rather hard recession, as you know.” Edward reminded her. “He would gladly accept financial aid from Cordonian but has concerns that this may affect his people’s freedoms. Prince Keith trusts you to give a fair assessment of Cordonian King’s relationship with his people. In Prince Wilfred’s case, Phillip is a very traditions-based Kingdom. He doesn’t want to welcome anyone into our union who may jeopardize those traditions.”

“You’ve all really thought about this.” Gwen sat back in her seat and looked between her two friends thoughtfully. The princes had managed to persuade her into doing crazy things before, like the time Roberto told an entire room of partygoers that she was his fiancé. This was the first time that they’d actually come to her with a royal responsibility. It was also one of the rare occasions that all six of them seemed to be in agreement about something.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, when’s the gala?” Gwen asked.

“A little over a month from now.” Roberto told her. “The first day of summer. You should be finished with school by then so it’s perfect timing.”

“Yeah, perfect.” Gwen held back a laugh.

“In the meantime, you’ll have unprecedented access to the Royal libraries of all six Kingdoms as well as Noble Michael. Prince Roberto, myself and the others will try to be available to whenever you have questions. I have complete faith that you will perform this task admirably, Miss Gwendolyn.”

“I hate to cut the visit short, Ed.” Roberto said, rising to his feet, but I’m afraid I’m due back home for a meeting with the King. Gwen, would you like to ride home with me? I can always have Al send a care later if you prefer to stay.”

“As much as I enjoy Prince Edward’s company, I’m afraid I do have schoolwork and now a great deal of research to get started on.” Gwen stood up too. “Until next time Prince Edward.”

“It was wonderful having you both hear.” Edward assured them with a smile. “Louis will show you out. I’m going to have another cup of tea, but Miss Gwendolyn please don’t hesitate to ask for help should you need it and thank you so much for doing this for us.”

Analysis & Promises

Chapter Summary

Gwendolyn tried to convince Roberto to take the possible new alliance seriously. Roberto hopes that all the changes coming tomorrow are for the better.



“If you continue writing like that, you’re going to burn a hole through the paper.” Roberto laughed. They were almost back at Villa Altaria and Gwen hadn’t spoken to him the entire ride from Charles. Instead she’d been scribbling intently in her notebook the whole way. Gwen looked up from her notebook wearing an apologetic smile.

“Now Rob, you and the others have trusted me with an important task. I want to make sure I do things right. I want to start by meeting with each of the princes to see exactly what they want to gain from a union with Cordonia and what they’re afraid they’ll lose.” She explained. “I know Wilfred likes to have his meetings early in the morning and that he prefers to have everything scheduled through Claude but Glenn likes to schedule his appointments himself...”

“Why don’t you start with me?” Roberto asked.

“Alright.” Gwendolyn repositioned herself so that she could better interview her friend. She changed her notebook to a blank page and asked her first question. “Prince Roberto of Altaria, what do you hope to gain from a relationship with Cordonia, if we are able to build one?”

“Not much honestly.” Roberto yawned. “Altaria’s in a good place. I just hope these Cordonians know how to have fun. The others can be stuffy a lot of the time, don’t you think?”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re hoping for?” Gwen couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “You just want some new friends to hang out with?”

“It sounds better if you say that I’m looking forward to making new allies.” Roberto decided. “Plus, it would be nice to explore and see new places.”

“I see.” Gwen wrote Roberto’s answer down. “And are you worried about having to give anything up?”

“No.” Roberto answered confidently. “We’ve been able to make things work with the other kingdoms. How hard could it be to add one more?”

“Well, introducing another kingdom into the union will be more taxing on everyone’s resources.” Gwen sighed. “And Prince Edward said that Cordonia is a large kingdom. That might spread resources even thinner.”

“Miss Gwendolyn is right, Your Highness.” Alberto added from the driver’s seat. Gwen and Roberto turned and faced the back of his head with surprise. Neither of them realized that he’d been listening in on their conversation. “Adding another kingdom will change things in Altaria for better or worse. You should consider this change seriously.”

“Yeah, okay.” Roberto rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably. “Can I think about my answers a little longer?”

“Sure Rob.” Gwen nodded. “I know Al said you have a tight schedule to keep this afternoon but maybe later we can hang out and watch a movie?”

“That’d be great.” Roberto’s smile returned. “I’ll work extra hard so that we can hang out.”

“Miss Gwendolyn, Prince Roberto, welcome home.” Alberto turned the limo onto the twisting driveway of Villa Altaria and within seconds the Altarian palace came into view.

Over the next five weeks Gwendolyn worked tirelessly. She somehow managed to finish all her schoolwork as well as find time to interview four of the six princes. (Roberto had yet to express any serious concerns to her and she knew she would have time to speak with Edward before the gala the next morning.) While visiting the princes, she stopped in each of their royal libraries for information on Cordonia and also any relevant information about the union kingdoms. She even tried her best to find out about the other nonunion kingdoms that would be invited to Prince Edward’s Gala.

It was the evening before the gala. In the morning Gwen, Prince Roberto and Alberto would all be traveling back to Charles to help Edward with the final preparations. Currently Gwendolyn sat cross-legged on the floor of her room at Villa Altaria. Cordonian newspapers and magazines were stacked neatly by one of her knees. Next to the stack was a file folder

filled with all the information she'd gathered on the applecentric Kingdom. Spread out in a fan around her were folders for each of the six union kingdoms and three more kingdoms that had been invited to the gala. Gwen was currently skimming through one of the Cordonian newspapers when someone knocked on her door.

"Come in." She called loudly, assuming it was Alberto. He usually came by to see if she needed anything before he retired for the night. She looked up from the magazine to see Prince Roberto holding a tray of tea with a few cookies carefully arranged on it.

"I saw that your lights were still on and thought I'd bring you a treat before bed." He explained placing the tea tray on a nearby table. "You've been working so hard."

"Cordonia wasn't exactly easy to research." Gwen yawned as she got to her feet. She stretched a little and shook out her tired limbs as she walked over to the table where Roberto stood. "But I'm sure it will all be worth it tomorrow when the King and his entourage arrive tomorrow. King Liam shares several similarities with all of you."

"Oh yeah?" Roberto asked, stealing a cookie for himself. "Like what?"

"Well, just like Wilfred Liam wasn't originally the crown prince of Cordonia." Gwen prepared herself a cup of tea as she talked with Roberto. "He had an older brother, Leo, who abdicated. Cordonia is a Kingdom with a *lot* of traditions and although they don't have as many laws as Dres Van, their justice system is no joke. Just like Edward said the royal family tends to leave day to day governing to the Dukes and Duchesses of their varying provinces. They only intervene on matters that will affect the kingdom as a whole. Prince Keith will like that."

"You were able to discover all of this from newspapers and fashion magazines?" Robert questioned as he bit into a second cookie.

"Not at all!" Gwen laughed. "The reason the six of you know so little about Cordonia is because most of the information available in the royal libraries across the six kingdoms is written a Cordonian specific dialect of Greek. It's an older practically unused language since most of Cordonia speaks English today. Only older or ceremonial legal documents are even written in it. Luckily Charles University has an excellent library and I was able to get English translations of almost anything I needed."

"And the fashion magazines?" Roberto asked again.

"That's because I started looking into Cordonia's more recent history." Gwen sighed. She paused to sip from her tea. "Once I knew what kind of Kingdom Cordonia was, I wanted to know what kind of King Liam was."

"What did you find out?" He wanted to know.

"I think in honor of fairness, I ought to let you make your own first impression along with the others tomorrow." Gwen commented, finishing her tea. She set her teacup down, suddenly looking very serious. "Hey Rob, I've never really been able to thank you..."

“Thank me?” Roberto looked confused, before nodding. “Oh, for the tea. It’s no big deal. Al brings you tea all the time.”

“What? No not for the tea.” She shook her head. “I meant everything else. You were the reason I came to Altaria in the first place...”

“You mean me and my big mouth.” He huffed regrettably.

“I wouldn’t exactly put it that way, but it was still nice of you to allow me to stay at the Villa when it wasn’t safe for me to go back to my apartment in Charles.” Gwen told him. “And even after everything that happened, when I said I thought it was best for us to stay friends. You still insisted that I stay in Altaria. And you were the one who suggested that I be in charge of researching Cordonia for the others. Things have been so chaotic that I’ve just never had a chance to thank you for being such a good friend.”

“It was nothing! That’s what friend’s do isn’t?” Roberto waved her off, his usual smile returning. He changed the subject quickly. “Say, I did think of one thing you can add to your list.”

“My list?” Gwen didn’t quite understand.

“Yeah your list of things we’re afraid to lose.” Roberto explained.

“Oh right. What is? I’ll write it down.” Gwen asked, searching around the room for a pen.

“It’s not a big deal.” He remarked casually. “Just promise me that no matter what happens we’ll always be friends. I just have this feeling that after tomorrow everything is going to change.”

“Rob, we’ll always be friends. I can promise you that.” Gwen assured him.

“I’m glad we’ve settled that. You should probably get some rest.” He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. “We wouldn’t want you too tired for the big Gala! Oh, and I had Al leave something in the closet for you while you were at school earlier, but don’t look until the morning, okay?”

With a playful smile on his lips, Roberto winked before sauntering out of the room. Yawning again, Gwen got to work gathering all her folders, magazines and newspapers off the ground. She wanted everything together and ready when it was time to leave for Charles in the morning. As she cleaned and straighten, she did cast a wistful glance at the closet wondering if she should dare a peek inside. The surprise gift from Roberto could only be a new dress for the gala. Shaking her head, Gwen decided to keep her promise not to look until tomorrow. She changed and turned off the lights before tip-toeing across the marble floor and snuggling into bed for the night.

The Dress

Chapter Summary

The morning of the big Gala finally arrives. Gwendolyn is still trying to cram as much information about Cordonia as possible while still trying to get ready for her big night.



“Miss Gwendolyn?” Gwen woke the next morning to a sharp knock that could only belong to Alberto.

“Good morning Al!” She called through the door as she climbed out of bed. She made her way to the door and let the butler in. Alberto stepped inside carrying a tray with a light breakfast and a cup of coffee.

“Due to today’s busy schedule I think it would be more efficient for you and Prince Roberto to have breakfast in your rooms. It will allow you more time to get ready for the gala.” He explained. “I’ll be by to check on you in a short while.”

“Thanks Al.” Gwen nodded, already reaching for the coffee. Alberto bowed and began to exit the room when she called out to him. “Oh Alberto, one more thing. Could you take my dress down out of the closet? You know I have the hardest time getting those things out of the bags.”

“Certainly Miss Gwendolyn.” Alberto allowed himself a small smile as he crossed the room. He remembered all too well the last time Prince Roberto had taken Gwendolyn to a party. She’d somehow managed to get a \$4,000 dress caught in the garment bag’s zipper. When she’d tried to loosen the dress herself it caused a small tear. She’d been fortunate that the royal seamstress was able to make a perfect repair, and no one had noticed the damage, not even the gown’s design who’d been in attendance that evening.

Alberto carefully removed the new dress from its bag and displayed it safely on Gwendolyn's bed. She put her coffee down and joined Al by the bed. As she took in the sight of the ball gown she couldn't stop herself from gasping. The top was a tightly fitted corset covered in hundreds of rhinestones and beads. The sleeves were two off the shoulder strips of rose gold fabric also covered in glittering gems. Each of the gems on the sleeves and bodice were held in place by rose gold fittings. The skirt was an enormous mountain of pale pink tulle, the top layer of which was covered in even more rose gold and rhinestones.

"He can't be serious." Gwendolyn scoffed. "I can't wear this! It looks like it weighs more than I do."

"I believe it was Prince Roberto's intention that you stand out at the gala this evening." Alberto suggested.

"Well, I'd say mission accomplished." She sighed. "I'm going to look like a giant cupcake."

"Perhaps I should go check on his highness..." Alberto bowed again and backed out of the room.

Turning her attention away from the cupcake ballgown for now, Gwen began to eat the breakfast that Alberto has brought in earlier. She was grateful for the coffee he'd sent along because they were starting their day so early. From her room's windows she could tell that the sun had only just begun to stretch across Altaria. If Prince Edward's gala was anything like the others she'd attended with the princes, it would stretch very late into the evening as well. They had a long day ahead of them, there was no question about it.

While she ate Gwen skimmed through her files again, trying to cram as much information into her brain as possible. After her meal was gone and her coffee cup emptied, it was time to wrestle herself into the monstrous cupcake gown. Gwen stood over her bed again wondering how on earth she was going to get inside the thing. Just then there was another knock at the door, it was softer and different from Al's. Gwen wondered if it could be Roberto.

"Good. I can ask him how I'm supposed to impress foreign dignitaries while looking like I'm part of the dessert table." She quickly made her way over to the door without bothering to ask who it was. "Oh!" She was surprised. Rather than Prince Roberto it was one of the maids.

"Miss Gwendolyn, please forgive me if I'm interrupting anything." The maid bowed apologetically.

"No, it's alright." Gwen assured her with a smile. "I've just finished my breakfast and was about to get dressed.

"Oh good, that's why I'm here." The maid explained. "Alberto thought you might need help getting into your gown for the evening. He said it was rather large."

"You have no idea." Gwen laughed and invited the maid inside. Now armed with the maid's help it only took a few minutes to put the dress on and tie up the corset in the back. "It doesn't look so bad now." She commented, looking at herself in the mirror as the maid cleaned up her breakfast tray.

“It looks absolutely stunning on you Miss Gwendolyn.” The maid nodded with approval.

“Thank you for saying so.” Gwen said as she swished the large skirt from side to side watching the tulle swing in the full-length mirror before her. “I was afraid I was going to look ridiculous but now that it’s on I can appreciate it better. Thank you so much for...” She turned to thank the maid for her help but as she did, she noticed a small slit on one side of the dress. “Oh no, don’t tell me I’ve ripped it! Al’s gonna kill me!”

Gwen’s hand moved towards the hole trying to assess the damage. When her hands touched silk her heart stopped. How had she managed to rip a hole that big through all that tulle down to the silk inner lining of the skirt? She looked down and inspected the hole closer. She breathed with relief when she realized it wasn’t a hole at all.

“Should I call for the seamstress?” The maid asked, worriedly.

“There’s no need!” Gwendolyn turned to face her excitedly. “The dress isn’t torn at all! It has a pocket!” She felt around with her other hand on the other side of the dress too. “Even better!” She remarked. “This dress has two pockets! Alright, I’ve decided I love this dress and I’ll wear it to every royal party forever. Thank you so much for your help!”

“Of course, Miss Gwendolyn, anytime.” The maid, looking entirely relieved that a crisis had been avoided collected the breakfast tray and dashed from the room as politely as she could.

As much as Gwen wanted to run through the halls of Villa Altaria shouting with joy about finally having pockets in her evening wear, she still had a lot to do before leaving for Charles. The gala, at least one interpretation of it, was meant to be a way for the six kingdoms to metaphorically let down their hair and get to know the visiting dignitaries. So, keeping with the theme and not wanting to look as if she’d been swallowed by her gigantic dress, Gwen decided to let her hair down too; mostly. Pulling just the very top layers of her chestnut brown hair back so that it wouldn’t get in her face while she moved about the gala, she curled every section of her naturally wavy hair so that tufts of curls cascaded all around her shoulders. For make-up she decided to go for nudes and natural shades both to compliment the light tones in her dress and the open honest theme of the evening. After final touches and satisfied nod in the mirror, Gwen pocketed her phone, collected her paperwork and set out to find Roberto and Alberto.

The Butler's Counsel

Chapter Summary

Gwendolyn and Roberto travel to Charles. On the way they both learn that the Princes aren't the only royals invested in the Gala. It seems the King of Altaria is also watching the Cultural Liaison and evaluating her diplomatic abilities.



“Ah, Miss Gwendolyn. I was just coming to check in on you.” Alberto approached her from the other end of the hall. Gwen walked towards him and they met in the middle of the hall. “Prince Roberto is ready to go and I’ve had them bring the car around. Allow me to carry those documents for you. It wouldn’t do for you to ruin your entrance at Charles Palace burdened with so much paperwork.” He held out his hands expectantly.

Normally Gwen would be more hesitant to hand over a months’ worth of research to someone, but she knew that Alberto was not a careless person. He would handle her work with care. She also knew that he would be as upset as she were if he lost any of the research. With her arms freed from pounds of paperwork Gwen shook them out and followed Alberto down the hallway.

Roberto was waiting, just like Al said he would be, in the Villa’s Entrance hall. He was wearing his formal uniform that he only wore to the most important occasions. Gwen supposed she should have expected all of the princes would be wearing their ceremonial outfits to the gala. Roberto looking charming as always in his red and black tailcoat and white fitted pants. He wore matching white gloves and a white sash that bore the Button insignia across his chest. His knee-high boots were shiny and freshly polished. His smile broadened at the sight of Gwen and Alberto.

“I knew that dress would suit you!” He remarked proudly.

"I look like one of those fashion doll cakes people get for their kid's birthday, but a weirdly regal one." Gwen smiled. "I kind of love it. Also it has pockets."

"The pockets!" Roberto clapped his butler hard on the back with excitement. The unexpected contact caused Alberto to stumble forward slightly. "I told you she'd love the pockets Al!"

"Yes, you did your Highness." Alberto cleared his throat and straightened his back. "Could we perhaps continue this conversation in the car? We still have quite a drive to Charles."

"I can't be your escort for the entire evening, because that might show a favoritism towards Altaria." Roberto frowned. "But I can at least escort you to Charles. Shall we?" He offered out his elbow to her. Gwen laced her hand through the crook of his arm and allowed her to lead him outside.

"Do you really like your dress?" Roberto asked worriedly as they climbed into the royal limo. "I know that you don't normally like pink. We could always see if Ed has something else you could borrow." He suggested cautiously.

"When Al first took it out of the bag it was a bit...intimidating." She admitted. "But once I put it on, I knew I couldn't wear anything else today. Al said you wanted me to wear something that would stand out right? The Rose Gold is a nice shade that will contrast with everyone else's ceremonial uniforms perfectly. Perhaps if you hadn't been born a prince you could have had a career in fashion."

"Wouldn't that have been something?" Roberto asked, relaxing into his seat. Gwen could tell from the far-off expression on his face that she'd lost Roberto to his own fantasies. He'd be dreaming up living life as a fashion designer the rest of the way to Charles.

"Miss Gwendolyn, it is not exactly my place, but may I offer you some words of advice that I often extend to Prince Roberto when he is nervous?" Alberto stole a quick glance at her through the rearview mirror before directing his attention back to the road ahead.

"Any advice from you is always welcome, Al." Gwen assured him.

"I must admit that it's a borrowed phrase from one of your American Presidents." He told her. "I came across it several years ago while reading a book on great world leaders when I was Prince Roberto's tutor. 'Believe you can and you're halfway there.' It's Theodore Roosevelt if I'm not mistaken."

"Yeah that sounds about right." She nodded. "He was a pretty great President too. He believed heavily in conservation and disbelieved in letting anyone bully him into doing something. He probably would have made a great Cultural Liaison." She sighed.

"If I may overstep just once more, Miss Gwendolyn." Alberto seemed to disagree. "I think that you have a certain finesse to the way you conduct yourself. You are one of the only people royal or not to have genuine positive relationships with all six of the union princes. Even our King is impressed by this."

“The King?” At the mention of his father, Roberto suddenly returned to the them from his daydreams. Gwen watched Alberto’s cheeks flush with embarrassment. He hadn’t expected Roberto to be listening to them.

“Yes.” Alberto nodded, recovering quickly. “The King mentioned to me, briefly, how impressed he is with Miss Gwendolyn’s seemingly natural ability to empathize and connect with the others. He also commented that he is curious to know the results of this evening’s gala. Historically, Cordonia’s distance from the union has been more than just physical. He’s curious to know what’s changed their mind.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing we have Gwen here.” Roberto relaxed again. “She can find out anything.”

“You know, that’s something I’m curious about myself.” Gwen confessed. “Cordonia has kept to themselves for centuries and I’m curious to know exactly what has changed their mind. I assume it has to do with the death of the previous King, Constantine, and his son’s rise to the throne but the details are still very vague. I’ve been waiting to ask Edward exactly how they responded to his invitation last month.”

“Well we have arrived in Charles.” Roberto observed. “It’s only another hour or so to the palace.”

Levaincois Roses

Chapter Summary

After finally arriving in Charlies, Gwen & Rob are greeted by Prince Edward and receive some insight into the Cordonians' motivation for joining the union.



Prince Edward greeted his friends at the impressive oak front doors of Charles Palace. Like Prince Roberto he was wearing his ceremonial uniform. The Prince of Charles' long jacket suitcoat was royal blue with red and gold trim. Beneath his jacket he wore a high ruffle neck collared white shirt and corresponding white gloves. His tightfitting pants were black and his high black boots were trimmed with gold. From shoulder to waist he wore a red and gold sash and proudly brandished the Levaincois crest on it. He stood straight and tall but smiled as his guests exited their car.

"Prince Roberto, Lady Gwendolyn." He nodded at each of them in greeting. "I'm very glad that you have both arrived safely."

"Prince Edward," Gwen made a grand show of curtsying with her dress. She decided not to waste all those layers of tulle. Why not use them to the advantage of impressive and formal greetings?

"You didn't curtsy for me like that!" Roberto commented childishly. Gwen knew that he was mostly teasing but there was a hint of jealousy in his words.

"My apologies Prince Roberto." She dipped into another graceful curtsy. This seemed to satisfy him as he turned to follow Edward into the castle.

"Miss Gwendolyn that dress is simply divine!" Edward commented as he ushered them inside. "You look as delicate and beautiful as a Levaincois rose." Gwen felt a small amount

of blood rush to her cheeks as she blushed. She knew that she was going to be the center of attention all night, but she wasn't prepared to be showered with compliments this way.

"Edward you always know how to make me feel special." She told him.

"As you should." Edward insisted very seriously. "A woman should feel special every moment of every day. I've just decided something Louis?" He looked for his butler who was standing nearby.

"Yes, your Highness?" Louis stepped forward. Prince Edward stood off to the side and motioned for Louis to follow him. The two of them talked in a hushed tone before the butler bowed. "I shall take care of it at once." He vowed before walking off.

"Now, we have a little bit of time before the others are expected. If you wouldn't mind joining me in my office, I'd love to discuss the itinerary and expectations for the evening." Edward explained. Gwen nodded, so she and Roberto followed him to his office.

"Edward, I've been curious about something. All six of you were invited to Advaboole when Prince Madaaf and Princess Shana were married. Sanc Sybil has expressed an interest in joining the union more than once and even Nervan has a strained but functional relationship with Dres Van." Gwen recounted what she remembered from her research.

"That's correct." Edward nodded.

"What I don't understand is that Cordonia has shown no interest in aligning themselves with *any* kingdom not just the union. Did they give any sort of indication in their RSVP as to what may have changed their mind?" She asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes." Edward told her. They'd arrived at his office now and he opened the door for Gwendolyn and Prince Roberto. "Louis will return shortly with tea. In the meantime, please make yourselves comfortable." Gwen and Rob sat next to each other on a blush colored settee. Edward joined them sitting in a matching armchair across from them.

"To answer your question Miss Gwendolyn, King Liam was very forthcoming for the reason behind his visit. He explained that Cordonia had undergone a lot of changes recently. With his brother abdicating and the sudden death his father, the previous King, he worries that the people will doubt the royal family's strength. He's believes aligning with a new kingdom, or in our case six new kingdoms, will flood Cordonia with resources and support."

"I mean I can kind of see his point. He rushed into an engagement with his brother's ex-fiancé to cover up a scandal with the woman he'd originally intended to marry and then immediately after the scandal was cleared away, he gifted her a duchy. Those sorts of things tend to shake royal citizens if our experiences are anything to go by." Edward and Roberto both reflected on their own past questionable choices that the media and Gwen had been privy too. "Not to mention the *multiple* assassination attempts against the Cordonian Royal Family."

"So, what's the plan for the evening, Ed?" Roberto wanted to know.

“I’m glad you asked, Prince Roberto.” Edward smiled. “Once the other Princes are here, we’ll gather in one of the palace meeting halls to discuss any research that Miss Gwendolyn finds pertinent for us to know. After that the outside kingdoms are scheduled to arrive. Unsurprisingly we are expecting a large delegation from Cordonia. Their total travel party will include the King, two Dukes, two Duchesses, A Countess and several other royals linked to various duchys throughout the Kingdom.”

“Woah.” Gwen huffed. “I mean I knew they’d all be coming, but when you list all their titles out like that, it’s a lot.”

“Hey, don’t worry.” Rob nudged her side with his elbow. “There will be a lot of us too.” Gwen wanted to ask how Edward planned on handling the entrances of so many royals in one place, when Louis entered the room. He placed a tea tray on the table between the settee and Prince Edward’s armchair. Edward immediately busied himself with readying the tea just the way everyone liked it.

“Prince Edward, I also procured the other item you requested.” Louis commented quietly.

“Oh, excellent!” Edward smiled. “Miss Gwendolyn, could you please follow Louis? I’d like for him to show you your room for the evening and make sure it’s adequate. I promise Prince Roberto and I will save you plenty of tea.”

“Uh, okay. I’ll be right back I guess.” Gwen got to her feet and followed Louis out of the room. She waited until they were a goody distance down the hall before prodding him for answers. “So, Louis, this surprise...?” Louis’ eyes widened but the rest of his expression remained composed. “C’mon, I stay in the same room every time I sleep in the palace and both you and Edward always make sure that I’m more than sufficiently taken care of. Which leads me to conclude that Edward has you concocting some sort of a surprise.”

“Always so intuitive, Miss Gwendolyn.” Louis smirked. “I think this surprised would be better to see for yourself.” When Louis opened the door to her room Gwen stepped in, not seeing anything amiss from the last time she’d stayed at Charles Palace. “Please have a seat at the vanity.”

She did as he suggested and sat at the vanity. Louis presented her with a small white box wrapped in a pink ribbon. Gwen removed the ribbon and opened the box. Inside was a beautiful floral hairpiece. She could tell from the aroma that suddenly filled the air that it had been made from fresh flowers. The hairpiece was two pale pink Levaincois roses that looked like the edges of the pedals had been brushed with rose gold leaf. The rest of the tiny floral arrangement was filled in with baby’s breath.

“Prince Edward thought you might want something to wear in your hair this evening.” Louis explained. “Would you like me to pin it in for you?” Gwen nodded and gently handed the hairpiece over to him.

“You know I learned in my research that pink roses, like the Levaincois Roses are often a symbol of gratitude?” She said as Louis carefully pinned the flowers in her hair.

“It’s certainly fitting. I know Prince Edward is thankful for all the hard work you’ve been doing.” Louis confessed.

“I just hope that all the research was worth it.” Gwen sighed. “I really want to make them all proud. I want to secure a union with Cordonia.”

“I’m sure the princes will be proud of your work regardless of the outcome of tonight’s gala.” Louis offered Gwen a hand so that she knew her hairpiece was secured. Gwen accepted his hand and he helped her to her feet. “We should return to Prince Edward’s office. There’s just enough time for a cup of tea before the others being arriving.”

The Gala Begins

Chapter Summary

The time for the Welcome Gala has finally arrived. While Gwen anxiously awaits the arrival of the large Cordonian delegation, she's reunited with many familiar faces.



“Okay, I just have to convince the King of Cordonia *and* his monstrous entourage that they should unite their Kingdom with seven other countries. No pressure.” Gwen sighed to herself as she stood in the middle of the Charles Palace ballroom.

The ballroom was mostly empty. Only the party’s caterers, bartenders, other castle employees and each of the Prince’s butlers had been let inside. It had been decided during the afternoon meeting with the princes that since Gwen was the host for the evening, she alone should be present when the guests were arriving. Each guest would be announced by the Charles Palace herald. Once all of the guests had arrived the princes, who would be waiting together somewhere unseen would be individually announced themselves. Feeling entirely out of place as the center of attention in the giant ballroom, Gwen nervously tucked and untucked her hands from her dress’ pockets.

“Would you like me to get you a drink, Miss Gwendolyn?” She was delighted and confused to see Zain, the head butler of Noble Michael standing next to her.

“Oh, Zain, I hadn’t seen you and Mike arrive.” Had she already missed the arrival of their first guest? “Where is he?” She asked. “I should go and say hello.”

“I’m afraid Lord Michael won’t be in attendance this evening. He has not been feeling well recently.” Zain informed her regrettably. “However, he wanted to make it known that Noble Michael was in full support of you and tonight’s gala and sent me along to assist in any way

possible. Prince Edward thought it might be best for me to report directly to you. He said that as tonight's hostess you would benefit from a personal butler for the evening."

"That was kind of Edward to think of me. Is Lord Michael okay?" She questioned, biting her lip with worry.

"He assured me before I left the castle this evening that it's nothing a few days rest can't fix." Zain seemed confident as he assured her. "Now would you like me to fetch you something to drink?"

"I, ah, yeah. That'd be great actually." She watched Zain walk off towards a drink table and turned back around to find two young smiling faces looking back at her. She had not expected Prince Keith's younger sister and Prince Glenn's younger brother to be in attendance that evening either. "Princess Cathy, Prince Alan, it's lovely to see you both." She offered the royal siblings a theatrical curtsy and the pair giggled, happy for the special treatment.

"Thank you for having us, Miss Gwen." Princess Cathy gave a short curtsy of her own. "When my brother told me you were throwing a party I just knew I had to come along. It took a lot of convincing to get him to let me come."

"You know how much Prince Keith worries about you, he's just being cautious." Princess Cathy was anemic and that often made it difficult or unsafe for her to travel far from home. Gwen knew Prince Keith well enough by now that bringing his sister along to the gala was his way of showing good faith towards the other princes. He wanted them to know that he trusted them and would stand by their decisions. "But I am really glad you were able to safely travel all the way from Liberty to be here tonight."

"Are you happy to see me too?" Prince Alan, a particularly jealous six-year-old, asked.

"Of course!" Gwen crouched down on his level to offer him a hug. After hugging him she stood back up. "I'm sorry but I have a bit of work to do at the moment but maybe once all the guests have arrived, I'll be able to find some time to tell you a story."

"Really?" Alan's eyes seemed to widen as large as one of Edward's teacup saucers with excitement.

"Yes." Gwen promised. "But in the meantime, I need you to be good and listen to Yu." She nodded to Glenn's butler, Yu, who had just arrived to escort his young master away.

"We'll talk later okay?" Cathy said before she skipped away to stand by Keith's butler, Luke.

By this time Zain had returned with her drink. He held out a square glass filled with a dark caramel colored bubbling liquid. Gwen took the glass but appraised it with caution. Although she was certain she knew its contents, she waited for clarification from the butler.

"It's Whiskey and Cola, Miss Gwendolyn." He confirmed. "I remember that you often order this beverage at royal events."

“Well, yeah, but most of the time there’s no soda so I end up with just whiskey. Edward and Wilfred in particular have lectured me about how much sugar is in soda and they refuse to keep it around. Don’t get me wrong, I am *not* complaining. For the rest of the night if you see my cup empty, get me another one of these. I want to take advantage of drinking as many sodas in Edward’s palace as possible.” Gwen sipped excitedly from her glass already forgetting her earlier nerves.

The ballroom was suddenly filled with a fan fair of trumpets signaling to everyone that the guests were beginning to arrive. Gwen handed her drink off to Zain who slinked away out of her sight. The first names announced were familiar as she’d attended their wedding a brief time ago. The Prince and Princess of Advaboole were all smiles as they sauntered into the ballroom together. They approached Gwen, with their hands still linked together.

“Miss Gwendolyn, we meet again.” Princess Shana was the first to say.

“Yes, we were not expecting our invitation to be reciprocated so soon.” Prince Madaaf added. “In fact, this is our first Royal event together since our wedding.”

“I’m glad we could be your first hosts as a married couple. On behalf of the six Kingdoms and Noble Michael it’s my honor to welcome you tonight.” The customary curtsies and bows were exchanged, and the Prince and Princess gracefully floated off.

When the trumpets sounded again, Gwen recognized the imposingly tall Prince Yakov from Sanct Sybil. Prince Yakov’s ceremonial uniform was mostly grey and black with a bright red sash as the only source of brilliant color. His steel grey suit jacket made his blue eyes look as cold and icy as the weather of Sanct Sybil. Gwen was glad that Prince Yakov had already expressed interest in joining the union and she wouldn’t have to spend much of the night trying to impress him.

“You are the Gwendolyn Graham that I have been hearing so much about from the others?” Prince Yakov commented with a bow.

“I guess so.” Gwen felt herself blush as she returned his bow with a curtsy. “I can only hope that it’s been good things.”

“Yes, yes.” Yakov assured her. “They all seem quite enchanted by you. Perhaps this evening I’ll find out for myself why that is.” Feeling satisfied with the exchange of pleasantries, Prince Yakov walked off to survey the remainder ballroom.

“Okay that wasn’t so bad. Just one country left to go.” Gwen ignored the gnawing feeling in her stomach that reminded her how important it was to impress the last Kingdom on the guest list. The herald’s trumpets sounded a third time and the delegates from Cordonia began pouring in.

The Cordonian Delegation

Chapter Summary

The Cordonians arrive at the Welcome Gala putting Gwen's knowledge of Cordonia to the test for the first time.



All the studying and research seemed to be paying off right from the jump because Gwendolyn was able to remember the names and titles of all the Cordonia delegates from the composed Countess Madeline to the stoic Duke Bertrand. When it began to feel as if the longest game of foreign dignitary *Guess Who* would never end, there were only three Cordonians left to greet.

“Duchess Charlotte, Duke Maxwell, on behalf of the Six Kingdoms and Noble Michael it is my honor to welcome you tonight.” Gwen repeated her now well practiced greeting with the typical curtsy. Although she noted to herself that Duke Maxwell and Duchess Charlotte were not typical nobles.

Duchess Charlotte’s hair was cut into a short choppy bob. The tips of her bob were a royal blue that faded upwards to black roots. Her A line dress was a spectacle of red, orange, blue and gold all coming together to give the appearance of a flickering flame. Even as her skirt swept the floor it looked like fire spreading through the room. Her Husband wore a light blue suit whose jacket was covered in a tentacle-like design. Gwen wasn’t certain, but the Duke’s bow tie even looked like a little octopus or squid.

“We’re the ones who are honored to be here.” Duchess Charlotte insisted. “ We are so thankful that you could accommodate so many of us on such short notice.”

“This ballroom is huge!” Duke Maxwell gasped. “I can wait to try my breakdancing moves!” The Duchess elbowed her husband expectantly. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He apologized, looking embarrassed. “But you have a really nice castle.”

“Oh! it’s not mine. I guess you could say I’m borrowing it from a friend.” Gwen chuckled quietly. “But your right, it is beautiful. Charles Palace is my favorite in the six kingdoms. Not to say that I play favorites towards any of the kingdoms.” She rushes to assure the Duke and Duchess.

“Oh rigggght.” Duke Maxwell gave an exaggerated nod and a wink. “Like Liam doesn’t have favorite Duchies.”

“Maxwell, Liam doesn’t have a favorite Duchy.” Charlotte disagreed diplomatically.

“Technically.” Duke Maxwell commented with air quotes, as if he’d given this a lot of thought. “But I bet if he was allowed to have a favorite it’d be Valtoria! Or maybe Lythikos. Do you think Ramsford could be his favorite because of all the awesome parties we’ve had there?”

“Why don’t we go see if we can find our seats?” Duchess Charlotte suggested. “We’ll talk again soon, Gwendolyn.” She promised before ushering her husband away.

“It would seem that I’m the last to meet the infamous Lady Gwendolyn Graham.” Gwen looked away from the Duke and Duchess to find the king of Cordonia standing before her at last.

King Liam looked every bit the part of a king. He had blue eyes like Prince Wilfred that somehow conveyed strength and kindness at the same time. He had a playful smile like Roberto’s, with the faintest hint of laugh lines. He stood tall and straight the way only those born into royalty did. He too wore a ceremonial uniform. A black jacket, shoes and pants with a crisp white shirt and a red cummerbund. Something about him felt comforting and familiar even though they’d never met before.

“King Liam.” This time Gwen didn’t mind dipping into a graceful curtsy. She’d felt her knees beginning to buckle since she’d laid eyes on the Cordonia King. She’d never felt this way about anyone before. *You have a job to do!* She reminded herself.

“Maxwell is right, this is a beautiful castle.” King Liam commented before kissing the back of her hand, sending a shiver through her body.

“I’ll be sure to pass the compliment along to Prince Edward.” She volunteered as the king straightened his back.

“Yes, where is Prince Edward? I thought given that this is his castle he’d be in attendance this evening.” King Liam scanned the room, looking for the Prince of Charles.

“All six of the union princes are here.” Gwen promised. “We thought it would be best for our guests to be greeted properly first and then they will be introduced.

"I see." The corners of King Liam's mouth dipped downward creating the subtlest of frowns. "So I'm holding up the entire evening's events talking with you."

"Oh not at all Your Majesty." Gwen told him. "You're our guest and our first priority is welcoming all of you."

"In the interest of time consider me welcomed for now." The full smile returned to King Liam's face. "I've been informed that you're seated at our table for dinner. That means we'll have time to talk later, Lady Gwendolyn." King Liam bowed again and left to mingle with the rest of his delegation.

"You're doing great, Miss Gwendolyn." Zain commented as he reappeared at her side. He held out her drink from earlier and a microphone. "Dinner will be served shortly, but first the princes must be introduced and they all agreed that you should be the one to do it. Since they all share the same title, you can introduce them in any order. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

"I think I'm okay, but just to ease my mind if you could check in with Louis and make sure dinner is all set. With everything going so smoothly I'm actually getting more nervous." She confessed.

"It would be my pleasure." Gwen switched on the microphone while Zain spotted Louis among the other butlers. As her butler for the day confirmed dinner preparations, Gwen gathered the attention of the crowd by welcoming everyone again.

"Thank you all so much for making the long journey from your home kingdoms to be here. I can say honestly that I speak for *all* six Kingdoms and Noble Michael when I say that we are looking forward to getting to know all of you a little bit better and to give you the chance to learn more about us. Now I think it's time we bring the princes, out don't you?" The ballroom was filled with a range of applause, from the light clap of Prince Yakov to the excitable beats of Duke Maxwell. Gwen waited for the room to settle before introducing the first prince.

Getting to Know You...

Chapter Summary

With all the guests finally arrived and greeted, it's time for the six princes to be introduced and the Welcome Gala to officially commence.



“In no particular order,” Gwen waited for the crowd to settle once again before she began to introduce the first Prince. She could have probably heard a pin drop when she next spoke. “With us tonight we have Prince Glenn representing the Kingdom of Oriens...”

At the announcement of his name, Prince Glenn stepped into the ballroom. The guests clapped and cheered while Glenn walked across the room quietly. He was a brunette whose black and gold royal uniform shimmered under the ballroom’s lights. Glenn didn’t pay the crowd much attention, but he smiled politely before standing off to the side, about a foot behind Gwen.

“Prince Keith Alford represents Liberty Kingdom Tonight...” Prince Keith was another tall brunette, but where Glenn’s eyes were light brown, Keith’s were ocean blue. The royal dress uniform of liberty was somewhat different from the others. Prince Keith wore a red high-necked ceremonial dress shirt with a black trimmed jacket. While the front of the jacket was cropped short to match his red shirt, the back of the jacket swept down to his knees. He also wore a blue sash with the Alford family crest. Prince Keith gave a single nod of acknowledgment to the crowd before moving to stand next to Prince Glenn.

“Prince Joshua Lieben is representing Dres Van Kingdom...” The guests celebrated Prince Joshua just as they had the previous princes. Prince Joshua entered the room, looking straight ahead. His dark black hair and cold grey eyes didn’t soften his appearance at all and he didn’t seem to care. He wore a white jacket and blue sash with very little decorative elements added

to his ensemble. He moved quickly almost marching through the ballroom. He didn't acknowledge anyone, even Gwen, as he took his place next to Prince Keith.

"Prince Roberto Button from the Kingdom of Altaria..." Roberto was a complete ham while taking his tour of the ballroom. He waved and blew kisses into the crowd acting as if he were in some sort of beauty pageant. He winked at Gwen and continued waving to the guests until the applause settled.

"Prince Wilfred Spencer of Phillip Kingdom..." There was a smoothness to the way Prince Wilfred walked into the ballroom. Standing at five feet ten inches tall, Wilfred was one of the shortest princes in the room, but no one would have guessed it from the way he carried himself. His blonde hair was styled neatly and his white tailcoat was the crispest and brightest in the room. Even his royal blue dress pants seemed to be perfectly starched as he walked through the room. He smiled kindly but it was a professional smile, the kind that never seemed to quite make it to his eyes. The smile remained in place as he stood next to Roberto.

"And lastly, representing Charles Kingdom, Prince Edward Levaincois." Perhaps aided by the fact that he had a slight homecourt advantage, Prince Edward seemed to float into the room. As always, Edward was the fairytale prince of the bunch. He knew exactly when to wave, smile and bow as he greeted the ballroom filled with royals. He placed a delicate kiss of greeting on Gwen's cheek before falling in line next to Prince Wilfred.

"Show off." Prince Keith grumbled from the other end of the royal line up.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the six princes of the six Kingdoms of the Noble Michael Union." Gwen couldn't believe she'd managed to flawlessly utter such a tongue twister as all six princes bowed in unison. With all the royal introductions completed at last, everyone was instructed to find their seats this included the royal princes. As the others disappeared around the room Prince Edward motioned for Gwen to hand him the microphone but stay standing with him.

"I'm sure by now you've all had the opportunity to meet Miss Gwendolyn Graham. She's the striking young woman who has been posted in the middle of my ballroom for the last two hours or so." A good natured chuckle rumbled through the room as Prince Edward proved there wasn't a crowd that he couldn't delight. "But if for some reason you managed to evade her, I wanted to take time to acknowledge how lucky we are to have her here this evening. Miss Gwendolyn has dedicated a lot of her own time to help us prepare for tonight's event and it would be nothing short of neglect, if I were to forget to thank her. Over the last several weeks Miss Gwendolyn has spent every spare moment of her time visiting each of the six kingdoms to learn as much about us and our guests here tonight as possible. She has done this while preparing for final examinations at her university here at Charles. We are incredibly lucky to have her here tonight and I just wanted to say that while we may all be here in my Kingdom and in my home, Miss Gwendolyn is very much the host of the evening. The other union princes and I are here only as figureheads for our respective kingdoms. Now I think that's enough formalities for now, don't you, Miss Gwendolyn?" Gwen nodded, not sure what else to say.

“Then let us all enjoy a toast to Miss Gwendolyn as we wait for dinner to be served.” Louis, Edward’s butler appeared from seemingly nowhere. He traded the microphone in Prince Edward’s hand for a glass of champagne before disappearing as quickly as he’d come. “To Miss Gwendolyn!” Edward called. The crowd responded back with all variations of the same sentiment.

“To Miss Gwendolyn!”

“Go Gwen!!”

“Yeah, Gweennn!” The loudest and the longest of cheers seemed to come from Prince Roberto and Duke Maxwell, though the two nobles were not seated anywhere near each other.

“Great.” Gwen whispered so quiet that even Prince Edward could barely hear her. “There’s two them.”

Zain guided Gwen to her seat at a table composed mostly of Cordonians. As the butler pushed in her chair Gwen found herself seated between King Liam and Prince Wilfred. The other princes were scattered at various tables throughout the room to maintain their appearance of impartiality. The remaining seats at Gwen’s table were filled by Duke Maxwell, Duchess Charlotte, and a man in a suit Gwen was certain she had not been introduced but recognized from the Cordonian newspapers.

“Ah, Sir Drake, I don’t think we’ve had the pleasure of meeting formally.” Gwen announced politely.

“Yeah sorry about that.” Drake shrugged. “Grand entrances aren’t really my thing. In fact formal dinners and politics aren’t my thing either. You could say I’m more like the Cordonian Court’s token commoner. Is that Whiskey?” He changed the subject, staring intently at Gwen’s glass.

“Please forgive *Sir* Drake,” Duchess Charlotte seemed to be reminding him of his title. Gwen knew from reading up on recent Cordonian history that Drake Walker was one of the newly appointed Protectors of the Realm. Prior to that he’d held no titles or land in Cordonia. “He doesn’t mean that the way you think he does. Drake is very proud of being a commoner. He excels at reminding Cordonian nobles of the needs and wants of its people. it’s one of the reasons King Liam chose him as a Protector of the Realm.”

“Glad we got all that out of the way.” Drake sighed, signaling he was ready to stop hearing about himself. “Now about that whiskey. Where can I get my hands on some because they *never* served whiskey at Cordonian parties.”

“We had whiskey at our wedding.” Duke Maxwell reminded him.

“That doesn’t count. You guys had everything at that party, including red pandas.” Drake huffed.

“Did he say red pandas?” Gwen asked, leaning forward excitedly.

“Oh yeah!” Duke Maxwell confirmed. “We have two of them living in our Duchy. They’re rescues! Would you like to see a picture?”

“I would love to!” Gwen gushed. She felt a tap on her shoulder. “just a second.” She turned to see Zain standing behind her.

“Sorry to interrupt, Miss Gwendolyn. I just wanted to let you know that dinner service has been perfectly prepared, and we’ve already begun serving.” He gestured to a nearby table where Prince Glenn was seated, his table had already been served their dinner.

“That’s great Zain, thank you.” The butler nodded and moved to disappear into the shadows again, but Gwen stopped him. “Could you do me a favor and grab me another drink and a glass of whiskey for my friend Sir Drake here.”

“Of course, Miss Gwendolyn. I’ll return with those things momentarily.” Zain nodded.

The castle staff arrived next and began serving their table. Plates of Chicken, Steak and Salmon were presented with a flourish. Once everyone had a plate before them the waitstaff moved on to the next table. The Cordonians began tucking into their meal but Gwen noticed out of the corner of her eye Prince Wilfred stared at his plate with displeasure. She cast her eyes down and found the source of the problem almost immediately.

Prince Wilfred had ordered the chicken dish which consisted of mashed potatoes and carrots for sides. Prince Wilfred hated carrots. He hated them so much that the Head Chef at Chateau Phillip had been told he was allergic. When abroad, Wilfred kept his aversion to carrots a secret. He knew that it was expected of a prince to never complain, especially about the food being served. Gwen inspected her own meal which consisted of a steak, mashed potatoes and brussel sprouts and knew just how to rescue the Prince of Phillip.

“Prince Wilfred, I know It’s terribly inconvenient,” She frowned apologetically. “But I ordered the steak not knowing that it comes with brussel sprouts. I hate brussel sprouts. I just *can’t* eat them. I know it’s childish, but would you mind switching dishes with me?”

“Anything for our host.” Prince Wilfred smirked knowingly. The pair traded plates and finally began to eat.

“So, Lady Gwendolyn, I heard Prince Edward say that you’re a student at a university here in Charles.” Duchess Charlottle recalled.

Just then Zain returned with two drinks. He placed the straight glass of whiskey in front of Drake and the whiskey-cola mix in front of Gwen. Drake looked as if he wanted to hug the butler in appreciation but thought better of it. Wilfred seemed to notice the carbonated bubbles rising to the surface of Gwen’s drink but decided not to mention it for the time being. She’d saved him from the carrots after all.

“I’m curious to know how a college student comes to represent seven countries as a Cultural Liaison without much experience.” Gwen noticed there wasn’t a hint of judgment in the duchess’ tone. She seemed earnestly interested in how Gwen had found herself in such a position. Still that didn’t stop Gwen from uttering the first response that came to her mind.

“Well, I suppose the same way a waitress from New York finds herself a Duchess of a foreign country after only living there for less than twenty-four months.” Gwen has also made her statement without judgement. She wanted the Duchess to know that they came from equally serendipitous circumstances.

“Okay,” Drake commented, leaning back in his seat. “I like her.”

“Wait,” Duke Maxwell’s eyes widened to almost the size of the diner plate in front of him. “You were a suitor for a prince *and* then someone framed you for an unseemly act *and* so the Prince was forced become engaged to someone else to buy some time to clear your name *and* then just when it looked like you two could finally be together it, turned out you were in love with his best friend? What are the odds?” He marveled.

“Not exactly.” Gwen laughed. Duke Maxwell couldn’t hide his disappointed, but the others at the table listened patiently. “It’s sort of a long story, but, well where to start?” She gave a sideways glance to Prince Wilfred, who wasn’t much of a storyteller himself.

“Perhaps we should just let Lady Gwendolyn enjoy her dinner in peace.” King Liam suggested with a pointed look in Duke Maxwell’s direction.

“No, it’s alright.” She insisted. “Duchess Charlotte and Duke Maxwell are right. I’ve learned a lot about all of you. It’s only fair I share some information about myself.”

Getting to Know All About You

Chapter Summary

Gwen shares her story with the Cordonians, hoping that by sharing a little about herself she can gain some trust or favor from them in return.



“It’s been awhile now, and the details are a little fuzzy.” Gwen explained honestly. “But back then I was living in this tiny apartment here in Charles. One morning I was walking through the capital, just seeing the sites and enjoying a day off from classes when I came across an elderly man who looked unwell. Without hesitation I rushed over to help. Despite his pained expression, the man assured me that he was alright and someone would be looking for him soon. I guided him to a nearby bench and waiting with him until a fancy car arrived. A younger man, who I assumed was the elder man’s assistant or caretaker, helped the elderly man inside the car. Before they left he handed me a business card with only a phone number on it. He told me to call if I ever needed anything.”

“I never knew that.” Prince Wilfred said as Gwen paused to sip her drink. “That elderly man and his assistant, it was Lord Michael and Zain wasn’t it?”

“That’s right, that’s how I know Mike.” She nodded, before addressing the Cordonians. “It’s important to the story I promise. So after that I just kind of went about my day exploring the city. I think I did a little shopping and strolled through a public garden. Before I knew it, it was dusk. I was making my journey home and it started to rain. Of course, I didn’t have my umbrella so all I could do was try to get home quickly, but fate had other plans. A motorcade of limos was passing me but the first car in the line was driving too fast causing a large puddle to splash me. I was totally soaked. It turned out the motorcade was a few of the princes on their way to a party at Noble Michael. So, Prince Edward invited me to attend the party even though it wasn’t his car that splashed me. He and Louis arranged everything and

they somehow managed to find me a beautiful dress and shoes within minutes and had a whole hair and make up team together when we go there.”

“Every single time I’m still impressed by the nobles’ ability to throw together things like that.” Duchess Charlotte agreed. “I always feel like a Disney character!”

“Same!” Gwen agreed excitedly.

“So what happened when you got to the party?” Drake asked. The Cordonians looked at him with surprise. It was clear Sir Drake wasn’t usually the type to become engaged in other people’s personal stories. “What?” He shrugged. “She’s got me hooked.”

“Well, not much happened at the party itself.” Gwen explained. “I was introduced to all the princes and I danced with Prince Roberto. It was great but after a while I started to feel out of place. I went out into the hall for some fresh air when I started getting harassed by a bunch of women. Prince Roberto had told them all that he chose to dance with me because we were romantically involved.”

“Wait, you’re the mystery woman of Altaria?” King Liam asked. “I remember reading about that. As King, or Prince back then, I’m expected to know about other kingdoms’ possible marriages or other relationships that could affect a Kingdom’s succession.”

“Well, I can confirm firsthand for you that I am the mystery woman of Altaria, but there was never a romantic relationship between Prince Roberto and I. Still, no matter how much we contested it, that didn’t stop the media from running stories about it. It soon became clear to us that it was too dangerous for me to continue living at my apartment for the time being. So the plan was for me to stay in Altaria for while until the rumors died down.”

“It took about six months for the media to finally spin the story back to the truth. They announced that Mystery woman of Altaria was just a student staying at the castle as a guest of the royal family.” King Liam remembered again. “So you’ve returned back to your apartment in Charles then?”

“Not exactly.” Gwen frowned. “On the morning I was supposed to return home, I had Alberto drop me off a few blocks away. I thought it would help avoid any further controversy. When I reached my building I was shocked to find out my apartment building was on fire.”

“No!” Duke Maxwell gasped.

“Yes.” Gwen confirmed. “Apparently my landlord had been lying about fire inspections for years and the building was full of faulty wiring. The building burned to the ground. At this point, I felt I had imposed on Prince Roberto and the royal family enough. I remembered the old man I had helped and his business card that I still had. By now I had learned that their true identities were Lord Michael of Noble Michael and his butler Zain.”

“Zain who knows where to find the whiskey, Zain?” Drake asked, waving his empty glass.

“The very same.” Gwen confirmed. “I’m assuming you’d like another?” She raised her own empty glass as well.

“Please, allow me. I already know how this story ends.” Prince Wilfred suggested. He rose to his feet and walked off towards the bar.

“Before I knew it, Claude and Prince Wilfred arrived in their car. They brought me to Phillip, and I stayed with the Spencers for a little while.” Gwen continued her story.

“Don’t tell me you’re the mystery woman of Phillip too?” King Liam couldn’t help but laugh. “The one who Prince Wilfred allegedly broke off his engagement for.”

“The very same.” She sighed. “Like Roberto, Wilfred and I were only ever friends, but in a way I am sort of responsible for his ended engagement. His fiancé Cecile was once engaged to Wilfred’s older brother Stephen, but Stephen abdicated the throne to become a doctor. When that happened, the engagement was transferred to Wilfred. Truthfully Cecile and Stephen were in love and I encouraged them to choose love over obligation.”

“To be honest, I’m really glad that sort of thing happens in other kingdoms.” King Liam smiled. “I’m sure you know but my own brother abdicated the throne and I was also engaged to his former fiancé.”

“I do, but it might help Prince Wilfred to hear it, should the two of you find time to talk together.” Gwen said. “By this point I was starting to feel like I’d become a burden to the Spencer’s too. I considered going back home, to the states, and giving up on school in Charles all together. I’d only missed one semester, but it was still going to be difficult to catch up.”

“Hang on, did you just keep moving from Kingdom to Kingdom?” Duke Maxwell asked, sounding thrilled by the idea. “Are you behind every single royal scandal in history?”

“That’s impossible, Maxwell. You know your own wife has been involved in almost every Cordonian scandal.” Drake commented with a hint of teasing at the Duchess’ expense.

“Oh yeah.” Duke Maxwell’s expression fell. He was completely oblivious to his friend’s jest. “Did they at least give you a Duchy for your trouble?” He asked just before Prince Wilfred returned with Zain. Wilfred had brought Whiskey for Drake and Gwen while Zain had brought a tray of drink offerings for everyone else.

“You don’t need the sugar.” Wilfred commented as he placed a cola-less beverage in front of her. Gwen made no comment but cast a childish face in his direction before turning back to face the Cordonians.

“I wouldn’t exactly say I was involved in every scandal,” Gwendolyn sipped from her glass. “But I did sort of bounce from Kingdom to Kingdom for awhile. The remaining countries wanted the chance to get to know me better and show me their kingdoms too. I guess that’s really what cemented my status as the Noble Union’s token commoner.” She laughed. “I have open invitations to stay at any of the seven country’s estates whenever I choose to, and I do visit each frequently. However, I predominately live in Villa Altaria. It’s relatively central to the other kingdoms and I feel I’m least in the way there.”

“That is quite the story. I’m glad you shared it with us.” King Liam approved. “I can see how your intimate relationship with the six princes and this Lord Michael would lead to you being chosen as the Union’s Cultural Liaison.”

“Miss Gwendolyn, forgive my intrusion,” Zain bowed. “You asked me to let you know when the guests were nearly finished with their meals, so that you could lead everyone into the first dance on the evening.”

“I did?” She whispered before realizing that Zain was trying to help her stay on schedule with Edward’s itinerary. “*Riiight.*” She rose to her feet, her pink skirts swishing loudly. “I’ll need a partner for the first dance, King Liam, would you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

“I’d be happy to.” King Liam stood and offered Gwendolyn his elbow.

The Agreement

Chapter Summary

As the Gala continues, it's time for Gwendolyn to start trying to wow the Cordonians. While King Liam seems to like her well enough, there's still a large train of Duchesses, Dukes and Royal Best friends to appease before the the night is over.



With one of Gwen's hands tucked under King Liam's elbow he led her to the center of the dance floor. The pair positioned themselves for a waltz. Framing herself to match King Liam's posture Gwen felt her back straighten. She caught the eye of the Bandleader and nodded to her instructing her to start the music. As the music began to swell, Gwen inhaled and exhaled a deep breath.

"Everything alright, Lady Gwendolyn?" King Liam asked taking his first step.

"Yes." Gwen promised, mirroring his step shakily. "I was just thinking I should have practiced dancing in this dress before right now."

"Ah yes, I suppose that's one of the benefits to being a king. I'm expected to wear the same ceremonial suit to everything. So, I already know I can dance in it." King Liam gave Gwen's hand a reassuring squeeze. "I promise you're in good hands. A good lead knows how to keep his partner safe from injury or embarrassment."

"I've no doubt." Gwen breathed. The tempo of the song was starting to pick up and Gwen found that it wasn't difficult to match King Liam's steps or timing at all. She supposed it was as he said, that a good lead could make any dance effortless. But she also suspected she may have actually improved her own dance skills over her time with the princes. "The same could be said of any partnership."

“How do you mean?” King Liam asked. His blue eyes shimmered from under the ballroom lights, leaving Gwen a different kind of breathless.

“Well dancing, dating, uniting kingdoms. They all require a little give and take.” She explained as they twirled around the dance floor.

“Ah, I see you’re not wasting anytime, jumping right into negotiations.” Liam smirked. While most matters of state were officially decided behind closed doors, He knew that the discussions began over dinners, dances and drinks disguised as casual conversation.

“I guess I need to work on my subtly.” Gwen tried to laugh her blunder off.

“Not at all, I appreciate the candidness.” King Liam insisted. “It makes things easier if we’re all straight with each other. It’s no secret that I would like Cordonia to be part of the Noble Michael Union, but ultimately the decision is not mine alone.”

“You mean you need the approval of your Dukes and Duchesses?” She asked.

“Uniting two Kingdoms is not an easy process. I’ve seen alliances take years to come together. Kings, or Princes, need support from their people to keep an alliance alive. So, it’s not just me you’ll have to charm tonight.” The song they’d been dancing too came to an end. Gwendolyn wouldn’t have noticed if King Liam hadn’t stopped dancing. “It was an honor to share the first dance with you Lady Gwendolyn. There are some other guests I’d like to talk with this evening, but I’d appreciate it if you could save at least one more dance for me.” He bowed quickly and waited for her response.

“Of course. Thank you for the dance.” Gwen bobbed down into quick curtsy. King Liam returned to his seat and Zain passed by and handed Gwen a microphone. “Now that dinner is over, the dance floor is officially open. So please, don’t let King Liam and I be the only ones to try out our dancing shoes.” There were murmurs through the crowd as couple started getting to their feet and making their way to the dance floor.

“You don’t have to tell me twice!” She heard Duke Maxwell call just before the band started to play another song. When Gwen stepped off the dance floor, Zain was there to collect her microphone again. She watched Duke Maxwell lead Duchess Charlotte in a series of twirls and reels around the ballroom. Prince Madaaf held Princess Shana as the pair pranced across the dance floor. Guest were pairing off and it was officially the start of the fun part of the night.

“Gwendolyn, dance with me.” Prince Keith demanded in the nicest way he knew how. Gwen accepted the hand of her poorly mannered friend.

“It’s nice to see you again Prince Keith. I’m doing great thanks for asking.” She smiled, and let Keith lead the way. His mood always improved when he felt in control.

“The King seems to like you well enough.” Keith observed. “But I remain unconvinced that you can actually sway him to join us.”

“Ah, that’s not what I heard from Ed and Rob.” Gwen told him. “I was told that you thought I was the perfect person for the job.” Prince Keith’s eyes widened. He’d thought that conversation had been kept between just the six princes. He didn’t deny Gwen’s accusation either. “I appreciate the support Prince Keith, and I will do my absolute best to win over the Cordonian delegation.”

“We’ll see.” Keith mumbled.

“Might, I cut in, I’d like a talk with the lady of the hour.” Prince Glenn was now standing next to Gwen and Prince Keith.

“She’s all yours.” Keith nodded. As Glenn swept Gwen into his arms, Prince Keith walked off to find his sister.

“Cordonia is a small country with a lot of nobility.” Glenn pointed out as they waltzed along to the current song. “How do they have so much money from just apples?”

“It’s not just apples.” Gwen explained as she narrowly avoided stepping on Glenn’s foot. “The duchy of Castelsarreillan is a large supporter of history and the arts. Portavira has a thriving fishing enterprise and Ramsford is home to a beautiful vineyard. Cordonia thrives by letting it’s duchies do what they do best and not putting all their apples in one basket.”

“Well, at least you were learning something during all your time in the libraries.” Glenn smiled. “Alan tells me you’ve promised him a dance later. He’ll be so disappointed if you forget.”

“Well then I won’t forget.” Gwen vowed. The song came to an end and Glenn escorted her off of the dance floor.

Gwen decided she’d had enough dancing for now. While party’s guests were more or less occupied with dancing and socializing, there was no need for her to act as hostess. Instead she could focus on her real goal of the evening, winning over the Cordonia dignitaries. As she scanned the outer edges of the ballroom, Gwen spotted her first target.

“Duchess Olivia,” She greeted the Duchess who only rolled her eyes in response.

“Lady Gwendolyn,” She offered a bored nod in response. “You’re no doubt here the try and whoo me, but I can assure you it won’t do you any good.”

“On the contrary, Duchess Olivia.” Gwen smiled. “I know that you and the king grew up together and that you’re very close. You hold the king’s ear better than most.”

“Liam is a strong leader capable of making his own decisions.” The duchess snapped.

“Of course.” Gwen agreed. “But the King himself expressed to me how important it is to him that he has the support of the Cordonian nobility. I think we can both agree that valuing the opinions of his people also makes King Liam a great leader.”

“This works for you?” Duchess Olivia asked with a contemptuous sigh. “This cute and optimistic routine? That’s how you managed to catch the attention of *seven* noble lands? You

may have noticed Cordonia already has a pair of lovable idiots.” She pointed to Duchess Charlotte and Duke Maxwell who were shimmying and shaking as they re-enacting the dance routine from the movie *Grease*. When Gwen looked back at the Scarlett Duchess, she’d disappeared. In her place stood Sir Drake.

“Don’t let her fool you.” He commented, handing Gwen an ice-cold whiskey and cola. “Olivia’s impressed by you. Maybe even a little threatened. She was the same way when Charlotte first showed up.” He took a long sip from his glass. “You’re wasting your time trying to sway her anyway. Olivia will always back whatever Liam wants. Don’t worry about the Duke and Duchess of Valtoria either. They’re in favor of any plan that doesn’t force their unborn child into an arranged marriage.”

“Are they expecting?” Gwen wanted to know. She sipped from her own drink wondering how she’d managed to miss that big a detail. They watched the Duke and Duchess embrace each other; the couple had dissolved into a fit of laughter.

“Not yet, but Liam did announce this week that Maxwell and Charlotte’s future children will be the heirs to the Cordonian throne.” Drake told Gwen. “I’m sure you know that the Noble Union aren’t the only kingdoms trying to Court Cordonia, you’re just the only ones not asking to marry off your royal heirs as collateral.”

“How terrible for those kids.” Gwen sighed. She looked away from the dance floor, giving Drake her full attention. “Can you imagine marrying someone you hardly know, for something as trivial as politics? Maybe it’s the American in me but I can’t believe countries are still pushing for things like that.”

“Have your six *best friends* not shared with you the terms of their own offer to Cordonia?” Drake asked. His expression changed, his supportive tone had disappeared.

“Well, not exactly.” Gwen confessed. What she expected to know the details of the arrangement? Did she now look unprofessional in the eyes of one of the King’s most trusted advisors? She should tell Drake the truth about how much she was involved in the plans to merge the kingdoms. “I’m more like a figurehead of this whole thing. The Princes agreed on their terms separately, I’m just the host for the evening.”

“Next time you may want to know exactly what they’ve offered before they ask you to host an event like this.” Drake warned. “The reason the union isn’t asking for an arranged marriage with Maxwell and Charlotte’s kid, is because they’ve offered up you instead.”

“Me?” Gwen gasped, nearly dropping the glass she was holding. “I thought they’d agreed to share resources or trade commodities. Something like that.”

“Well in a way they did.” Drake said. There wasn’t a hint of teasing in his voice. If anything he was looking at Gwen with sympathy in his eyes. “They just offered to trade you. I wouldn’t be surprised if this whole event was orchestrated as a way to highlight your diplomatic abilities. Maybe trying to prove that your worthy of marrying a King.”

“I can’t believe they’d do this without asking me!” Gwen huffed. She was keeping her tone low, not wanting to cause a scene, but Drake could tell she was fuming mad. This information

had obviously been a surprise to her.

“You know Liam would never want to go through with an arrangement that you didn’t agree to. You could put a stop to the whole thing if you told him you didn’t know.” Drake suggested.

“I couldn’t do that to any of them.” Gwen shook her head. “Liberty needs the money, Charles and Phillip could really use the extra import and export power. Cordonia could really benefit from being a part of the Union too. Any one of them would put their people first. That’s what royals do, right?”

“You shouldn’t feel pressured to do something that you don’t want.” Drake assured her.

“I, ah, I need some air.” She told him. “Please don’t mention anything to King Liam or the others.”

Aftermath

Chapter Summary

Gwen is faced with the impossible decision of choosing between defending her own beliefs or ruining the union's chance to join with Cordonia.



Gwen stood alone on the ballroom balcony. She was leaning on the beautiful hand carved railing with her face held in her hands. She wasn't looking at the gorgeous private rose garden that meant so much to Prince Edward or the twinkling lights that the castle staff had lined the long cobblestone drive with. Instead she looked past the expansive castle grounds to the capital city of Charles. It was hard to do from such a distance, but she could almost see the high clock tower of her university.

Gwen focused on the purplish-black form of the clock tower. She pretended that she could also see the university dorms which were located within walking distance from the tower. She imagined that she were in one of those dorm rooms now and thought of what she'd be doing if she'd chosen to live in University housing rather than off campus in her own apartment. Perhaps somewhere in an alternative universe there was a version of Gwen eating stale pizza and giggling with her friends instead of holding back tears on a castle balcony. She'd most likely be studying for an exam or maybe even watching a movie with her roommate. She'd have a normal roommate of course, not a prince who'd try to barter her away to a visiting King.

"Gwen! There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. What are you doing out here?" Gwen looked over her shoulder to see Prince Roberto. Rob was all smiles as he waited for his friend to answer him.

“How could you not tell me?” She asked him with a shaky voice. It was harder to control her emotions now that she wasn’t alone.

“Not tell you what? I just said I was looking for you.” Rob explained with confusion. Gwen crossed her arms over her chest. She chose her next words carefully. She still didn’t want to cause a scene in front of the foreign diplomats.

“How could you not tell me that I was part of the offer on the table?” She hissed at him. “I mean you didn’t even ask you just *assumed* that I’d be fine with an arranged marriage! I mean I can’t believe Wilfred agreed to this he knows how I feel about it, I’m the one who talked him out of...”

“Gwen, Gwen slow down!” Rob gently gripped her by the shoulders, trying to get her attention. “I have no idea what you’re talking about! I promise! An arranged marriage? Why would I agree to something like that without asking you? You’re my best friend.”

“You promise you didn’t know?” Gwen studied his face, trying to see if he was lying.

“I promise Gwendolyn, I had no idea.” He vowed. “Stay here, I’m going to get Prince Edward so we can sort things out, alright?” Prince Roberto turned on his heels and disappeared back into the throngs of the party.

Gwen began to pace the length of the balcony while she waited for Prince Edward and Prince Roberto to return. What would she do now? Regardless of what she did or didn’t know before the party, the princes had offered to marry her to the King of Cordonia. If the king decided that he did in fact want to marry her and she said that she didn’t want to marry him, it would look like the Princes were incapable of holding up their end of a deal. If she told King Liam the truth, that she had no idea about the arrangement, it could make the union kingdoms look untrustworthy or dishonorable. She could make it so that the gala was a complete failure. Then the King wouldn’t want to join the union, but all of those options would hurt the union countries and her friends’ reputations.

Some friends. She commented to herself. *They’re auctioning you off to an Apple themed kingdom without your consent.*

“Miss Gwendolyn, is everything alright?” Prince Edward asked when he stepped out onto the balcony. “Prince Roberto says that you’re in quite a state. What’s happened?”

“What’s happened?” Gwen repeated with a sarcastic laugh. “I thought I was helping you throw a party, Ed! I never agreed to marrying a King for you!”

“Oh no.” Prince Edward looked shocked. “What a terrible misunderstanding this is. Perhaps you don’t remember but we did discuss the situation while you were here working in the library one afternoon.

Three weeks ago

Gwen sat cross-legged on a pink velvet pouf in the Charles Palace library. Her laptop was balancing on a three-foot stack of books. Her backpack was stuffed with folders of information about the Noble Michael Union, its kingdoms and Cordonia. A large tome about the history of international trade in Charles sat open on her lap.

“Ah, Miss Gwendolyn, hard at work I see.”

“Yeah, just doing some light reading.” She joked. Gwen marked her page with a sticky note and closed the book so she could talk with Edward. “You know, arranged marriages have occurred as part of international agreements so often in Phillip, that it has its own volume in the trade history books of Chateau Phillip. I’m relieved to see that Charles does not share that history.”

“Not everyone has the luxury of marrying for love, Miss Gwendolyn.” Edward frowned. “And some that do still choose arranged marriages as a way to elevate their own status. Would you not consider becoming Queen?”

“I don’t need to be Queen, Ed.” Gwen laughed, reaching for her book again.

“Why not?” Prince Edward probed. “You have an interest in politics and economics, do you not? You want to work in a career where they can do the most good. Who has more power to do good than a Queen?”

“Leave it to the Flower Prince to make an arranged marriage sound like a fantasy power move.” Gwen rolled her eyes. She turned the page in her book, focusing more on her research now.

“What if Prince Roberto or I were to ask you to become Queen as a favor to one of us?” Edward asked. At the time Gwen had missed the leading tone to his questioning.

“Well, then, I supposed if for one reason or another you were unable to secure a queen and you had no options other than me, I’d consider it.” Gwen reached for her laptop and began transcribing something from the book in her lap. “Do you have any other hypothetical questions, Prince Edward?” She questioned, looking up from her work. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I am working for you.”

“Yes of course.” Edwards stood up straight, a friendly smile on his face. “Would you like to join me for tea later, when you’re done working for the day of course?”

“It would be my pleasure.” Gwen agreed.

“That doesn’t count!” Gwen huffed at Prince Edward. She glared between he and Prince Roberto, grasping for words to express how angry she was feeling. She began pacing again to burn off some of the adrenaline. “Firstly, we were speaking in hypotheticals! Or at least I was. And secondly, I thought you meant marrying you or Rob. Like if one of you couldn’t find a wife by the time you were made king or something!” Gwen covered her face with her hands briefly before resurfacing to add to her rant. “But then of course that wouldn’t be an arranged marriage so I should have known that you weren’t talking about...”

“Uh, Gwen?” Rob stepped directly in her path. She stopped pacing. Gwen wanted to scream, but she couldn’t because it would draw everyone’s attention to the balcony. “Sorry, we just can’t keep up with you when you talk that fast.”

“I am so sorry for the misunderstanding Miss Gwendolyn.” Edward apologized. “Had I known that we were not in agreement I never would have made such promises to King Liam. I shall go at once and tell him that we wish to retract our offer of marriage.” He turned on his heels but Gwen stopped him.

“No Ed wait!” She called out to him and he immediately looked back. “According to Drake, the marriage is a big incentive for the Cordonians to consider joining the union. They know that they have to unify with someone, and the other countries they’re looking into want the Duke and Duchess of Valtoria to marry off their unborn kid. If we take marriage off the table, they might not consider joining us at all.”

“Oh, I see.” Prince Edward frowned.

“Maybe we can make a new deal?” Roberto suggested. “One that doesn’t include marrying our friend to a king against her will?”

“Rob, as much as I appreciate that, I don’t see a way out of this that doesn’t make the Union look disorganized, untrustworthy or ill prepared. Edward’s right. I’m always saying that I want to be helpful, I want to do good. Who has more power to do good than a Queen?” Gwen repeated Edward’s question back to him.

“So, you’ll do it then?” Edward asked. He didn’t want to sour the mood by sounding too hopeful. Gwen couldn’t speak. The best she could offer him was a nod. “That’s wonderful Lady Gwendolyn!” He exclaimed. “Since you’ve officially agreed, I see no reason to trouble the others with the details of this conversation.” Still smiling, Edward left the balcony and rejoined the party.

“We could leave right now.” Rob suggested. “I’ll go anywhere you want to go. We’ll say you’re leaving the palace for some fresh air or something. Then we sneak to Ed’s garden. He keeps a ladder behind his favorite rose bush, just past there.” Roberto pointed off the balcony to the edge of Prince Edward’s secret garden. “We climb down the ladder to an access road. We can walk the length of the road to town. We can take a plane or a bus to anywhere from there. Or...or I’ll secede! I’ll pull Altaria out of the union and since you’re unofficially an Altarian citizen you won’t be allowed to represent the union anymore.”

“Rob,” Gwen finally found her voice as she looked into his kind brown eyes. “As much as I appreciate you offering to run away or start a war to stop me from doing this, I’ve made up my mind. Remember what Louis said in the car on the way over? Everyone in the Union is expecting us to reach an agreement with Cordonia, even your father.”

“My father!” Prince Roberto rolled his eyes. “I haven’t impressed him much in the past twenty-five years. Why start now?”

“I’ll be alright Rob.” She promised. Gwen reached out and held one of his hands in hers. She squeezed it reassuringly. “Besides, it will be nice to outrank you for once.” She teased him

with a wink. “Try not to look so heart broken, at least for my sake?”

“Anything for you, Gwen.” He promised, forcing himself to smile. Anyone who didn’t know him well would assume he was back to his normal cheerful self. Only Gwen, and maybe Alberto, could see the sadness hiding just behind his eyes. “I believe it’s my turn for a dance.”

“Well, by all means, lead the way, your Highness.” She replied with a giggle.

Persuasion



After her dance with Roberto, Gwen was back on track to win over the Cordonians. Personal feelings aside, she was not willing to risk being the reason they turned down the Union's invitation to join. With so many Cordonian royals still left to sway, Gwen knew she would need a few more allies to turn the tides. She scanned the ballroom searching for the Duke and Duchess of Valtoria. The couple was sitting back in their seats at the table. One of the Duchess' feet was resting in her husband's lap.

"Duke Maxwell, Duchess Charlene." Gwen greeted them quietly as she approached.

"Lady Gwendolyn!" Charlotte smiled. "I should apologize for being unlady like. You see my husband can be...excitable at times and I'm afraid I may have hurt myself trying to keep up."

"Oh no! Should I call for the royal doctor? The Levaincois have an excellent doctor." Gwen looked around trying to locate Louis or at the very least Zain.

"Oh it's not that serious!" Duchess Charlotte assured. "Not worth getting everyone riled up over something elevation and a little rest will help with."

"Of course." Gwen nodded.

"Did you want to talk to us about something else?" Duke Maxwell asked.

"Well, yes. That is if it's not too much trouble." Gwen asked.

"I'm not going anywhere any time soon." Charlotte gestured to her injured foot.

"Well, I was just speaking with Sir Drake and he let it slip that you're not exactly thrilled to be promising your future child to a marriage with another country. The Union is the only one of your prospects not asking this of you."

"Right, they've suggested a marriage between you and Liam instead." Duke Maxwell said.

“Yes.” Gwen nodded. “I understand that the two of you don’t know me, and that you don’t owe me any favors, but at least King Liam and I are two consenting adults. Should a marriage take place between us we’ll have both agreed knowing fully what we’ve agreed to. I wouldn’t want or expect two children to go through something as significant as a marriage without either of them having the chance to express their own consent or displeasure.”

“Neither can we.” Charlotte confessed. “Cordonia must have an heir. We agreed to allow any child of ours to become the heir as a favor to Liam, but if he were to marry and have his own children...”

“What I think my wife means is how can we help?” Maxwell asked.

“King Liam told me that it’s important to him that he have the support of his people before making any decision. Drake said that Duchess Olivia of Lythikos will always vote in favor of King Liam. So, if I am able to convince King Liam that we are a worthy match, I’ll have Duchess Olivia’s vote as well. If I can count on your support that leaves only the four remaining duchies undecided.”

“Not exactly.” Maxwell frowned. “Liam will also consider the opinions of the Guardians of the Realm. Many of whom are not Dukes or Duchesses. Plus, he’ll probably want to know Madeleine’s opinion. She’s the Royal Communications Director.” He rolled his eyes.

“That is quite a few more people than I had thought.” Gwen confessed.

“Nothing we can’t handle.” Charlotte said encouragingly. “This sort of thing happens *a lot* in Cordonia. Luckily, your two new allies happen to be very popular with most of the royals. And very good at conniving them to see things our way.”

“Thank you so much, Duchess Charlotte and Duke Maxwell!” Gwen smiled. “I promise I will do as much on my own as possible. I just might need a guiding hand here and there.”

“Just Maxwell and Charlotte, now that we’re allies.” Maxwell winked. “So, where do we start? I’m always up for some courtly intrigue.”

“Well I was thinking Duke Bertrand might be a good start? Since he is your brother, he may be the easiest to convince.” Gwen suggested.

“You don’t know Bertrand.” Maxwell snorted. “But he’d do anything for Charlotte, so we can use that somehow. C’mon, I’ll introduce you.” Maxwell slid out of his chair and led Gwen across the room where Bertrand was discussing finances with Prince Edward.

“Bertrand!” Maxwell clapped his brother on the shoulder. “Have you met Lady Gwendolyn yet?”

“We did meet briefly during my entrance, however it is always a pleasure to be in the presence of our host, as I was just telling Prince Edward.” Bertrand said.

“Yeah, Eddie, this is your place, right?” Maxwell whistled lowly. “Nice gilded ballroom, but I heard you’ve got a thing for flowers. It’d be nice to learn about something other than apples

for a change. Would you mind joining me on a walk of the garden outside?”

“It would be my pleasure Duke Maxwell, but it would be rude of me to leave Duke Bertrand, here.” Edward frowned.

“Don’t worry, I’d be happy to keep the Duke company while the two of you enjoy your walk.” Gwen offered. This was all the assurance Edward needed. He allowed Maxwell to escorting him away, already rambling about the various roses showcased within the ballroom.

“I must say Lady Gwendolyn, I thoroughly enjoyed the dinner service.” Duke Bertrand was the first to speak. “It is so rare these days that one attends an event in which all the proper serving utensils and dinner wear are used.”

“Well, educate and decorum are two things that are very important to the Union, and a proper place setting is a small way to convey how important our guests are to us.” Gwen parroted back a speech she’d heard Alberto give to Prince Roberto one evening during a state dinner.

“Well said, Lady Gwendolyn.” Duke Bertrand smiled. “I suppose you’re here to make a case for the Union?”

“You’ve got me.” Gwen agreed.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, but even an appropriate table serving will not be enough to sway my vote towards the Union. I need to know that whatever King Liam decides will not cost Cordonía to give more than we can afford.” Bertrand explained.

“I would expect nothing less from a Duke with your prestige. I know that you’re getting married soon.” She remembered reading in both American and Cordonian news. “Planning a wedding gets a person laser focused on the future and it’s only natural that you want the best future possible for your country and your family. You should know that financially the Union is thriving.”

“That’s not true for all of the Kingdoms though is it?” Duke Bertrand asked. “You must be aware that Liberty is struggling financially at the moment.”

“It’s true, Liberty is not as profitable as the other Kingdoms.” Gwen recognized. “But Prince Keith and the royal family have dedicated a lot of time to cultural endeavors. They support their people where it’s important.”

“And do you think it’s fair for Cordonía to pay for Liberty’s *cultural endeavors*?” He questioned.

“I suppose that depends. Would Cordonía not expect something in return for their funds? Whether that was for the debt to be paid back or for imports or something else. It would be a trade. Not a single Union Kingdom is looking for handouts.” Gwen countered.

“You’re still a student, Miss Gwendolyn, correct?” Duke Bertrand wanted to know.

“Yes. Here in Charles.” She nodded.

“May I ask what your course of study is?” Bertrand asked.

“Economics with a minor in anthropology.” She answered.

“Well, I can see that the princes were fortunate to have found you, Lady Gwendolyn.” For the first time since their interaction had begun, Bertrand smiled. “I look forward to talking with you again sometime. Perhaps over a more pleasant subject, like apples or decorative napkins. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to catch the end of that garden tour.”

“I would like that very much Duke Bertrand.” Gwen told him before he walked off in the direction Maxwell and Edward had headed.

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