Anarchy in the U.K. - Director's Cut

by Yahtzee

Summary

A series of ficlets fleshing out the universe of "Anarchy in the U.K." -- from the guys's pasts to their future, other characters' POVs, and more.

Notes

My apologies - I wasn't even going to start posting these until I was done with the final chapter of "Pantheon," which I very nearly am. But I'm having a Really Bad Day, and a whole year later this universe is still one I crawl into for escapism, so I decided to start posting. I've written several of these already, will put up more in the weeks to come, and have others already in mind ... but if there's a moment/scene/POV that you wanted to read for "Anarchy in the U.K.", feel free to suggest one!
Watching The Royal Wedding

ONE: Armando Muñoz

Armando knew there was nothing Emma Frost would’ve liked better than to pretend this whole day wasn’t even happening. But they couldn’t ignore Britain’s biggest news story of the year, could they?

Annoyingly, he wasn’t at St. Paul’s himself. Armando had been given a verbal invitation, with the understanding that the real deal was soon to follow. Linen envelope. Hand delivered. The whole nine yards. And a plus-one, to boot; if he met the right woman before May, he’d be able to deliver the single most impressive date of all time.

Then Emma had put in for a press pass in his name.

“How would you send me to cover that?” he’d protested in her office.

“You have the inside scoop, it seems.” Her voice was cool. She’d been hacked off ever since she’d learned Armando was welcome at Clarence House, all the more because she’d learned it from film footage of one of the charity pop concerts sponsored by Prince Alexander – which had showed Armando getting down in the same luxury box as Erik and Charles. “You can provide more insight than anyone else we have.”

“My relationship with them is personal. Not professional.”

“I’ve never understood why so many people insist on drawing a line between the two,” Emma mused. And she wouldn’t back down.

Erik had apologetically rescinded the invitation. If they invited only one member of the press covering the event, they’d be accused of playing favorites. Armando had understood; he’d been expecting it from the moment Emma assigned him.

He’d protested the assignment to the bosses upstairs, citing a conflict of interest. But by the time the brass at Global Media finally let him off the hook, all the invitations had been issued. No regrets, of course, so every seat in the cathedral was filled – and Armando was shit out of luck.

So: No press pass. No invite. Instead, he was watching like every other schmuck in the world, in front of a television set.

(Depression was kept at bay by memories of Charles and Erik’s mutual bachelor party – a salmon-fishing trip to the Highlands that involved a whole lot of single-malt whiskey consumed in a sumptuously comfortable lodge. That was flash enough for one week, Armando figured.)

“They’re about to start!” shouted Ronnie from copyediting. The large-screen TV in the conference room would be showing the wedding for everyone in the office today; some of them would be writing about the coverage itself, while others just wanted to make a party of it. Armando was in the second group. If he hadn’t come into the office, he’d just have watched at home alone, which was a good way to wind up sulking for a few hours.

Besides, this way there were crisps, cookies and some sort of cheese thing Janos had brought in, plus mimosas for everyone who wasn’t filing copy today. Nothing made up for not getting to actually be
there – but mimosas helped.

Crazy, he thought as he watched the white carriage traveling toward St. Paul’s with hundreds of thousands of onlookers cheering from the roadside. That’s Charles and Raven in there. I’ve seen these people in sweatpants. I’ve watched them eat pizza. They’re just people, so what the hell is this all about?

Which, Armando knew, was pretty much how both Charles and Raven felt about it. Yet when he saw them today – Charles in military uniform, Raven in a billowing white confection of a wedding dress that put Disney princesses to shame – he caught some sense of the glamour of it. The mystique.

The cameras cut away to show the final arrivals at the church, which included Erik. People in the newsroom started to applaud; Armando joined in, though mostly he was planning how to tease Erik about that fancy suit.

“So, what, is he best friends with Lady Moira now?” someone said. “Did he ride there with her and Sean Cassidy?”

“They can’t put him in with the royal family, so they had to come up with something,” chimed in someone else.

Armando knew they were hoping he’d start talking and give them the straight scoop. Well, they’d have to keep on hoping.

Damn, what is that in Moira’s hair? It looks like she stole the feathers off Big Bird’s head. The English fashion for “fascinators” was one Armando didn’t really understand.

Once Raven climbed out of the carriage, her attendants started fixing her skirt and train; for the first time, the crowd really got to see her dress. The fashion correspondent began typing furiously, which made Armando smile – until he heard somebody say, “She went with long sleeves to hide the cuts, I guess.”

His smile froze on his face. If he heard one shitty joke about Raven’s problems, this party was about to get seriously unpleasant.

Then the fashion correspondent spoke up. “Megs would have had sleeves regardless.” She didn’t even look away from the screen; her fingers flew across her keyboard on autopilot. “You can’t be married in a cathedral in a sleeveless gown. It’s … tacky.”

The subject was dropped, which was a relief.

Armando enjoyed watching the trip up the aisle, particularly the part where Charles and Raven went past the row where Erik was seated, and Charles gave him a quick wink. That made the TV commentators slightly flustered, but won wolf-whistles from the Global Media crew. Afterward, though, the whole thing became sort of dull. Lots of hymns, lots of talking by the Archbishop of Canterbury: Armando suspected he’d have started tuning out even if he had been there. People began to chit-chat, and when Raven and Zale walked into a side room off-camera for a while, to sign some certificate or something, Armando decided this was the ideal time for a run to the loo.

On his way back, he happened to glance over at Emma’s office – and saw her sitting alone at her desk. She didn’t seem to be working, just lost in thought

Armando went to rap on her doorjamb. “Hey. How come you’re not watching with the rest of us?”

Emma shot him a dirty look, but just before he was about to raise his hands and say, Sorry, she
sighed. “I doubt Erik would like the idea of me watching.”

“It’s not like I’m going to tell him about it.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

He hesitated. Until now, he hadn’t ever revealed that he knew this – but the time had come. “You mean, you feel guilty.”

Emma’s eyes met his; she was truly stricken. “He told you?”

“Not for a long time. Erik wasn’t throwing shade, okay? He only told me so I’d understand why he left like that.”

She took a long time to say the next: “Do you have any idea what it was like, going to my bosses and admitting the single biggest news story in the United Kingdom had been right under my nose, for months, and I missed it? It’s a miracle I wasn’t fired on the spot.”

“They can’t blame you for not knowing something Erik kept secret.”

Emma gave him a withering look. “Our jobs are all about knowing things people would rather keep secret.”

Not all about that – but Armando got her point. “So, what, you were trying get in good with them again? You traded info about Erik for scoops on other stories?”

She shrugged. One of her perfectly manicured hands drummed a pen against her desk, and she bit her bottom lip.

“For what it’s worth,” he said, “I never reported it. And I never would. You’re clear. All right?”

“I honestly thought of it as helping Erik.” The words seemed almost to have escaped from her. Emma slumped back in her chair, tired, not fighting it any more. “I thought – just a little information here and there, and it would give the tabs fresh meat, so maybe they’d stop doing shit like publishing photos of his dead parents. They’d have something else to write about, you know?”

Armando leaned against the doorjamb. “Like the tabloids can ever have enough meat. You couldn’t ever have kept them off him. You had to know that.”

“I did. I just convinced myself otherwise, because I wanted to believe it. I wanted to save face. Instead I committed a breach of ethics that should have sunk my career for good. Now I live with it. Every single day.” She breathed out. “So, yeah, I don’t feel a lot like looking at Erik Lehnsherr on a big-screen TV right now.”

“Do you want me to tell him you’re sorry?”

Emma stared at him; clearly she’d never even contemplated that. “… I doubt he’d want to hear it.”

“You might be surprised. Erik’s mellowed out a lot.”

For a long time she said nothing else, but then, very shortly, she nodded.

How would Erik take it? Armando wasn’t sure. Yeah, he was more laid-back these days – but in Erik’s case, “more laid-back” was not the same as “actually laid-back.” Still, in the long run, Armando thought he’d be glad to know.
“Come on,” he said, nodding his head toward the direction of the conference room. “Erik’s hardly ever onscreen. You might as well have a mimosa and get a look at the dress, right?” When Emma hesitated, he played his trump card. “You gotta make fun of the hats.”

“Oh, all right,” she said, as if she were doing him a favor. But as they walked through the office side by side, Emma gave Armando a smile.

**TWO: Glover**

“I wish Mr. Hartley could have seen this.”

“As do we all,” Glover said to the Kensington Palace housemaid who had spoken. Archibald Hartley had been a good man, and he would have been delighted to see Princess Margaret so happily married. However, Glover had always had private reservations about Hartley’s attitudes toward service; the man had become far more intimate with the family, particularly the princess, than any servant should ever presume to. Yet there had been extenuating circumstances. Had Hartley not come through for the girl, would she have survived her mental illness?

Then again, Glover thought, had Hartley not propped up Her Royal Highness for so long, the Family might have been forced to get her appropriate help much earlier. In the end, it was always best to know one’s place.

He sat in the Buckingham Palace theater room, a small but luxurious private theater complete with red velvet curtains and deep recliner seats, not to mention a top of the line sound system. Members of the Family were able to screen the movies they wanted to see, in privacy and security – and when no one from the Family had reserved the theater, the staffers were free to set up screenings of their own. They even had a Classic Movies Club that met first Wednesday of each month; members were as senior as the Keeper of the Privy Purse and as junior as the laundress who had joined the Buckingham Palace staff just two months prior.

Today, those with more audio-visual expertise than Glover had set it up to project the televised Royal Wedding.

Not everyone was interested in watching, of course; some people had too much to do, such as the cooks, who were even now overseeing the arrangements for the wedding breakfast. A few others who had the day off were taking advantage of the chance to visit family, go shopping or simply loll about in bed. Nonetheless, the theater was packed with an audience far more informed than most.

“I can’t believe she’s getting through it,” said Woodley, who worked closely with Princess Margaret at Kensington. “Look at her! Calm as anything.”

“Diazepam?” one of the footmen asked, but Woodley shook her head, an emphatic no. Glover suspected very few people in the room believed her, but he was one of those who did.

“Bloody hell, I told Her Majesty not to wear the pink,” groaned one of the Queen’s maids. “On anyone else, that color would look cheerful. On her it looks … wrong. Like an undertaker wearing a glitter wig.”
“It’s a celebratory day,” Glover said. “Time to do something different, surely.” This was his way of shushing any further sarcasm about the Queen’s clothing, and it was understood. A respectful hush fell.

From the time he’d become the Prince of Wales’ butler, Glover had possessed authority among the staff – both real (he could countermand any orders not royal) and potential. The potential came from the understanding that he was likely to become head butler at Buckingham Palace itself when the crown was passed down to the Prince of Wales.

(The current butler there, Jacoby, was nearing retirement age and had made no secret – below stairs, at least – of his eagerness to put aside his labors and repine in the Grace & Favor flat he would be able to live in free of charge for the rest of his life.)

Still, Glover thought, he shouldn’t discourage all mirth, even that at the Family’s expense. People had to let off steam, from time to time. Service was always better when provided without frustration or resentment. What better chance than this for people to vent a bit?

So when the Prince of Wales audaciously gave Mr. Lehnsherr a wink on the trip up the aisle, and several people laughed or clapped, Glover joined in and even added, “Now everyone else sees what I’ve been seeing!”

More laughter. Some surprise, too: Glover had never volunteered any information about the prince and Mr. Lehnsherr, and he knew the others had been too intimidated to ask. One of the young footmen, emboldened perhaps by the free-flowing champagne, ventured, “Did you always know, sir? About the prince, and – and everything?”

“If you mean, did I know the Prince of Wales was a homosexual, the answer is no.” Which was not entirely true, and more to the point, might make him sound like a fool. So Glover added, “At least, I did not know outright. I had my suspicions, but I took pains not to learn more than I ought. Furthermore, His Royal Highness was extraordinarily discreet.”

Even Glover had thought the prince must sleep with Lady Moira once in a while. The condoms in her bathroom wastebasket – such subterfuge boggled the mind. Yet he had been all but certain that women were at least not the Prince of Wales’ primary sexual interest.

“I’d have had to know,” one of the Queen’s maids said. She drank soda water only, like all the others who would have to go back to work once the wedding party returned to their homes. “The wondering would have driven me mad.”

Glover privately thought that any of Queen Louisa’s maids would be glad of something to wonder about. Anything. Her Majesty was as predictable as a metronome.

Then again, consistency was a thing to be wished for in an employer. Those royals with set expectations, standing orders, clear likes and dislikes – they were the easiest to serve. Prince Richard could be an unpleasant and imperious, but he rose every day at 6:30 a.m. on the dot, which meant his valet knew exactly when to warm the bathwater, and his cooks knew exactly when to have his French toast ready. (Prince Richard’s one weakness was a rapacious sweet tooth.)

The Prince of Wales was reasonably consistent … within his own definition of service, which was not like that of any other royal now or in the past. Glover had learned to live with it, mostly.

“Do you like him?” the new laundress dared to ask. “Mr. Lehnsherr, I mean.”

“He is considerate, intelligent and quiet. I like him very much.” In point of fact, Glover liked him
better than the Prince of Wales. Once Lehnsherr had adapted to royal life, he had become far clearer and more decisive in his instructions than His Royal Highness had ever been. Lehnsherr asked for little, but he apologized for none of it. This was the proper attitude. The Prince of Wales had unfortunately absorbed his mother’s undue humility, forever behaving as though Glover were a casual friend who would be doing him a favor; Lehnsherr treated Glover as what he was, a professional doing his job. Perhaps in time the Prince of Wales would learn from his partner.

“And they’re really in love?” the laundress said. Around her, a few people laughed, but the laughter had changed, become embarrassed; she’d gone too far there, and everyone knew it.

Glover decided to have mercy. “They appear happy. More than that, no one can know except themselves.”

The words and we should not pry went unspoken, but she got the gist anyway. Even in the darkened screening room, the flush of her cheeks was obvious.

Walsh, the housekeeper for Prince Richard’s rooms in Kensington Palace, spoke up – perhaps to spare the girl any further embarrassment. “Do you think Lehnsherr might get used to the life? Ask for more hands-on service? Full-time cooks, a larger cleaning staff? Lord knows it’s time.”

“One must hope,” Glover said heavily.

Anyone outside of royal service would think that having an undemanding employer would be heaven. The Prince of Wales dressed himself for casual events, asked for only the simplest comforts, and even made his own breakfast in the morning, most days. People would think that would be ideal.

In fact, it was Glover’s worst nightmare.

His duties now – those, he had accepted, and he would’ve been lying if he’d said he didn’t like having hours free at night to watch “Broadchurch” or read Flashman novels. It was the future Glover feared, and he was far from the only person in service to be uneasy.

Right now, approximately 100 people waited on the king in various capacities; another 100 waited on the queen. Prince Richard’s staff was the equal of theirs, sometimes even larger. The Prince of Wales employed fewer than 20 servants, not including staff for his charities and scheduling, and most of those few servants were not employed full-time.

When King George IX was replaced by King Charles III, what would happen to all those jobs? To all the people who filled them?

Yes, of course, when the Prince of Wales assumed the throne, he would require more staff than he currently had. But he would never employ anywhere near the numbers of staff his grandparents did. Princess Margaret kept a proper household – not so grand as her elders, but one befitting her standing – yet this was largely because of the needs of her illness. She had taken on only one additional servant upon her marriage, a valet for Prince Zale. As they were likely to be the parents of the heir to the throne, their standard of living would be influential … but Glover could scarcely imagine that royal service would be greatly expanded after the next king had spent decades trimming it down. Public sentiment would not allow it, nor an increasingly stingy Parliament.

In other words, the profession Glover had devoted his whole life to was a profession that would soon cease to exist.

Even now, look at the young ones, he thought. They laughed, made free with comments about Lady Moira’s yellow hat, and had no doubts about the days to come. These days, people didn’t enter royal
service with the idea of remaining for a lifetime; most of them worked five years at most, more often about two. And why not? The jobs waiting for them in the private sector were both less demanding and more lucrative. One footman had been hired away by an American billionaire a few years ago; not only had the footman instantly been made a butler, but he’d been given a six-figure salary, a house of his own, and cars for both him and his wife. If one could bear dwelling someplace called “Omaha,” that would be fine living indeed. The laundress who sat there, still blushing: Within a few years’ time, she would be able to get a senior position at any of the world’s biggest hotel chains. After learning how to live up to the standards of Buckingham Palace, staffers were prepared to handle any and all hospitality needs.

Glover did not envy them. He had his life, and he liked it, and would not have moved to Omaha for a sack of jewels and a Bentley. Retiring to a Grace & Favor flat suited him. But … it was strange to think of a way of life dying out. His way of life. Within another generation, it would be all but gone.

On the screen, larger than life, was the smiling face of Princess Margaret, radiant as she clasped Prince Zale’s hands. She looked happier than Glover had ever seen her.

_Hartley should have lived to see this,_ Glover thought. _And no longer. It would have broken his heart, knowing our day is done._

**THREE: Sebastian Shaw**

A gay bar in Bangkok.

_A little redundant, don’t you think?_

So the joke always went. That wasn’t entirely accurate – Bangkok offered pleasures for any sexual persuasion, from the vanilla to the criminally perverse – but it was close enough. Sebastian Shaw only knew that the gay bars all ran together for him after a while: the same dance music (a few years behind the European and American styles), the same lights, the same overpriced drinks.

The same beautiful local men hoping to pick up rich, less beautiful foreign men. As Sebastian provided some sex appeal to go with his wallet, he never hurt for company.

Tonight, in particular, he wanted to keep busy.

So he went to the bar with high hopes, then damned himself for a fool, because this gay bar – like any other open at this time of the day – was showing the satellite feed of the royal wedding. The royals were camp without even knowing it, and nobody would pass up the chance to mock. As Sebastian stood there, looking at an enormous screen showing idiotic Brits in Union Jack foam hats, he considered turning on his heel and going back to his hotel. If he needed companionship, it could be hired.

Instead, he found himself taking a seat.

When the bridal carriage began making its journey to the cathedral, the TV commentators were fawning over Megs’ dress and tiara; the guys in the club only had eyes for Charles.

“He’s keeping the beard. You think Ricky’s into bears?”

“That one’s not a bear. Without the beard he was practically a twink.”
“It doesn’t hide that mouth. Who didn’t know he was a fag just from that mouth? You look at those lips, you just know they’ve spent some time sucking cock.”

And so on.

Sebastian remembered the one and only time he’d been in the presence of the Prince of Wales, at that party at the Canadian embassy. The man had managed to be both polite and controlling at once, smiling warmly while wordlessly hinting that Sebastian should find himself on a plane departing the United Kingdom at his earliest convenience. He was handsome, too – not Sebastian’s type, nor a type he would have thought Erik went for, but undeniably attractive.

Apparently he hadn’t wholly understood Erik’s tastes, just as he’d failed to understand something else about him. But what? Sebastian did not regret losing a chance to have Erik back in his bed as much as he loathed the knowledge that he’d guessed wrong.

Erik had been his. He’d taken him in hand when Erik was hardly more than a boy; over the years Erik’s personality had acquired certain needs and flaws Sebastian could navigate like roads on a map. Many of those needs and flaws were ones Sebastian had nurtured – just in case he might need them.

Surely some of those vulnerabilities remained.

He remembered Erik saying that he didn’t know how he would ever fit into the royal world. On a day like this, he probably felt that more strongly than ever. Look at him there, in a morning suit of all things. Erik never felt entirely comfortable in clothing more formal than slacks and a sweater. The starched collar must be digging into the flesh of Erik’s throat. Strangling him.

Sebastian imagined the red lines indented into Erik’s skin, and his own fingers rubbing them until they vanished.

No denying it. He found it as hard to let go of Erik’s body as his soul.

As the Prince of Wales walked his sister up the aisle, he seemed to wink directly at Erik. Certainly the crowd in the bar thought so – there were whoops and whistles – and the BBC commentators fell all over themselves trying to describe it decorously. Sebastian wasn’t even sure he’d winked at all.

The wedding settled into the usual formalities, and the commentary within the bar settled onto less fascinating topics, such as Megs’ dress and Zale’s ass. Finally the bartender went back to making drinks, which meant Sebastian could get the gin and tonic he so badly needed.

Look at him, he thought as the Prince of Wales was shown on camera – in the rows reserved for royalty, with Erik at least forty feet away. He’s in one world; Erik’s in another. Even now.

This couldn’t last forever. Eventually, the prince would move on; he could have virtually any man he wanted, and Sebastian couldn’t imagine having such freedom without fully exploring it. Or maybe Erik would be the one who tired first, when he realized his platitudes about being “defined by love” could only support him for so long. However it happened, someday the tabloids would announce that Erik had left the palace for good. No worry that Charles would ever re-enter Erik’s life; their spheres were so different that they’d certainly never see one another again.

Then Sebastian could find Erik.

It wouldn’t be hard. He already knew Erik was likely to return to Bangkok, a place he knew well but could get lost in fairly easily. They’d come together to this very bar – had made out in that corner, Erik all but giving him a hand job under the table. The next time Erik came here, Sebastian could be
waiting. And he’d play it just right – no gloating, not on any level Erik would ever see. Just sympathy. Erik would be bitter enough without being goaded.

Maybe he could even convince Erik to tell him what the prince had been like in bed. Show him. Sebastian would let Erik play the prince, so Erik could win back some measure of his pride.

This reunion would last more than five months. This time … would be interesting.

Sebastian’s fine mood lasted through the rest of the ceremony, and the beginning of the ludicrous aftermath; apparently no one considered the wedding complete until the final balcony appearance. His drink nearly finished, Sebastian thought he might as well head home. He wasn’t in the mood to pick up anyone tonight. Probably he’d jack off to the memory of Erik as a virgin, opening his mouth for Sebastian’s cock that very first time.

Just as he took the last sip, from the corner of his eye he saw the bridal party walking out onto the balcony. Then someone yelled, “Oh my GOD!”

The entire place went wild. Sebastian turned to the screen to see Erik – standing with the royal family, by Charles’ side, as hundreds of thousands of people cheered below.

“That’s it,” someone announced. “They’re getting married. No way he’d be out there if they weren’t.”

“Ricky is as good as royal already!”

“Let’s hear it for the Lord High Gays of Planet Earth!”

For a few long moments, as the celebration continued around him, Sebastian sat there with his glass in his hand. He could tell how embarrassed Erik was to face the crowd like this, and yet Erik faced it anyway. Every time he and the prince glanced at each other, their smiles broadened.

Gone for good.

He went to the bar and ordered another drink. Next to him stood a young man – American or Canadian by the look of him, early 20s, obviously broke. When Sebastian smiled at him, he smiled back. And there was something about this one’s eyes, something uncertain. Maybe he hadn’t intended to go quite this far from home without a plan. Sebastian was good at plans.

“I’m Klaus,” he said. Klaus Schmidt was one of his favorite aliases. That was how he’d introduced himself to Erik, so long ago.
Erik's Last Words to Sebastian

Chapter Notes

(They're not all about Sebastian, I promise.)

Erik said, “There are worse fates than leading a life completely defined by love.”

It felt like letting go. Which was absurd – knowing this meant that his entire future would be charted, fenced, determined by forces largely outside his control. He would’ve thought it would feel like a great weight settling on his shoulders. Instead, it was all he could do not to laugh.

Sebastian would think Erik was laughing at him, when really it was just the sheer surprise of it.

And the joy.

“You don’t sound like yourself,” Sebastian said. “That’s not the Erik I know.”

“No. It’s the person I’ve become. You haven’t known me for years.”

“You’re pretending I don’t know you at all.”

“I wish I could, but I can’t. You shaped me in ways I can’t begin to calculate. But … you shaped my past, Sebastian. Not my present, and not my future.”

Was that all it took to be free? Once Erik had thought this man was his fate, that the terrible magnetism of Sebastian Shaw would always have a pull on him. That they would continue to come together, collide and crash, over and over again, for the rest of their lives. Yet now walking away from him felt easy. Right. Even knowing – especially knowing he would never see Sebastian again.

Despite everything, Erik wanted them to part well. He was tired of walking away from uncertainty and doubt. No more ragged edges. Just the truth.

Sebastian’s grin would have looked confident to anyone who didn’t know him as well as Erik, who could detect the faintest flicker of doubt. “So you’re turning your future over to some ponce of a prince instead.”

“Charles doesn’t define my life. My love for him defines my life. This world – yes, it’s strange to me, and alien, and sometimes I don’t know how I’ll ever fit in.” Erik ran one hand through his hair as he searched for words. “But as long as I’m by Charles’ side, the rest will … work itself out, in time.”

“Really, Erik, I never figured you for a golddigger. All this for a place in the palace?”

The sneer had no sting, because it was completely false and even Sebastian knew it. Erik simply said, “All for Charles. And for me, too. Because the life I have with him is the best life I’ve ever known.”

It took Sebastian a moment to come up with a reply, and the moment lasted too long, because the crowd had begun flowing more onto the porch, finally trusting that the rain had ended for a while. Sebastian muttered, “We can discuss this somewhere private.”
“I’ve said all I had to say.” Erik lifted his head and smiled across the crowd, at the figure coming toward them now. He held out his hand and said, “Besides, here’s Charles.”

Obviously Charles was interjecting himself into this conversation out of concern, or at least avid curiosity. But even Erik could glimpse no sign of this in him. Charles’ public persona had been polished to a sheen long before Erik ever met him, and it would hardly fail him now. He might have been strolling out to meet yet another diplomat. Charles’ voice was casual and warm as he said, “There you are, Erik.”

“Here I am.” Erik caught Charles’ fingers in his own, very gently – his way of saying, *No need to hold on tight. I’m not going anywhere.* He nodded toward Sebastian, declining the man the honor of formal address. “I believe no introductions are necessary.”

“Mr. Shaw. What brings you to Great Britain?”

“Business,” Sebastian said, clearly somewhat off balance. His bravado didn’t extend to taunting the Prince of Wales in public.

“How long will you be staying in our country?” Charles’ smile was so easy that most people would have missed the other side of his question, which was, *How soon will you leave?*

“No, that wasn’t it. Erik realized Sebastian was staring at him only because he couldn’t look Charles in the face.

For the first time, Erik saw Sebastian without the allure of worldly sophistication the man once had for a 16-year-old boy in Dusseldorf. Not that Sebastian didn’t have polish – but compared to Charles, he looked shabby and small, and he knew it. This wasn’t a matter of wealth, or the perfect cut of Charles’ fine suit, or the boyish handsomeness that would have made Charles a prize even if he’d been a pauper.

What cowed Sebastian was Charles’ stature. His surety. The bedrock beneath him. The place in the world Sebastian had spent his whole life clawing and cheating to get: It was Charles’ birthright. Even if he’d lost the crown, Charles would have forever been something beyond Sebastian’s wildest dreams of riches, influence and privilege.

Erik could almost pity the man.

“I hope you will enjoy your stay, Mr. Shaw.” Charles remained all politeness as he began to turn away. “If you’ll excuse us, there are some people here I should like for Erik to meet.”

“Of course,” Sebastian said. This encounter couldn’t end soon enough for him, apparently; already he had taken a step back. But he looked one last time at Erik, and there was real feeling in his voice as he said, “Goodbye.”

For one moment, Erik was a gangly teenage boy again, dazed with infatuation and wild with uninformed virgin desire, looking at Sebastian and seeing someone with the power to take him anywhere he’d ever want to go. If it hadn’t been love as Erik now understood it – it had been close enough to it to illuminate his whole world for a while.

He wasn’t grateful. Sebastian had gotten far more out of it than Erik had, and had left so much pain in his wake. But this man was part of the long path that had led Erik here. That was reason enough to be kind.
“Goodbye, Sebastian,” Erik said. He even smiled. Then he squeezed Charles’ hand and let himself be drawn back into the warmth and buzz of the party.

As soon as they were a few steps into the crowd, Charles whispered, “What did he say?”

“Nothing important.”

“Are you really not going to tell me?” For the first time, a shadow of uncertainty could be glimpsed in Charles’ eyes.

So Erik took Charles’ hand in both of his. “Nothing Sebastian said tonight mattered. What I said – that was what was important.”

Already Charles’ smile had returned, but obviously he was even more curious than before. “Then let’s hear it.”

The center of a diplomatic reception was no place for an emotional confession. Even now the party guests fluttered closer to the Prince of Wales, like moths drawn to a candle; Charles would always be at the center of everything, the brightest light. Erik would walk a few steps behind. His career would always come second to the needs of the monarchy. His freedom – or whatever fragile hope of it had remained – he’d never see that again.

But he would get to spend the rest of his life with Charles, and even though it was no life he’d ever dreamed of before … it was a good one.

For just one moment, to hell with etiquette and protocol. Erik leaned forward and swiftly kissed Charles’ cheek. “I’ll tell you everything tonight,” he promised. “Right now we’ve got a job to do.”

Reassured, Charles turned away from Erik to resume meeting and greeting the dignitaries. Erik stood one step over, two steps back, smiling.
Had Charles been at home, Glover would probably have extracted the relevant pages from his morning newspapers. His butler would have reassembled each issue, ironed them for crispness, and presented them as usual without comment, trusting that Charles was likely not to notice the missing page numbers. (Had Charles not yet drunk his coffee when he did his morning reading, Glover might well have been correct.) A little time on the Internet might have sprung the news anyway, but Charles rarely surfed at random; his schedule didn’t allow for much of anything at random.

But Glover was acutely prone to seasickness. On the rare occasions Charles went out on his yacht, a junior member of the staff stepped in. This one must not have been as vigilant as Glover.

Because Charles sat there on the deck, coffee and croissant forgotten, staring down at a picture of Erik Lehnsherr.

It was his official author photo. Some writers went in for posed shots in front of bookshelves or in sunny outdoor scenes, but Erik simply stared straight forward. It was the same posture he’d have been in for a mug shot. Yet that lack of vanity, that dislike of even the basics of marketing – it was so very Erik.

Charles read the story. His pride was genuine. Yet it was nearly silenced by the voice in his head saying Don’t do this, don’t, you know it never makes you feel any better.

But another voice finally said, This isn’t about you. It’s about Erik.

It was early, yet – but an hour later in Florence. Not too early to call.

He fetched his cell phone from inside. The scrambling software finally seemed sophisticated enough for him to risk using one – at least, until the tabloids figured out how to crack that too. Today, however, Charles felt he could make the call. After a glance back at his cabin, he stepped quietly back onto the deck and walked to the very stern, where he would be least likely to be overheard.

They continued to share phone numbers, though they called less and less. Come to think of it, the last three calls had all been Charles’ … and the last of those had been many weeks ago. Months, really. After this, he knew, he would have to let Erik be the next one to phone. The next silence promised to be long.

All the same, he still knew Erik’s number by heart.

Two rings, and then – “Pronto.”

Charles had to smile. “How very continental of you.”

“… I suppose I’ve gotten in the habit.” Erik sounded awkward – but not un pleasingly so. “Hello
“You know perfectly well what. The LA Times Book Prize? Heady stuff. You’re turning into a literary lion.” How obnoxiously chipper. Charles forced himself to speak more sincerely. “I saw the news and felt very happy for you. So I thought I might call with congratulations.”

“Thanks. That – means a lot.” But it was Erik, now, who became cavalier. “I should’ve gone to the ceremony, but … L.A. Can’t stand the place.”

Charles responded in kind. “Sunshine, palm trees and insincerity. The combination is your kryptonite.”

That won him a laugh, which made Charles smile. It helped to think of the way Erik’s face looked when he was happy. “I don’t mind sunshine.”

“No, I suppose not.” So many of Charles’ memories of Erik took place indoors – but then, they had to. Then that desperate, futile spring, when they’d tried to pretend Erik could lead a normal life. At least in his memory, it had rained virtually every time they’d ventured out. He was certain it had been pouring the night he returned home from his trip to the Netherlands to find Erik already moved out of Clarence House, the relationship over but for the formalities.

They’d had that one sunny day. Their walk together in Islington. For a moment Charles felt as though he were back there, disguised in a parka, sunglasses and two days’ beard, thrilled merely to be strolling past a Costa Coffee. Of course the real thrill had been Erik – having him near, sharing his home, and knowing that despite all the obstacles Charles was falling in love.

Sunshine had blinded him to their inevitable end. Erik was more clear-sighted.

“And where are you? This doesn’t sound like the kitchen.”

“No. Off the coast of Portugal, enjoying a sneak preview of summer.”

“On the yacht,” Erik said, and though his tone was neutral Charles knew him well enough to understand the hidden sneer. His wealth and privilege had never ceased to irritate Erik on some levels. Once this reaction had had the power to make Charles feel ashamed. But now it only irritated him in turn.

Though some of his mood might have sprung from the fact that Erik had asked where he was. Their whole first year apart, Erik had known when to call or email, because he’d been following Charles on the news. Obviously he didn’t bother any longer.

Then Erik said, “How are Happy and Glo?”

“As gleefully spoiled as ever,” Charles said, and when Erik chuckled, the call felt relaxed again. “Glo’s getting so terribly old, though. She can’t take the stairs any longer.”

“Poor girl. The way she used to dance on her hind legs for treats – ”

Erik had bought the dogs treats for Christmas. Charles had to bite his bottom lip before he answered. “I know. But we take good care of her.”

“You always would.”

The softness in Erik’s voice was dangerous. By now Charles knew that if Erik found himself becoming overly sentimental, he would catch himself and become either cold or cynical in short
order. Charles didn’t want that. At this point he had to assume any conversation between him and Erik might be their last. He so wanted them to end well.

*It ended two years ago. So why doesn’t it feel over?*

“Listen, I ought to go,” Charles said, as though he were terrifically busy instead of on holiday. “Congratulations again.”

“Thanks.” Erik hesitated – a pause that went on one second too long – and in that silence Charles heard the farewell Erik would not allow himself to say.

Yes. This was the last call.

Finally Erik said, “Take care of yourself, Charles.”

“You too.” Charles shut off the phone, not waiting for goodbyes. He could not say the words, nor did he want to hear them in Erik’s voice.

Of course they’d said goodbyes before. He had heard Erik out that last day, on Erik’s final trip to the palace, when neither of them could stop crying. It had felt like the end of the world – but Charles hadn’t really believed it. Not then, not at any point in the two years since.

*What did you think would happen? That Erik would suddenly dash back to you someday, full of regrets and love, suddenly able to make this absurd life work for him? Impossible. Charles had always known that. Yet the hope had lingered, like the final glowing embers in the ashes of a fire, until today.*

For a while he sat there on the back of the yacht, staring out at the sunlit sea. Warmth from the cloudless sky above caressed Charles’ skin; the collar of his white linen shirt flapped once in the breeze. His sunglasses cut the glare, and yet did not obscure the other boats on the horizon – paparazzi one and all, even now getting snaps of the king on holiday. He could imagine the headlines now: The Man Who Has Everything. Charles laughed once, but the sound strangled in his throat, and then he didn’t want the sunshine any longer.

He went back inside, careful to step out of his sandals so that he would walk quietly. Better not to wake anyone, because he still wanted a few moments alone – but it was too late for that.

“There you are.” Kenneth smiled at him, ginger hair dark and wet from his morning shower, bundled in his white toweling robe. He came to Charles and bussed his cheek. His breath smelled sweetly of orange juice. “You’re the only man I know who gets up as early on holiday as he does any other day of the week.”

“Guilty.” Charles held up both hands.

One of them clasped the cell phone, which Kenneth saw. “Were you on the phone with Margaret? Is she doing better?”

“Couldn’t reach her. No doubt she’s not up yet.” The lie came too easily.

“Hey.” Kenneth put one hand on Charles’ shoulder. “She’ll pull through. She always does.”

Charles nodded, though he wasn’t as confident as Kenneth – who, despite his genuine kindness, had never broken through Margaret’s reserve to become someone she would talk openly to. He would never be allowed to call her Raven. Perhaps that was why Kenneth didn’t see how much worse Raven had become in the past two years. Or maybe it was simply that he had never met her before
Hartley’s death, the event that had begun her downward spiral. By now the entire nation assumed her to be a hopeless drug addict. Her tentative romance with Prince Zale had withered on the vine. The murmurs about the lack of an heir to the throne grew louder every month – though that, at least, would soon be seen to.

At the moment, Prince Richard was working eagerly with palace aides to draft a proposal for Alex to be invested as Prince of Wales – a highly unusual step, but one that could probably be sold as a necessity. Charles had accepted it as such. After Alex’s investiture, Charles would in essence be sharing his throne with a younger, handsomer, very straight man, one whose popularity would dwarf his. He’d need to step out of the spotlight more, become just the living body on the throne while Alex fulfilled the role of figurehead.

So. Charles would have more time to do absolutely nothing. Raven would sink deeper into her reclusiveness. All that remained to them of their father’s birthright was the money. If people knew of his thoughts, they would laugh at his self-pity – “people with real problems,” “poor little rich boy,” so on and so forth. But Charles, who had more privilege than virtually anyone else on earth, keenly knew its limits.

If I’d stepped aside as heir back when I first came out, stipulated that Richard or Alex could succeed me, then Erik and I might still be –

No. He’d spent too long repeating variations of this in his mind. It had to stop, today, permanently.

Kenneth drew Charles down onto the small sofa. “Please don’t worry so much about Margaret. All right? You’ll be back with her in a week.”

Best to let Kenneth assume his assumption about the reason Charles’ blue mood was correct. “I worry about leaving her just after she’s had an episode.”

“You have to take of yourself too. Rest and recharge.” Kenneth’s fingers brushed through Charles’ hair. “You’ve been run down lately, I think.”

Charles simply nodded and leaned his head on Kenneth’s shoulder. He needed to be grateful for what he had, including a stable relationship.

Kenneth was everything Betsy Braddock could have wished for in the King’s partner. His aristocratic lineage stretched back to the Wars of the Roses, at least, which meant Kenneth’s blood was nearly as blue as Charles’. He had no profession, as he was independently wealthy; this meant no conflicts of interest, and Kenneth was already accustomed to filling his days with various diversions. He donated to the right charities. He could talk thoughtfully about art and history, could charm the entire room at any party or reception. His past was as spotless and sterile as an operating ward. And Kenneth had accepted the limitations on their romance: Weekends and holidays, but always living in his own London flat or country home. Official events never, unofficial events occasionally. Matrimony out of the question, their commitment informal and unspoken. Great fondness, and good sex. Love? Maybe, of a kind.

It wasn’t what he’d had with Erik. That came along once in a lifetime, if you were lucky. Hadn’t it been wonderful to know that sort of passion, even for a few months? Surely his life was the richer for having known Erik, and loved him, even though he’d lost him, too. Charles thought the day might come when he could look back on his time with Erik with gratitude, and even joy.

Just not yet.

“Honestly, you don’t look good.” Kenneth’s handsome face faded into deep concern. “Let’s go back
to bed for a bit, get a couple more hours of sleep. I’d hate for you to take sick on your holiday.”

“You take good care of me,” Charles murmured against Kenneth’s shoulder. “I’m lucky to have you.”

Kenneth chuckled. “I’m the lucky one. Any man in the world would want to be with you.”

Any but one. Charles closed his eyes, buried his face in the collar of Kenneth’s robe and tried only to think of how very much he had, instead of what he’d lost.

**

After Charles rang off, Erik stood for a while at the window of his Florence apartment. He meant to be drinking his espresso and looking at the dome of the cathedral – his latest rented, pre-furnished living space might be tiny and impersonal, but the view was spectacular.

He might as well have been starting at a slab of concrete. In his mind he could only picture Charles.

When he’d left Clarence House, and Charles, for good, Erik had assumed he would never fully be able to establish himself as anything other than the prince’s ex-lover. The first few months had been even more difficult than he’d dreamed. Even when he was back in Bangkok, certain dedicated paparazzi had still tailed him for a while.

(Though fortunately none of them had been around the night Sebastian Shaw walked up to him with a smile, and received a long-delayed, well-deserved punch in the face.)

But then his book had come out to good reviews. “Bubbles” had gone over well too, and now he was working on another business history, about the origins of modern global business practices in Renaissance Italy. The news was no longer much interested in him, except as an author, which was precisely how Erik wanted it.

These days the tabloids were more interested in that Kenneth whats-his-name.

When Charles had first appeared with his new lover – hand in hand, smiling up at Erik from the New York Times web page – it had hurt more than Erik had thought it would. Or could. He’d spent an entire weekend in his apartment, never once stepping outside his own door, fighting the terrible urge to call Charles. Don’t do this, don’t move on, if you’re still waiting for me then maybe someday –

Someday what? Erik had no answer for that. No answer existed. Although he’d known this before, he spent that long miserable weekend forcing himself to accept it.

Another six weeks passed before he phoned Charles, when the acid burn of it had cooled. He’d been able to wish them well, and pass along his sincere condolences to Kenneth about the frenzied press coverage. The only strained moment had come when Charles asked whether Erik was seeing anyone. “Not regularly,” Erik had said. “You know me.”

“Of course,” Charles had said. Everything Erik had ever said about collar and leash hung between them for a long moment, and then Charles had gone off into some digression about the Brahms recital he’d gone to a couple of weeks prior, which got them past it.
Commitment. Domesticity. Erik had always known these weren’t for him. His romance with Charles had been – a folly, a delusion, a glorious one at times but too fragile to last.

In some ways Erik was glad he’d tried it, just once. Now he knew better, and would never make that mistake again.

Nor would he speak to Charles again, and he thought both of them knew it. The past was the past. Probably for the best they hadn’t acknowledged this last parting. It would only have dragged them down. Erik wanted to enjoy this day, when he was still coasting on the high of the LA Times Book Prize.

Okay, he didn’t feel that high at the moment – but he could get it back. Move on, go forward. He always did.

He realized the espresso had cooled in his cup. Erik poured it into the sink and decided to make more later. Instead he changed into his workout gear and headed out onto the streets for a run. Although he’d never been much of a runner before, Erik had thrown himself into it after leaving Charles. It turned out to be the sport he’d been waiting to find his whole life.

Running was about boiling yourself down to the purest essence. Everything unnecessary fell away, from body fat to daydreams to bad moods. You sweated it out of you until you were nothing but muscle and will. He weighed 15 pounds less than he had when he’d been living in London. Erik thought he might shear a few off yet.

The cobblestones pounded against the soles of his running shoes. Erik headed straight for the nearest hill, driving himself upward. His muscles burned, a welcome heat that cleared his mind.

A pigeon fluttered up in front of him, then shot into the sky. Erik craned his head to look at it for one moment. Once he’d read that birds had evolved to have hollow bones, to reduce their weight. You had to be empty before you could be light enough to fly.
The full list of the casting for the OCs (and the X-Men not shown in the film series) in the world of Anarchy in the UK. None of them appear in this chapter, actually, but some of you were interested to see:

Betsy Braddock = Maggie Q  
Prince Richard = Tim Roth  
King George IX = Michael Gambon  
Queen Louisa = Maggie Smith  
Kenneth Deramore = Simon Woods  
Niall Edgerton = Iwan Rheon  
Prakash Rajamani = Dev Patel  
the late Prince Edward, Charles & Raven's father = Kenneth Branagh  
the late Princess Rose, Charels & Raven's mother = Greta Scacchi  
Roger Hornby = Peter Capaldi

Have not settled upon a Glover, nor do I know enough child actors for Sophie. Happy to take suggestions!

Welcome to the Magic Kingdom!

As ticket holders to the Deluxe Disney Experience™, you already know that the best of Walt Disney World and Epcot awaits you, including character breakfasts for your children to enjoy one-on-one time with their favorite figures from Disney movies, FastPass tickets that get you to the head of the line at the most popular attractions, personal concierge service in the parks to assist you throughout the day, and complimentary meals and beverages at all our Disney resorts. However, this week’s ticket holders are in for an even greater thrill – visiting the Disney parks alongside Britain’s royal family!

King Charles III, his husband the Duke of Exeter, and his niece Princess Sophia will be joining in all the family fun. They have insisted on receiving no special treatment aside from their private security (which will keep you and yours safer as well). Yet we think this unique experience will be even more memorable for your children if we preserve some of the important traditions associated with royalty. Imagine being able to go home and tell everyone that you knew all the right protocol, and so were able to address the king as “Your Majesty” and Princess Sophia and the Duke of Exeter as “Your Royal Highness.” This is an occasion no one in your family will ever forget. If you’re the slightest bit nervous, don’t be: Full guides to proper etiquette for dealing with royalty will be tucked into the complimentary fruit basket waiting for you in your room upon check-in.

Keep in mind that many parents are sensitive to having photos or video taken of their children without their consent; this rule applies as much to Princess Sophia as to any other child at Walt Disney World. By keeping the Deluxe Disney Experience™ private and exclusive, you enhance the
specialness of the occasion and your role in it. If you have further questions about royal protocol, security or anything else, feel free to ask your Disney Experience concierge, who will be ready and eager to help.

Enjoy your stay with us! Let the magic begin.

“I intend to keep this letter,” Erik said that morning, as Charles brushed Sophie’s hair. “To induce vomiting in case one of us accidentally takes poison.”

“Who took poison?” Sophie said.

Charles shot Erik a look as he knelt in front of Sophie. Although she was steadier than her mother, some of Raven’s sensitivity showed up from time to time. Sophie could be easily frightened; they’d already decided not to enter the Haunted Mansion. “No one took poison, sweetheart. Uncle Erik was just making a joke.”

“A very bad joke.” Erik bent over, brushed back her honey-brown hair, and kissed her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“If nobody took poison, then it’s okay.” Already she was wriggling with excitement again. “Can I put on my own shoes?”

“I don’t know,” Charles said. “Let’s see if you can.”

Sophie bounded toward her room, eager to prove she was able to fasten the Velcro panels on her trainers without either her uncles’ or her nanny’s help. Her lilac trousers and polka-dotted shirt were practically a blur. If she was this wild before they’d even seen the park, what would she be like once they got started?

He must have looked worried, because Erik took his hand. “It’s not too late to call in some help. The nanny could be here within half an hour.”

“Miss Lee is enjoying a well-deserved day off by the pool.” Besides, Charles intended to live as a normal man for a couple of days; normal men wore blue jeans, and held their husbands’ hands, and took care of children without the help of the most highly recommended nanny in the world. If other people could manage child-rearing for eighteen years straight, he and Erik could handle it for a day. “We’re going to have a wonderful time.”

“… you’ve never been to a theme park, have you?”

“Well, no. Why?” They were supposed to be fun, weren’t they? Why would people pay so much money to go year after year if parks weren’t fun?

Erik’s good spirits had already returned, along with his wicked grin. He always became so amused when he got the chance to show Charles something about ordinary life. “Trust me, you’ll never forget it.”

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“We’ve swept the area, sir,” said one of the security team. “It’s clean.”
Charles managed to keep a straight face at the news that Wonderland was safe for them to take breakfast tea with Alice and the Mad Hatter. “Thank you, Porter. On we go.”

Their Disney concierge was a lovely young woman named Brandy, whose braids were pulled back into an intricate knot at the nape of her neck; this had the effect of making her khaki shorts and red polo shirt seem almost elegant. She led them from their rooms, down a long corridor – not in regular use, because they weren’t staying in any of the usual resort accommodations. It turned out that Walt Disney World had one suite more exclusive, secret, luxurious and secure than all the rest; this had been offered up to their royal visitors with pride, and apparently a complete unawareness of the irony of putting a real king in Cinderella’s Castle.

Then again, the furnishings in Cinderella’s Castle were more opulent than they’d been in Clarence House, so maybe the Disney people were on to something.

As they walked, Brandy explained, “Your Majesty, Ms. Braddock and I went through the profiles of all the attending guests and chose appropriate companions for every meal except the final dinner. If you particularly enjoy the company of any of these families, you can let us know to place them with you again at that last meal.”

“Splendid,” Charles said. He’d rather have taken his luck, as he so rarely had the chance to meet people at random. Yet Erik had pointed out that if by some mischance they wound up at a table with violent homophobes, or radical Catholics from Belfast, Disney World would lose its luster very quickly. At least he’d gotten security to agree to them taking meals with the other guests. “Whom do we have this morning?”

“The tables seat ten, sir,” Brandy said. “You will be sitting with Jeffrey and Grace Kim of Baltimore, Maryland, and their twin daughters, Lucy and Lily, who are almost exactly the same age as Princess Sophia.”

Sophia brightened. “Can we play together?”

“Hope so,” Erik said, and squeezed her hand. Charles felt a slight pang; he remembered that well, the desire to be a kid like every other kid, to be able to simply run out and play. It hadn’t happened very often for him. Maybe they could do better for Sophia.

Brandy continued, “The other family seated with you will be Rhoda and Danielle Slone-Huffman of Waterford, Maine, and their son Arlo, who is one year younger than Her Royal Highness.”

They’d been paired with one of the other gay couples in attendance; Charles realized he should have expected as much. “I’m sure they’ll be delightful,” he said, which was overstating the case a bit but was only polite. “Have they been told to expect us?”

“We informed both families of the dining arrangements this morning, sir.”

Oh, dear. Most people needed more time than that to get comfortable with the idea of dining with royalty. That meant he and Erik would probably have a table of Turtles to deal with.

But there would be children, too, and children were almost always the most delightful of Dogs.

The security guards pushed open a set of double doors that led them into the lobby of the Wonderland Tea Room, which was abuzz with excited children and loud parents. When their party walked in, some people hushed, but others began talking animatedly – “That’s them! The king and the princess!” – and one man in the back clapped for a few seconds before he was hushed.

Applause. Charles managed to disguise his amusement. Oh, Americans. They simply did not
understand the protocol and saw no reason not to put themselves forward. He would never forget the man in California who had shouted out cheerfully, “Hello, Prince!” While this attitude irritated most members of the royal family, Charles had always found it a refreshing change – at least, for a short while.

A video screen on one side showed various images of the theme park and Disney slogans. As they walked past it, giant pink letters scrolled past, proclaiming, WALT DISNEY WORLD: WHERE EVERY LITTLE GIRL IS A PRINCESS!

Sophie could read very well for her age. Her face lit up. “Are all the little girls here princesses?”

“… they are today,” Charles said.

Erik whispered, “Oh, God, she thinks she’s found her tribe.”

Let her think it. When he was a child, he would have given a lot to have friends who didn’t have to call him sir. If Sophie could live that, even for a few days, Charles wanted that for her.

Brandy led them to their table near the front; the other families were already there, the parents wearing the pained rictus smiles of extreme terror. But Charles’ lifework was mostly a matter of putting people at ease, and by the time they’d sat down for a few moments, the situation was already improving. Mrs. Kim turned out to be Dr. Kim, a dermatologist; her husband was a professor of music; and Greta and Danielle Slone-Huffman ran a bed-and-breakfast. “Specializing in gay and lesbian travelers,” Danielle explained. “Though of course we welcome anybody. Um, Your Majesty. And Royal Highness…es.”

“Now we know where to stay if we’re ever in Maine,” Erik said.

This was pleasantly received as the joke it was, but Charles knew he’d have to speak to Erik later. Even now, seven years into their marriage, Erik’s royal patter occasionally erred. Had these women been even slightly less savvy, tomorrow’s news stories could have contained a small blurb about how they had promised to visit Waterford any day now.

The Kim twins were each decked out in costumes – one in a green dress that Charles now knew was Tiana’s, and the other in a yellow one like Belle’s. (Sophie’s presence in his life meant that Charles now knew the plots of all Disney movies backwards and forwards.) Each of the children had been very quiet at first, so much so that Charles knew they’d been specifically told not to say a word. People often did this, because they were nervous about their kids embarrassing everyone involved, but Charles wished they wouldn’t. Often it made children fear him, which was awful, and Sophie wanted to make friends for the day.

Fortunately, children only stayed quiet for so long.

The one in yellow broke first. She said to Sophie, “Where’s your princess dress?”

“They said I didn’t have to wear one today.” Sophie smiled toward them. “But yours are so pretty!”

Lucy and Lily practically glowed, and Charles squeezed Sophie’s hand under the table. Already, she had learned the most critical part of the job, which was the importance of making other people feel good whenever possible.

Little Arlo, seeing that the other kids at the table could talk, blurted out the question that obviously had been troubling him. “Are you the King of England for real?”

“Yes, I am.” Charles poured his own milk into his coffee.
Arlo demanded, “Then where’s your crown?”

His mothers looked mortified. They shouldn’t have; this was one of the questions Charles heard most often from small children. He gave his usual answer: “I left it at home. You see, it’s very heavy and not at all comfortable. So I only wear it for special occasions.”

The adults relaxed, but Arlo didn’t seem to be convinced. He kept glancing at Charles suspiciously, as if expecting him to be revealed as an imposter at any moment.

Once they were able to get out into the park itself, the entire experience stopped feeling like another day at work and started actually being fun. Charles had never been taken to such a place as a child, so he’d heard about amusement park rides but never been on one. To his astonishment, it turned out that he loved them.

“Spin faster!” he shouted at Erik as they went on the teacup ride, the world whirling around them. Sophie giggled wildly, but Erik looked a bit green. The Magic Carpets of Aladdin were even better than the teacup ride, and Pirates of the Caribbean was better than the Magic Carpets. If only Sophie had been old enough to ride Space Mountain! Charles was eager to find out what a real rollercoaster was like. In the meantime, he settled for Big Thunder Mountain.

“I’ve created a monster,” Erik said as they walked toward the Prince Charming Carrousel, Charles sipping soda out of a commemorative Buzz Lightyear cup. “We’ll have to go to Universal Studios next, won’t we?”

It took Charles a moment to realize Erik was joking, because that sounded brilliant.

He didn’t understand exactly why, but for some reason, the very artificiality of the place soothed him. The countless shops with endless, colorful merchandise – restaurants and kiosks serving guilty-pleasure snacks in ample American portions – the lack of any need to do anything constructive – it wasn’t real life at all. Usually, that was what got to him in his darker moments, made him feel isolated or ridiculous: The gap between his life and the way most other people lived.

Here, though – here Charles’ experience was exactly as absurd as everyone else’s.

_Giddy and plastic and a hell of a lot of fun_, Charles decided.

For the most part, they stayed near the families they’d breakfasted with. Charles was delighted to see the Kim twins talking and laughing with Sophie as though she were any other new child they’d met. Which of course she was – but rarely did she get the chance to act like one. Meanwhile, Arlo proclaimed that he didn’t play girl games, but never stopped going out of his way to run or jump or do something else he thought might impress them. It was obvious he saw little difference between Sophie, Lily and Lucy.

The parents, though – oh, they were lovely, really. All four of them intelligent and cultured, and careful of protocol without being stiff. Yet there was no getting around the fact that they saw Charles, Erik and Sophie as Royalty, not as human beings. This attitude was more common than not, but Charles found himself wishing they could have set it aside here, at least. Surely, in a theme park, people could just play – couldn’t they?

After Stitch’s Great Escape, they ate a late lunch at some sort of pseudo-Polynesian place with carved wooden tropical birds that sang to them. Charles dug into a hamburger and some sort of alcoholic beverage that was more pineapple juice than spirits.

“Look at you,” Erik said, shaking his head. “You’ve gone native.”
“I suppose I have. But this burger is delicious.” He so rarely ate hamburgers. The last time must have been at least two years ago, in one of Sean’s luxury boxes at a football match. A pity. Maybe he could convince the chefs at the palace to make beef wellington a little less often and try some new things. Like hamburgers.

Erik said, “Next thing I know, you’ll be wearing Mickey ears.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

He did not, at any point in the day, put on Mickey ears. However, when they found themselves near the actresses who played Sleeping Beauty, Mulan and Merida, Sophie gamely posed for a “princess picture” that resulted in about eight thousand cell phone flashes going off at once.

*That one will be in the papers tomorrow,* Charles thought. But he didn’t mind. That was the sort of harmless, benign coverage they needed to allow from time to time. Besides, Sophie looked adorable.

Only in the late afternoon did he realize that Erik wasn’t enjoying himself quite as much. His expression was ever so slightly strained. Obviously he liked seeing Sophie have fun, but probably wasn’t having much fun of his own.

Obviously this wasn’t something they would discuss in public. But as they took the Jungle Cruise, Charles folded Erik’s hand in his and squeezed gently. That won him the gentlest smile he’d seen on Erik’s face all day.

By the time they returned to the resort hotel in the later afternoon, even Sophie admitted she wanted a nap. As they walked down their private hallway, Brandy said, “On your desk in your suite, you’ll find a folder with some details about the family you’ll be dining with tonight. The Whitmans of American Fork, Utah – a Mormon couple with five children. They’re active in efforts to make the Mormon church more welcoming to gays and lesbians.”

*Church of Latter-Day Saints,* Charles mentally corrected her. He’d come into contact with few enough Mormons in his life, but he knew that much. “Thank you, Brandy. We’ll see you this evening.”

As Erik tugged off Sophie’s shoes, she murmured, “I really like Lily and Lucy.”

“They seem like very nice girls,” Charles agreed as he undid her ponytail.

“Could they come see me in London?”

Charles sat down on the bed beside her. “If the Kims ever come to Britain, we might be able to arrange for you to see each other. But they live in America. Remember how long the plane trip was to get here? Well, it’s just as long in the other direction.”

“And they’re not fancy,” Sophie grumbled. “Why do we have to be with fancy people all the time?”

“Because we’re the fanciest, I’m afraid.” Charles kissed her forehead. “Now get some rest. You want to be ready for dinner tonight, don’t you? Mickey and Minnie will be there.”

“Can I have one of the princess tiaras? I want to wear one like Lucy and Lily.”

“Not a tiara. You have plenty at home.”

“I do?” Her eyes grew big.
“You haven’t worn them yet because they’re too big for you still. But when you get older, you can take your pick.”

Sophie had been taught not to whine – but she was already very good at negotiating. “Maybe if I got one now, I could practice wearing tiaras, for later.”

Charles was no slouch at negotiations himself. “What if we got you some fairy wings instead? Glittery ones you could wear on your back.”

It worked. Sophie beamed as she snuggled under her covers. “Like Tinker Bell?”

“Exactly like Tinker Bell.” Charles glanced at Erik for his reaction, but it was impossible to read his face.

When they went back into the living room, Erik immediately flopped down on the nearest sofa. Charles sat beside him so they could share the ottoman. “Oh, dear lord, my feet,” Charles groaned.

“I know.” Erik’s head lolled back to rest on the sofa cushions. “I can’t believe I backpacked across Asia with these same feet. They were sturdier two decades ago.”

“Weren’t we all?” Propping up his feet, Charles said, “Did I hear Brandy incorrectly, or is that town in Utah actually called ‘American Fork’?”

“I heard her say it too.”

“My God.”

For a few moments they simply sat there in blessed silence. Already Charles sensed Disney World would be best enjoyed between intervals of peace and quiet. He didn’t want to shatter this moment of serenity – but he sensed they ought to talk.

“You didn’t seem to be enjoying yourself today,” he ventured.

Erik shrugged. “Theme parks aren’t really for adults. We just have fun watching the children, right?”

_Do not yet mention potential birthday visit to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter._ “I thoroughly enjoyed it. Top to bottom.”

“So it seems.” Erik’s smile was slightly smug. “I think you’re getting to live out your long-delayed childhood.”

“Maybe.” Charles rested his hand on Erik’s leg, thumb stroking back and forth. “Are you all right?”

Erik didn’t answer for a few long moments; Charles let him have the time. Finally Erik said, “It doesn’t matter.”

“No limits.”

That won him a deep sigh, but then the truth. “It’s just – I can’t help wondering what we would have been like. As fathers, instead of uncles.”

Charles managed to hide the extent of his surprise, lest he make Erik feel foolish. Confidences were still difficult for him sometimes. “I thought you’d come to peace with that a while ago.”

“I have, mostly. But I wonder sometimes. Like today.” Erik’s smile was sad. “We’re good with her.”
“We are.” The long-banished images crept back into Charles’ mind: children’s laughter in the mornings, a baby’s weight in his arms. The life they could have led, had Charles not become king.

But there was no point in tormenting themselves.

“No one gets everything,” Charles murmured. “God knows I have no right to point at the one corner of my plate that’s empty.”

“I know, I know. We lead an almost nauseatingly privileged life.”

For Erik, it probably was literally nauseating at times. Charles knew that Erik had once deliberately chosen to lead a life pared down to the pure essentials. He’d owned few things, almost all of them basic requirements. His career had been focused on economic conditions in developing nations; he’d always drawn attention to inequity and corporate opportunism. In other words, Erik was one of the scant few people in the world who had no use for being a millionaire.

This was actually one of the things Charles loved most about Erik. To be loved despite wealth and position, rather than because of it – he’d never expected to find that. But it also meant that the privileges of their life together were little consolation for Erik, compared to the freedom he’d lost. “Do you regret it? The choices we made?”

Erik shook his head. “I just wonder, sometimes. What it would have been like.”

“In Cambridge, while I became a scientist and you got a job in a shop?” Charles teased, hoping to lift Erik’s spirits.

“I would’ve liked that. Showing you how the other half lives. Well. The other ninety-nine percent.” With a sigh, Erik added, “I know we’re absurdly fortunate. I could hardly forget it. But today – you were having so much fun, and I could see the kind of father you would’ve been – I wished we’d had that freedom. And it reminded me again that you’ve spent your whole life in an elaborately gilded cage.”

Many people spent their lives in cages of one sort of another, and gilding was rarely involved. But this wasn’t the point Charles needed to make. “I’m not fortunate because of the crown or the wealth or any of that. I’m fortunate because – because my sister is happier than she’s ever been before in her life. My niece is the most wonderful little girl, loving and good-natured and clever. Because I’m healthy, and I have a good mind.” He stroked a lock of Erik’s hair away from his forehead. “And because somehow, against all odds, we found each other. That’s the best fortune of all.”

Erik smiled, soft and fond. “You’re not going to let me stay in a bad mood, are you?”

“No.” Honestly, Charles thought Erik’s mood had as much to do with sun exposure, jet lag and noise as anything else. The question of what might have been – it was one they had all but put behind them, by now. “I realize the comforts of our life mean little to you, because you’re the least materialistic person on earth. You just have to remember everything else we have – the non-material things – and how lucky we are.”

After a moment, Erik rested his head against Charles’ chest, and they sat there in the blessed quiet for a while. Probably he would fetch Erik some Panadol and a glass of water, and by dinnertime they’d be back to normal.

Then Erik said, “The sheets.”

“Beg pardon?”
“The sheets. I really like the sheets we have in the palace.”

“What brought this on?”

Erik sat upright again. “You said material comfort meant nothing to me. Mostly that’s true, but – those sheets. My God. They’re like being wrapped in clouds.”

“Are other sheets different somehow?” Sheets were … sheets, weren’t they?

“Yours are at least 1000 thread count, from what must be some sort of genetically engineered super-cotton.” This was joking, or maybe it wasn’t, because Erik looked entirely serious. “Most people’s sheets are to your sheets what – what sandpaper is to most people’s sheets.”

“Really?”

“Did you not notice what the linens were like in my Islington flat?”

Charles remembered the scratchiness, though mostly as an element of some absolutely fantastic sex. “I thought something must have gone wrong with your laundry service.”

That made Erik laugh out loud. “My ‘laundry service’ was me spending a weekend afternoon at a laundrette.”

“See? I’d never have made it on the outside.” Charles kissed Erik quickly, smoothing the last of his bad mood away. “We need naps as much as Sophie does. Come on. Let’s have a lie-down before dinner.”

According to the materials they’d received ahead of time, the master bedroom in the Cinderella suite featured a “California King-Sized” bed. Apparently kings in California required a larger bed than Charles did; he and Erik might as well have been lying down on Luxembourg for a nap. But the mattress was just soft enough, and the lights were low, and he could spoon himself behind Erik in perfect comfort. The contrast between the din of the theme park and their shared silence was delicious.

“I nearly forgot,” Erik murmured. “The thing with the bed and breakfast this morning. Sorry. I didn’t realize what I was saying until too late.”

“It’s all right. They knew you weren’t serious. Both families were lovely, really. Let’s hope the Whitmans are as well. And whoever we get tomorrow.” Drowsiness weighed him down, pleasantly. Charles snuggled in closer to Erik. “What are we doing tomorrow, again?”

“Tomorrow is Blizzard Beach. One of the water parks. Situated on, what do they call it … Mount Gushmore.”

“Angels and ministers of grace, preserve us.”
the night between chapters eight and nine

Chapter Summary

Just a short snippet from the night after Erik first confessed his feelings for Charles.

Erik pulled Charles next to him, slid his leg between Charles’ thighs, nestled his face in the curve of Charles’ shoulder. He couldn’t get close enough. His body ached and trembled in the aftermath of sex, and every breath still came shallow and fast. His hand curved around the back of Charles’ head, holding him close as Erik whispered, “I love you.”

“Say it again.”

“I love you.”

That phrase had been so foreign to him for so long, as though it were something he’d memorized phonetically from a language he didn’t speak. The words weren’t empty any longer.

Charles made a small sound, neither a laugh or a sigh, something in between. “I still can’t believe this is real. By now – ” He leaned up on one elbow, the better to see the clock on the nearby table; it was just after midnight. “—by now I thought you would have left the palace for good.”

“You mean, you thought I would’ve left you.” Erik was in no mood for euphemisms; tonight was about laying bare the truth. “I’ve been such a shit the last few weeks – one foot out the door, and I know you knew it, so don’t even pretend – ”

Charles leaned down and brushed Erik’s lips with his own before answering, “I’m the one who broke up with you, remember?”

“That was different.”

This time, Charles didn’t argue. “It’s all right. That’s over. We misunderstood each other.”

“Ourseleves. Or myself, anyway.” He burrowed in even closer to Charles. So many years he’d lived apart from anyone else, never allowing anyone near. Now he wanted to press himself against Charles, into him, as if he could merge their minds, their skins. As if Charles’ heart could pump his blood. “I never meant for this to happen.”

A moment’s silence, the sound of Charles’ breath. Then, “You sound as if – as if you regret it.”

“No.” Erik pulled Charles into the kiss this time, long and deep. He didn’t stop until both of them had to gasp for breath. “Never that.”

Yet felt as though he regretted … something. That there was some part of this, one step on this strangely crooked path, he hadn’t handled right. Still Erik knew he didn’t regret loving Charles.

“Listen to me,” he whispered. “I meant every word I said. I’m not going to take this back tomorrow. I love you.”

The chaos to come was inevitable; he’d already leaped off the cliff.
“I love you too. So much.” Charles’ smile returned. That smile was all Erik needed to see.

They remained tangled together for a while after that, exhausted yet unable to sleep. Erik’s mind boiled with possibilities, questions, risks. How do I tell Emma? Will Global try to fire me for keeping this secret? Oh, shit, when Roger Hornby hears about this he’s going to find a way to bitch me out for not filing the biggest scoop I ever got.

Since he first skipped his college graduation ceremony to catch a flight to Vietnam, Erik had prided himself on his freedom. His lightness, his – invulnerability. He had lived in a dozen apartments, each as impersonal and self-contained as the last, never allowing himself to stand still. Never had he allowed himself to pick up anything he wouldn’t be happy to put down again. Tonight he was within a palace. Every brick of it belonged to Charles and told the story of who he was. And no matter where Erik went after this, or how his life changed, he knew that he would never be able to leave Charles behind, not really.

As much as he loved Charles, Erik couldn’t help feeling the new weight.

Charles pressed kisses along Erik’s hairline, against his temple. “I’m going to make this work for you. Whatever I have to do.”

Erik had to laugh. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep. Even your power has limits.” Then Charles looked wounded; Erik’s tone had been harsher than he’d intended. So he continued, more gently, “The battles ahead aren’t ones you can fight for me. We both know that.”

“I can fight a few of them. But I know what you mean. You’re right.” After a pause, Charles asked, “Can you keep your job?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Charles pulled away, enough for Erik to see the raised eyebrow. “The words ‘conflict of interest’ spring to mind.”

“I don’t report on the royal family. I only made one exception to that rule.” They both smiled at that, remembering Kenya.

Had Erik dreamed then that he could be on this path – would he still have invited Charles in out of the rain? It seemed impossible to him that he could have chosen this, back then. He might not have chosen it only a few days ago.

“There will be other complications,” Charles continued. “As long as you know that.”

Erik nodded. “Don’t worry. I know how it works; I can handle it.”

“Sometimes I think you could do anything.”

That made Erik laugh softly. He was the last person anyone ought to idealize, and surely Charles knew it. Tonight, though, they could let themselves get carried away. None of the usual rules seemed to apply.

How long would this last? Erik had always asked himself this question at the start of a relationship – at least, ever since his first romance with Sebastian Shaw. He’d become all too good at making estimates: down to the month, usually, and sometimes even down to the week. Now, however, Erik found himself on wholly unfamiliar terrain. He could not imagine leading this life at Charles’ side, in the public eye. But even less could he imagine leaving Charles. Not knowing what he knew, and feeling what he felt.
“Forever” wasn’t a concept Erik put much faith in. Tonight wasn’t the time to convert. Instead he swore to himself to hold on as long as he could. That was how he put it to himself, and made it less frightening that he could not imagine any end.

He took one of Charles’ hands in his, and they clasped them together between their chests. Charles’ heartbeat thumped against Erik’s wrist. And yet, still – “I can’t get close enough to you.”

“Come here,” Charles said, which was absurd as they were already intertwined. But Charles rolled Erik back so that he lay on top, his forearms framing Erik’s face. They were locked together thigh to thigh, face to face. In a whisper, Charles said, “We’ll be this close every night from now on.”

But there was no such thing as forever …

Charles continued, “Everything we were afraid of earlier today – it’s over. It’s all over. We know each other now.”

Erik nodded. But even as Charles lowered his face for a kiss, it seemed to Erik that there was some distance he had yet to travel to truly be with Charles forever – or as long as he could. Miles left to go.
“Hello there!” Charles said to the dogs as they scrabbled at his feet. The gold braid on his crimson jacket gleamed dully in the light from the lamp Glover had left on in the sitting room. He settled his uniform cap on the table for Paulson to deal with in the morning. “Hello, hello, hello. You two seem very happy to see us. Did Glover not feed you? I’m quite sure he did.”

“More likely they need to go out,” Erik said. Already he was unknotting the tie around his neck, as though it had been strangling him.

“Glover would have taken them out just before he left.” But the way the corgis bounced and whined – certainly they wanted something.

“You told Glover he didn’t have to stay past ten, because we thought we’d get in around eleven. It’s now half past one.”

“Oh bloody hell.” Had they been out that long? Alex had turned the armory into a makeshift disco for the after-wedding celebrations, and while Charles hadn’t let himself get drunk enough to dance, he’d been highly entertained just watching Erik and Moira. “They still shouldn’t need to go out until morning, though.”

“Everyone’s schedule is off today.” Erik began walking toward their closet. “I’ll find our raincoats.”

The clouds had only begun to gather after the balcony appearance, and the rain hadn’t started until an hour or so ago – as much as they could have hoped for from English weather. Even now it was more drizzle than downpour. Charles hesitated, though. He didn’t mind the wet, but he’d never actually taken the dogs out himself.

Do you have to pick up the poo? Does Glover do that? Do the gardeners?

Charles went into the kitchen. He understood that most people used some sort of old paper for this purpose. But Glover had tossed the papers away. Finally he decided the gardeners would handle it at least this once, and turned his attention to figuring out where in the world the umbrellas were kept. The only one he found was brilliant red – therefore Glover’s, not his – but at least it was large.

He and Erik walked down the steps to the courtyard, the corgis at their heels. To Charles’ relief, the dogs only seemed to want to piddle. Once they’d done that, though, Happy and Glo showed no sign of wanting to come in from the rain; there were too many interesting blades of grass to sniff.

“What a day.” Erik shook his head in bemusement. He stood next to Charles, holding the umbrella over their heads. “That scene on the balcony – I can’t get over it.”

“I adore it when we do the balcony,” Charles confessed. “It’s one of the few times all the attention focused on us actually feels like love.”

“The signs – the things they yell – ”

Charles couldn’t help smiling, thinking of the banners that read ASK ME, ALEX! “My favorites are the Union Jack top hats.”

Erik gave him a sidelong glance. By now the rain had become a mist, silvering the night air around them. “Do you want one to wear with your Slanket?”
“At least they’d match.”

“They even ordered Raven and Zale to kiss.”

The chanting had been almost deafening, yet had been nothing compared to the cheer when the newlyweds had complied. Charles said, “Given how over the moon Raven and Zale were today, I’m sure any excuse to kiss was very welcome.”

That was when Erik’s smile changed – became harder, more cynical. A bit like that of the Erik Charles had first met in Kenya. “They won’t cheer that way for us.”

“You never know.” But really, Charles knew Erik was right. “We’ll have to find a balance. Even Raven and Zale shouldn’t do more than kiss in public, and with closed mouths, yet.”

“And I guess we don’t even get to do that.” Erik never had come fully to terms with the fact that Charles would be king for all the people of Great Britain – not merely the 59% who approved of their relationship in the latest poll.

Charles knew they’d have to compromise at times. But not with this. “Listen to me,” he said, looking up into Erik’s eyes. “I don’t care who disapproves. I don’t care what they say. I intend to kiss my husband in front of the whole world.” He couldn’t resist a smile. “Just watch your hands.”

“If I can.” Erik’s smile gentled as he brushed two fingers along Charles’ cheek. As exhausted as they were after all the wedding hubbub, Charles suspected the night’s celebrations weren’t over yet.

The corgis continued snuffling about, apparently willing to spend the entire night wandering around in the rain. “I’ll call the dogs in,” Charles said. “We ought to get to bed.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Charles smiled. “Of course I haven’t forgotten.”

Tonight he would “officially” propose. In his opinion, the most romantic place to pop the question would be while they were in bed, making love. He’d imagined whispering his proposal between kisses on Erik’s bare skin.

But Erik said, “Here. Ask me here.”

“In the rain?”

“Yes.” Erik’s eyes seemed to be drinking him in. Charles wondered what he looked like in his slightly disheveled uniform; he must have cut a better figure than he thought.

Certainly Erik looked beautiful – his shirt open at the neck, stubble defining the lines of his jaw. If this was the moment Erik wanted, then that was the one Charles should choose. But … “While the dogs are having a pee?”

“They’re done with all that. Besides –” Erik’s hand worked around the curved handle of the umbrella as he sought the right words. “We’re like any other two people right now. Not in a palace. Not anywhere grand. Just us.”

Charles stepped closer and took Erik’s free hand – his left hand. Gently he brought it to his lips and kissed Erik’s fourth finger, exactly where the ring would go. He hadn’t planned any sort of proclamation, but that was all right; simple and honest was best. “That day in Kenya – I was running through the rain and heard a stranger call to me – and I still can’t believe that was you. Of all the
people in the world who might have been standing there, it was you. And now I can’t imagine my life without you in it.”

Earlier Erik had promised to feign astonishment. Instead his expression changed, becoming something unfamiliar – until Charles realized that this was what it looked like when Erik became choked up. His voice was hoarse as he answered, “I don’t want to imagine my life without you, either.”

“Then say we’ll never have to imagine that. Say you’ll marry me, and be my husband, for the rest of our lives.”

Erik breathed out sharply, then pulled Charles closer, into a kiss. Closed mouths. Presentable to the public. And yet as intimate as any lovemaking.

When their lips parted, Charles said, “Is that a yes?”

“You know it is.”

“Say it.”

“Yes,” Erik said, in the moment before they kissed again. Somehow it sounded even better than Charles had imagined.

**

The next day

All Erik wanted to do that Sunday was relax. Surely the entirety of Great Britain needed a day to unwind from the hubbub of the royal wedding. He longed to spend a while reading and napping on the couch, then spend even longer in bed with Charles. A man only got engaged once in his lifetime – ideally, at least, and certainly in Erik’s case. He ought to take a moment to enjoy it.

Instead, he was even busier than he’d been before.

“An official portrait?” Erik could have groaned. “Today?”

“They’ve already announced our engagement – it’s in all the morning papers.” Charles was out of bed, walking naked toward the shower. Yet somehow he was already on official business. “Which means we need to have a portrait for the media within the day. Before afternoon, preferably.”

Erik cursed quietly into his pillow, then got up.

To his surprise, Paulson chose informal outfits, not suits and ties. Although Erik willingly shrugged on the charcoal grey sweater, he said, “Wouldn’t we be more dressed up for this?”

“Usually, yes,” Charles said, as Paulson fastened his belt for him. “But remember, we’ve been engaged for ages. So this is just an acknowledgement of the engagement, and therefore a little more low-key.”

Was it also to make their engagement look less official? Like something people could disregard if
they chose? Erik wondered whether or not to speak up about this – but he knew he had to choose his battles. Besides, Charles looked so happy, practically glowing. No, it wasn’t worth calling out, not today. He just wanted to keep that smile on Charles’ face as long as possible.

“Outside would have been ideal,” Betsy Braddock said later that morning, as she walked with them toward the Clarence House library. “The garden, sunshine, everything very simple and natural. But Mother Nature isn’t working with us today, sir.”

Rain had poured down ever since last night. Even as Betsy spoke, thunder rolled in the far distance.

“The library will be fine,” Charles said. “Books and leather couches, Old-fashioned and cozy. Exactly the thing.”

Erik saw no need for being old-fashioned, but he assumed the library would do as well as anywhere else. It wasn’t as though he had any opinion of his own. Hard to have come up with any preconceived notions about your engagement photo when you’d never before dreamed you would ever get engaged in the first place.

“She should His Royal Highness stand to the left or right?” the photographer asked Betsy, as assistants positioned lights and blotted any hint of oil from Charles’ face. “The last few royal engagement portraits all had the man to the right, but we’ve got two men here.”

“Mr. Lehnsherr should be the right, as he’s the tallest,” Charles said. “The portraits always make the man look taller even if he isn’t.”

“Not if the right looks more regal, sir.” Betsy folded her arms. “Forgive my saying it, but we cannot afford to make you look like the bride.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Erik bit that back, then said, “Back in the 19th century, lots of wedding pictures had the man seated and the woman standing. What if Charles sits and I stand?”

Charles was fighting a smile. “You don’t mind looking bridal?”

“I won’t.” Erik had to believe this.

In the end, they tried that pose – Charles in a high-backed leather chair, Erik standing behind the chair with one hand on Charles’ shoulder. But Erik was too tall to make it work, so they settled on a variation. Erik leaned on the back of the chair, ”casual yet confident!” as Betsy coached – while Charles sat slightly to the side, relaxed and happy. For nearly a quarter hour, they made Erik move a few centimeters closer to Charles – then further away again – trying to find the exact distance that would look affectionate but not sexual.

Engagement portraits shouldn’t look sexual, Erik told himself. Not for straights any more than for gays.

But when they started snapping pictures, he imagined their engagement portrait as being something else entirely – a shot of their last night in the dungeon, Erik naked in chains, on his knees as Charles took out his cock –

“Not quite so broad a grin, Mr. Lehnsherr,” Betsy called. “A little less. There we go. Perfect.”

**
“What do you mean?” Charles stared across the long table in Buckingham Palace, around which was being held the latest meeting of the Firm. “Of course Erik and I are going to have a honeymoon. That’s what you do after you get married.”

“Looks sordid,” opined the King, who was eating specially warmed crackers, brought to him every few minutes by a harried footman. “Everyone knows honeymoons are about sex, and we don’t want the public thinking about the sex you’ll be having!”

Thank God Erik’s not here today, Charles thought. As angry as he was at the moment – which was incandescently furious – Charles could at least control himself. Erik wouldn’t have bothered to try. “If anyone in Great Britain is still under the illusion that Erik and I haven’t had sex after living together for almost a year and a half, we ought to take the opportunity to enlighten them.”

“Nobody wants to see it,” the King said blithely. “Lord knows I don’t.”

“Father, please.” Richard spoke in such a slow, measured way that Charles knew he was trying to hide his embarrassment. “The marriage is taking place. For the sake of the monarchy, we shouldn’t remind the public of any objections they may have. Instead we must treat this as any other morganatic marriage within the family – with respect, but discretion.”

Charles would be grateful for Richard’s support later; at the moment, he was still too angry to feel anything else. “‘Discretion’ shouldn’t prevent me from having a honeymoon.”

“Of course not.” The Queen gestured as if she were shooing away a fly instead of her husband’s antiquated ideas. “Mr. Lehnsherr is a part of the family now. Though I must say it took you long enough to get around to it, Charles. You might have let him slip away, at that rate.”

He managed not to sigh. If we ever split up – God forbid – I think Erik would get to keep Grandmother in the divorce.

“I had a question.” Raven paused, perhaps waiting for someone to silence her. This was the very first meeting of the Firm she’d ever attended; she’d agreed that, after her wedding, she would start taking a more active role. But asserting herself in a long boardroom, surrounded by family members and their assistants – it wasn’t easy for her. “Why does Charles’ marriage have to be morganatic? That’s usually to ensure any children aren’t in line for the throne, but that’s not an issue here.”

Richard cut in. “However, Mr. Lehnsherr is not Church of England. He is not even Christian. And, I take it, still unwilling to convert?”

Actually, Erik had offered – half-joking, half-not. I’m a non-believer Jew. I could be a non-believer Anglican. It wouldn’t make that much difference. But Charles suspected most people would see this as the cynical move it was, and therefore Erik’s conversion would be more damaging than not. “Erik won’t be joining the C of E. So, a morganatic marriage.” He spoke mostly to Raven, making this an explanation rather than a defense. “Unrecognized by the church or the constitution, while still being completely legal and legitimate. Both Erik and I are comfortable with that.”

“Well, I hope you don’t think we’re attending this farce,” the King said through a mouthful of crackers. “I’m not watching any poofter kissing.”

Before Charles could even begin objecting, the Queen said, “Stay home if you will, but I for one intend to be present at the ceremony. There is no reason whatsoever they should not kiss at the altar.
like any other married couple.”

The King gave her a look. “When did you turn Labour?”

“Don’t be vulgar. Labour.” The Queen shook her head. “I am merely being reasonable, and recognizing that we must put forth a united front to the public. And I hardly see that two men kissing in public is any more nauseating than a man and a woman. In my opinion all such affection should be kept private, but apparently the 21st century has other plans.”

“You think kissing me at my wedding was nauseating?” The King’s face began to turn red. The Queen breathed out heavily, which came too close to a yes.

_Uhoh_, Charles thought. The King and Queen rarely disagreed on much any longer, mostly because they had led mostly separate lives for the past quarter-century or so. But when they did disagree, the battles went down in legend. Charles could see every assistant and secretary at the table blanching simultaneously.

Prince Richard cut in. “Father should not attend.”

“You can’t be serious,” Raven said.

But Richard continued, “As I said before, this should be treated as any other morganatic marriage. Morganatic marriages are not recognized by the church. Therefore the King should not attend out of respect for his role as supreme governor of the Church of England. The rest of us may choose to attend, or not, as we see fit.”

Immediately Raven said, “I’m going.”

“As am I,” the Queen said. “And you, Richard?”

“… if I am invited,” Richard said.

Charles had honestly never considered whether or not to invite Richard before, but he knew an olive branch when he saw one. “Erik and I would be happy to have you there.”

The King looked at them all as if he’d never seen them before in his life. “Mad, the lot of you.” Then they brought him his latest plate of warm crackers, and he paid no more attention to anything else.

That night, after Erik had returned home from the meeting with his publishers at the London office, Charles told him the entire saga. He’d meant to amuse Erik; instead, it was like tossing a grenade.

“Put him off his feed,” Erik stormed as he paced the length of their sitting room. From their place by the fire, the corgis watched him, their heads turning back and forth as though they were taking in a match at Wimbledon. “So he thinks he has the right to judge us. To say to our faces that our being in love disgusts him. Who the hell does he think he is?”

He thinks he’s the King of England, Charles thought, but he would never say that out loud. “You mustn’t take Grandfather so seriously.”

“What, you think he was making a joke?”

“That’s not what I meant. He’s just so – ineffectual and vague and self-obsessed. None of us have cared much about his opinion for decades now.” Privately Charles suspected that Grandmother had never cared. “Grandfather is literally a relic from nearly a century ago. He’s irrelevant. You mustn’t let him get to you.”
Erik stopped pacing, but his expression remained stormy. “They want to police our kiss at the altar.”

“Nobody wants that, not even Grandfather, really. He just doesn’t want to be there, and as long as we don’t want him there either, it’s fine.”

“It won’t just be him. What happens if I hold your hand at an official function? Or if we dance at a reception?”

“You know I don’t dance.”

“It’s the principle of the thing.” Erik turned toward him. “We ought to be able to – to kiss on the balcony. Or dance. Or anything else any of the others do. There shouldn’t be any difference.”

Charles stood, holding out his hands for Erik to take. “There won’t be. I swear. But – even the other members of the family would be discreet.”

“Discreet.” His fingers tightened around Charles.’ “So what about this? Could I do this?”

“Hold my hands? I don’t see why not, as long as the occasion is suitably informal – ”

“What about this?” Erik pulled Charles to him, against his chest.

“It’s awfully close, don’t you think? Even regular citizens talk about too much ‘PDA.’”

One of Erik’s hands slid down Charles’ back to cup the curve of his ass. “And this?”

Apparently Erik had hit upon a different way of burning off all that anger and tension.

“That?” Charles kept his tone of voice as innocent as possible. “In Scotland, maybe. Or outdoor events, polo matches, that sort of thing. But definitely not at Ascot.”

“What else could I do in Scotland?” Erik slowly went to his knees, his fingers working at Charles’ fly the entire time. “This would be all right, wouldn’t it?”

Charles wanted to play along, but he couldn’t, because now his cock was free of his boxers, and Erik had brought his face temptingly close.

“How would the good people of Britain and the Commonwealth feel,” Erik whispered, “if – at our next public appearance – I tried this?”

With that he opened his lips and took Charles in.

"Mmm." Charles couldn't speak at the moment; even his thoughts weren't taking the shape of words. Instead there was only the heat of Erik's mouth, wet and soft, and his tongue playing with the ridge of Charles' cock.

But they had to keep the game going, didn't they?

As soon as Erik pulled back for a breath, Charles managed to say, "Only in the royal box at the proms."

Erik laughed out loud – then pushed back against Charles' hipbones, so that Charles willingly toppled onto the couch. "Nowhere else? I was thinking of our next turn on the balcony."

"Maybe." Charles arched his hips so that Erik could tug down his trousers and shorts, stripping him naked from the waist down. As he reclined back on the cushions and pulled Erik toward him,
Charles murmured, "But show me exactly what you have in mind."

Already Erik's mouth was around Charles' cock again, so the low rumble of suppressed laughter vibrated deliciously along his skin. But then he started to suck harder, and Charles had to brace his hands against the arm of the sofa and hang on.

For one moment Charles didn't bother putting aside his anger. He took his cue from Erik; instead he reveled in it. *Every single one of you who thinks I shouldn't be with Erik – every single one of you bastards who thinks this isn't love, or that we don't have the right to be together – or can't imagine gay sex being beautiful – take this.*

Charles thrust into Erik's open mouth, and Erik took him so deep – "*Fuck,*" Charles breathed. "Oh, God, Erik, *fuck me.*"

Erik pulled back the whole length of Charles' cock, removing his mouth just long enough to whisper, "*After.*"

Then all Charles could do was wind his fingers into Erik's hair, and tug softly as Erik kept sucking him, warm wet tongue curling around Charles' cock. He panted until he had to groan, surrendered to Erik until he finally had to start thrusting. As he looked down in a daze, the sight of Erik's muscular arms braced against his thighs – his beautiful face buried between Charles' legs – the way his mouth curved around Charles' cock –

"*Fuck,*" Charles whispered again, just before the rush came over him, tearing away everything but the exhilaration of Erik's touch. As he came, his hands fisted in Erik's hair and shook.

Erik had hardly finished swallowing before Charles tugged him up by the hair. With a grin, Erik said, "I believe you just made a suggestion."

"*An order,*" Charles gasped. "*A royal command.*"

"*Get yourself started.*" One kiss on Charles' forehead, and then Erik took himself off to fetch the lube.

Charles obeyed, sliding his fingers inside himself. The sooner he started this the sooner he'd be ready. The sooner Erik could be inside him. His spent cock twitched once against his belly, still warm and wet from Erik's spit. Even though his daze, Charles realized he looked slightly ridiculous – naked from the waist down except for socks, still in a fully-buttoned Oxford shirt from the waist up.

Not that it mattered … or it didn't until Erik walked back in the room, stark naked, one hand holding the lube and the other hand already slathering it on his erect cock.

"*Don't you dare get yourself off,*" Charles said, drawing his legs up in the most obscene display he could manage. "*That's for me.*"

"*You'd better believe it.*" Erik knelt on the sofa, pushing Charles' fingers away with his own. As they shoved inside – just a bit rough – Charles bit his lower lip. Erik murmured, "*Once we're married, I'll be another Royal Highness. I'll be able to give my own royal commands.*"

"*Mmmm. Yes, please.*"

Erik's hands caught Charles' thighs to press them even further back, until his knees nearly touched his shoulders. "*For now you're doing just fine.*"

Then Erik thrust inside, swift and forceful, and Charles couldn't keep from crying out. Erik sped up –
going harder, starting to pound him. Charles responded by arching his body into it even further. The slap of their bodies seemed like the most delicious sound in the world. Though it was too soon for him to reach orgasm again, Charles could still revel in the sensation of Erik getting him there, right there, the most perfect spot –

Erik’s breath caught in his throat, and his movements stuttered, quickened, halted – and then his eyes squeezed shut and his jaw fell open as Charles felt a rush of wet heat inside him.

Charles smiled. He loved watching Erik come.

When Erik pulled out, Charles quickly grabbed his boxers for cleanup; Glover and the rest of the household staff were true professionals, but there were still things they shouldn't be expected to clean off the sitting-room furniture. Erik slumped down beside him – half over him – his sweaty chest warm and damp even through Charles’ Oxford shirt.

Smiling, Charles whispered, "And that we have to save for my next Christmas speech."

Erik began to laugh. The sound filled Charles with the deepest relief; he knew, now, that Erik saw the humor in their situation. That he trusted them to find the balance, together, day by day and night by night.

**

*Two months later*

Erik was so deeply engrossed in reviewing copyedits that he lost track of the time, and was startled to look up and see it was nearly seven at night.

He smiled. Charles’ plane would be landing within the hour.

As Charles’ acknowledged fiancé, and soon as his husband, Erik would be invited on most future official visits. However, the trip to Italy had been entirely planned out before they’d announced their engagement. While the hosts had offered to adjust accommodations, Charles and Erik had declined, mostly because Erik was on deadline with edits for *Bubble*.

During Charles’ ten-day absence, Erik had made tremendous progress; he’d worked out everything but a tricky transition in chapter three. So he could spend the next couple of days thoroughly welcoming Charles home.

Amazing, how much you could miss someone after less than two weeks –

The green phone in the kitchen rang. As he went to answer, the corgis appeared at his heels, bright-eyed with hope; they were well aware that any trip to the kitchen could result in a treat. “Hello?”

“Mr. Lehnsherr.” It was Betsy Braddock on the line. “You realize the Prince of Wales’ plane is due to arrive shortly, sir?”

“Of course. Is something wrong?” Nothing too bad – she wouldn’t be cool and calm like this if there were any kind of emergency, but maybe Charles’ flight had been delayed due to bad weather. The rain was coming down heavily outside, or had been the last time he checked.
“Not at all. However, now that your engagement is official, it would not be inappropriate for you to greet the Prince of Wales at the airport. If you don’t wish to, I don’t think it will send any particular public signal; I simply wanted to let you know the option is open.”

Security detail thrown into action, going out into the rain and damp, all to see Charles just half an hour earlier than he would anyway. Erik smiled. “Please tell the equerry to make arrangements for me to go to the airport.”

“Certainly, sir. I should imagine they can be ready for you within ten minutes, which will allow for plenty of time.”

Easy for her to say: Betsy wasn’t the one who badly needed to shave.

Erik went into the bathroom, shaved, brushed his teeth and combed his hair. Probably he should change into a suit, but surely good trousers and a dark shirt would be all right, especially under his trenchcoat, which he’d need to wear because of the rain –

The thought came to him then, and his smile turned into a grin.

Forty-five minutes later, as the car pulled up, Erik could see the small gathering of reporters huddled together under an awning. Not much of a press appearance tonight – they were expecting only the usual wave-and-dash from Charles. Good. Erik liked the idea of surprising them.

“I can hold the umbrella for you, sir,” Betsy said. “Or one of the attendants –”

“That’s all right. I’ll hold it myself.”

So he was standing only a couple dozen feet from the airplane steps when Charles made his appearance, waving and smiling – going without an umbrella, because by now it was only the faintest mist of rain.

But not so much that Erik couldn’t stand there holding the red umbrella they’d stood under when they got engaged.

(Glover had been surprised when Erik asked to borrow it, but of course no force on earth could have made him ask why.)

Charles’ eyes lit up when he saw Erik, who couldn’t stop grinning. The freedom to be here, to step forward – and Charles’ freedom too, to come down the steps and walk straight into Erik’s arms – it still felt very new. As they embraced, camera flashes lit up the gloomy night.

“The red umbrella,” Charles murmured against Erik’s neck. He held back not at all; the court of public opinion had no jurisdiction here, at their reunion. “I can’t believe you brought it.”

“My attempt at being romantic. How did I do?”

“Beautifully.”

They kissed then, just a brush, though that was enough to renew the flashing and whirring of nearby news cameras. Erik didn’t mind. The people of Great Britain would have to get used to this – just like Erik.

He said, “We’ll have to make Glover an offer for this umbrella, you know.”

“I think we can make it worth his while.” Charles’ smile was soft as he took Erik’s free hand in his.
“It’s so good to be home with you again.”

Strange enough for Erik to have finally found a place he would always call home. Stranger still that it had turned out to be in a palace. But strangest of all was being the one Charles would always come home to. Strangest, and best.
"You know I hate asking you to do this," said Edward, Prince of Wales. He sat upon a velvet sofa, eyes cast down at the Turkish rug, unable to meet his brother's eyes.

Richard, Duke of Cornwall, managed to resist a contemptuous sniff. "Yes, I should imagine you do."

Edward looked up at him then, so wounded that Richard nearly felt guilty. They were opposites – rivals – and yet still brothers, still capable of understanding one another in ways no one else could ever match. Yes, Edward had dug his own grave this time and was relying on Richard to drag him out of it … but the pain Richard saw in his eyes was very real.

He attempted to gentle his voice as he continued, "How did this happen?"

"The most boring, cliché scenario you can imagine." Edward ran one hand through his reddish-brown hair; not one lock of it had yet turned gray. Richard was already nearly silver at the temples. When they'd been dealt their hands in the womb, Edward had received all the best cards. "My usual secretary is out on paternity leave. Wendy stepped in to take up the slack, we spent more time together than usual, and – "

As Edward's voice trailed off, Richard finished the sentence for him. "And you began an affair."

"No." Edward's eyes narrowed. "Not an affair. A … complication, an indiscretion, but I haven't been unfaithful to Rose. I would never do that to her, not ever."

"And yet this Wendy seems to have something to hold over your head, Richard thought but did not say. He suspected that if he asked more questions, he would have to suffer through various explanations of the Clintonian grey area between "indiscretion" and "sex." Best avoided. "Are you being blackmailed?"

Edward winced. "No. Wendy's not like that."

"Then why are you so worried?"

"She's upset. Unsteady. Wendy knew I would never leave Rose for her, that our relationship – our flirtation – she had to know it was meaningless, in the end. But now she's attached, and distraught, and … she's not the steadiest of individuals. Not when she's emotionally compromised."

Richard strongly doubted "meaningless" was a word Wendy Byrnes had ever applied to her whatever-it-was with the Prince of Wales. Yes, Edward possessed the easy warmth and incredible charm that forever eluded Richard. But there were downsides to warmth and charm, such as people becoming far more attached to you than you ever meant for them to be. Edward wasn't blind to the effect he had on people, particularly women; he should have known better than this.

Then again, Wendy should have known better too. She was a grown woman, an educated professional, and somebody who ought to have policed herself against any breach of royal protocol, let alone one so egregious as this. And Edward was right about one thing: Wendy could never have sanely imagined that she would be a threat to Princess Rose. If she was causing trouble now, she was irrational at best, disturbed at worst.
Was Edward perpetually drawn to unstable women? Richard could come up with no other explanation for why Edward had chosen Lady Rose – a woman fundamentally unsuited for public life. Her tantrums and tears remained mostly concealed from the public, but something of her vulnerability shone through even in the blurriest photos, or the most fleeting video images. The public loved that vulnerability. Fed off it. How had Edward not seen how toxic this combination would prove to be?

(The most inexplicable part of it, to Richard's mind, was that Edward, in order to pursue Rose, had abandoned a new-but-promising flirtation with Princess Alberte of Denmark. Alberte had been equally as lovely as Rose and far more experienced in handling the difficulties of royal life – a woman well worth the having.)

"Emotionally compromised," Richard said. "So Miss Byrnes might do something rash, like go to the press."

The blood drained from Edward's face. "No. She wouldn't – she's not the type. But she might make a scene."

"In front of Rose, you mean,"

Edward nodded. By now he was slumped miserably in his chair, so broken that Richard felt sympathy stirring despite everything.

Ever since he'd been old enough to understand the cosmic joke that made Edward the heir instead – the fact that their placement in the womb meant Richard was born 45 minutes later and thus forever in second place – he'd resented Edward. And yet he could not help admiring him, too.

Edward was the handsome one – just a bit taller, features slightly more symmetrical, hair burnished a slightly lighter shade of auburn that could blazed almost like gold in sunlight. Richard had no particular reason to be displeased when he looked in a mirror, but he knew that when he and his brother stood side by side, everyone's eyes would always go first to Edward. And Edward beguiled the crowds so easily. How did he manage to make it seem as though he were interested in every single person in the crowd? To keep a smile on his face through rain or seasickness or political protests? Such ready grace was a gift … one Richard had not received.

In a time when kingship meant more – when the role was not that of a figurehead – Richard had no doubt everyone would have understood which of the twin brothers should assume power. Which one was substantive, and which trivial. Records were not so precise in older times – hours of birth could be obfuscated if need be –

However, they lived in the modern world. Edward was the heir, and supporting him meant supporting the monarchy itself. Richard might mock Edward's facile views of the world, or view some of Edward's choices with contempt. But if his brother needed his help, then help would be given.

Richard straightened himself, smoothing the front of his coat. "I shall offer Miss Byrnes a promotion to the king's staff. A hefty pay rise, more prestige, and next to no contact with you – none of it solitary."

"She'll know you're kicking her upstairs."

"I mean for her to know it," Richard said.

Had Edward attempted to handle this himself, the move would have come across as cruelty –
intended to provoke. So provoked, Wendy might have caused a fuss. But Richard knew that his summons would send a chill through Wendy, one that would have her uncertain and unhappy even before they spoke. She would know what was coming; she would also know Edward had foisted off the job. A direct confrontation between the two of them might have possessed a dangerous sort of intimacy, but Edward refusing to even talk to her directly? – the kiss of death. When Richard offered her both a promotion and a chance to save face, the king's mistress would gratefully climb into that escape hatch. No doubt there would still be some tears, some glares, perhaps an intemperate email or two … but any chance of Wendy interfering with Princess Rose would be over.

Assuming, of course, that Edward stuck to his resolve.

"You're certain it's over?" Richard said this in the same tone of voice he would have asked whether it had stopped raining.

Edward nodded. "Absolutely."

"I would've thought you'd never haven taken up with the woman in the first place, if it were so easy to put her down again after."

Richard meant it as a slight, but Edward thought he was sincere – an assumption that shamed Richard with its generosity. So he remained silent as Edward whispered, "You know it's Rose I love. It's always been her, from that first moment, that first day. But she's gone so far from me now."

"The two of you aren't getting on?"

"It's not that. I'd know what to do about that. But Rose has withdrawn so deeply within herself that I have no idea whether I'm making matters worse or not. She never raises her voice, never refuses an engagement, but she … sleepwalks through life. The children are the only ones who can rouse her from it, but only for so long. And they're getting older." Edward bit his lower lip. "Whatever it is that's going on with Rose, Charles and Maggie have started to sense it. When they realize the truth – or when Rose shuts them out too – I don't see how they'll be able to bear it."

Richard considered Edward an overly permissive parent, but he did not doubt Edward's devotion to his children. Upon studying his brother's pallor for a moment longer, Richard said, "That's what you're worried about. The children learning the truth about you and Wendy Byrnes."

Edward grimaced. "Christ. That's not – I mean, yes, that would be horrible, but I honestly hadn't even thought about that. Wendy would never … well. She wouldn't."

"Then it's only that you need Miss Byrnes seen to right away?" Richard said this knowing it could not be correct, not entirely. Something else ate at Edward now. What was it that could knock Edward off his pedestal of confident self-regard?

For a long while, Edward remained silent. Then he said, "I'm not scared of Rose finding out and making a fuss. I'm scared of Rose finding out and – not caring. That she might already be so far from me she wouldn't even give a damn. I just want her back again. That's all."

A funny way you have of showing it, Richard thought. But he bit the comment back for his brother's sake. "I'll deal with Miss Byrnes immediately. So you needn't worry about that any longer. As for the rest – take the family on holiday. On the yacht, perhaps. Away from it all."

"Someplace Rose can't get away from me, you mean." Edward sounded tired. But he nodded. "Maybe that would help. I don't see how it could make things worse, anyway."

That night, as he prepared for bed, Richard kept turning the exchange over in his mind. He was not
one to play loose with confidences – not even those from his arrogant older brother – so he spoke only circumspectly to his wife. "What is it that you think makes people grow apart?"

"Unexpectedly philosophical of you," Alberte said, never looking up from her copy of Phineas Finn. "What sort of people do you mean?"

"Husbands and wives."

She glanced at him over the lenses of her dark-blue reading glasses. "Am I meant to take this as a hint?"

"Of course not."

When Richard didn't explain, Alberte pushed him no further, raising an eyebrow before saying, "Boredom, I suppose. Most people resist falling into routines."

Richard considered routines a fundamental component of a healthy, productive life. It had always seemed to him that Alberte did too, but – "You don't mind that we have our routines, do you?"

"Don't be silly. We've arranged our lives just as we like them. Why would I want to alter anything for its own sake? Rather adolescent if you ask me."

"I entirely agree."

How lucky he was in her. Edward's incomprehensible foolishness in letting Alberte go had given Richard the chance of a lifetime, one he had not wasted. He'd courted and married her within a year, and all the time since had not diminished his admiration for her. Alberte had lost some of the willowy slenderness of her youth after giving birth to Alex, and her dark-brown hair was now shot through with silver, but in no other way would Richard admit she was any different than she'd been on the day they married. She wore her hair as close-cropped as a boy's – just as she always had – and a pair of blue-and-white striped pajamas that might as well have been his. Yet to him she remained the essence of feminine grace.

Yet the papers went wild for Rose instead, Rose the unstable, Rose the ungrateful …

"You're starting to look sour again," Alberte said. "As you're obviously not going to tell me what's on your mind, you may as well go to bed. That way you have a chance of falling asleep before you work yourself into a mood."

Obediently Richard tucked himself in beside her. Alberte continued reading, but smiled softly as his arm stretched across her belly. After a while – once he felt relaxed but not yet drowsy – Richard said, "You'd tell me, wouldn't you, Al?"

Alberte turned a page. "Tell you what?"

"You'd tell me if you were feeling bored or unhappy. If you needed something new."

"Are you worried now that I'm weary of our sex life?"

"That's not what I meant." Then he stared at her. "Wait. Are you?"

"Not at all."

Would Alberte tell him the truth about that? Seeing Edward so pale and drawn after talking about the distance between him and Rose – it had shaken Richard more than he'd been able to admit, even to
himself, until he was once again safe by Alberte's side. "Well, if you do ever want to try something new, you only have to ask."

Alberte placed her book atop her belly, pages down, before looking at him. "Would you be at all interested if I wore some sort of contraption that would allow me to be the one fucking you?"

"Good God. No. Wherever did you hear of such a thing?"

"Still haven't done any exploring on the internet, have you?"

Richard had learnt to send emails a few years ago and he didn't see the point of much else. "Is that where you learned about this?"

"One learns all sorts of interesting things online."

"Is that something you really want to do?"

"No." By now Alberte was smiling. "I only wanted to see your face when I said it."

"You're teasing me now." But Richard smiled also.

"You make it too easy, my darling husband. Too staid for your own good. Yet what would I do without you?"

Richard kissed her shoulder. Alberte went back to her book, and he fell asleep by his wife's side, to the sound of the occasional turned page.

TWO. (nine years ago)

"Your Royal Highness?"

Richard looked up from his desk to see Hartley – formerly his brother's butler, now in attendance upon Princess Margaret. This meant the man ought to have been doing his duty at Clarence House, not here in Kensington Palace … and certainly not standing in Richard's office. "Hartley, what is the meaning of this?"

"Forgive me, sir, but a situation has arisen that requires both the greatest urgency and discretion."

Wendy Byrnes. The name floated into Richard's mind apropos of nothing. She had given them no trouble since he'd booted her to Buckingham Palace six years prior – and yet, ever since the plane crash, she'd been walking around red-eyed and pale. Richard had been bracing himself for some sort of tell-all confession to a tabloid, I Was Edward's Real Love or some such rot.

But no. Hartley would be the last person on staff to know anything about Miss Byrnes' plans, or lack thereof. This was another matter altogether – another load of royal dirty laundry, which only Richard could wash. "What is it?"

"It is the princess, sir."
"Margaret?" He'd risen from his desk before he'd even finished saying the name. "What's wrong?"

"She has … injured herself, sir."

At first Richard thought Hartley was describing some sort of mishap that would have been better handled by calling the family physician. Only after he saw Margaret curled on the floor of the bathroom, blood streaking her arms, did he realize she'd hurt herself on purpose.

He'd thought he was too old to feel anything like paralyzing horror. But he felt it then. Richard could not bend down to her side, could not summon soft words. He could only stare at her marred skin beading with blood.

"Were you … did you attempt to commit suicide?" he said, standing above her.

Margaret shook her head. Her gold hair was tied in pigtails like that of a younger girl; her infantile habits sometimes irritated Richard, but now her appearance only made her seem more vulnerable. "I … I wanted to feel something else."

"What? Pain?"

"Another kind of pain," Margaret whispered. "At least it would be different."

This made no sense whatsoever, but Richard could appreciate that this was not the moment for lectures. What was he supposed to do?

All his routines, all the protocol by which he lived his life – none of it could help him now. Worse, none of it could help Margaret.

In the end, he behaved much as he had when Alex was small and scraped a knee roughhousing. Richard spoke quietly but firmly, talking only about the necessities of cleaning and bandaging the cuts, and saving all remonstrance for later. Margaret seemed to respond to this; at any rate, she calmed down. But he could tell that whatever unfathomable impulse had overcome her had not entirely lifted. An irrational moment – well, Richard wasn't given to them, but he could understand them. Moments passed. Whatever was happening with Margaret would not end so easily.

"She's too much alone, sir," Hartley opined as they went down the stairs. "Too much time to brood."

"You forget your place," Richard said, silencing Hartley. No doubt the situation needed to change, but that was no reason to begin taking advice from the help.

Once she was asleep, Richard took himself back home. For the past month Alex had been enduring glandular fever, and so was yet again asleep in bed in the late afternoon. Only the faintest slivers of light penetrated the drawn curtains of Alex's bedroom, so that he appeared to be only his own silhouette against the white coverlets. Richard stood in his son's doorway for a while, silently grateful that Alex was a good son. A steady boy. Happy, more often than not.

Discretion in this matter was of the utmost importance. He did not explain in detail even to Alberte, saying only, "Margaret's still grieving, far more seriously than I would hope for at this point."

"Edward and Rose have only been dead for three months," Alberte replied. She sat at the far end of the dining table – as was proper – yet the distance between them mattered not at all. They could connect through all the ceremony and civility; this was essential to their happiness. "How can you expect the poor girl to be over it already? I'm not, and I wasn't even particularly close to Rose." Her eyes studied him carefully. "You're not over losing Edward yet either, no matter how well you carry on."
Ever since the plane crash, Richard had found himself remembering one night he and Edward had camped out at Balmoral, sleeping side by side in the same tent and giggling every time they heard one of their guards fart or snore. How silly they'd been. How obnoxious. Yet Richard couldn't shake it now – the memory of Edward muffling his laughter against his pillow, the way that one night seemed to have lasted forever.

"No," Richard said evenly. "None of us have recovered from the tragedy. But Margaret seems to be getting worse rather than better."

"I wish Charles were still at home," Alberte sighed. "They're so close; if he were here, it would help her. But no doubt pulling Charles out of university would make everything worse for him. It would do us no good to heal one child by harming the other."

Richard had profound misgivings about Charles' fitness to be heir – the boy was too soft for the role, apparently infected with his late mother's tendency toward sentimentality. But he had to admit Charles was intelligent; his studies at Cambridge meant a great deal to him, which deserved a measure of respect. "No. It's important for Charles to carry on as usual. Naturally the people of Great Britain understand the children's sorrow, but they must not come to think of Charles and Margaret as weak."

Alberte sipped her wine, considering. "Might we have her here to stay for a while? But – no. Not with Alex being ill. That's the last thing Margaret needs, a bout with glandular fever on top of everything else."

True, but his wife's generous spirit had inspired an idea. "What if she moved back home?"

"What do you mean?"

"Her former home in Kensington Palace. We've not filled those rooms yet, and so far as I know, no one in the family has yet put in a request to move in." The remodel of Clarence House had been completed only two years prior. "Margaret would be nearby, in her childhood home. That would prove steadying, wouldn't it?"

"It might. Certainly it's worth a try." Alberte beamed. "Yes, please. Invite her tomorrow. It's still furnished – she could settle in immediately. We can keep an eye on her, and as soon as Alex is on the mend, they can spend a great deal more time together. He's a good influence on her."

Sometimes Richard thought Margaret wasn't a good influence on Alex. Although his son remained as clever, courteous and disciplined as any father could ask, of late there had been hints of … rebelliousness. He said as much to Alberte, which earned a snort.

"He's become a teenager," she said as she cut through her stems of asparagus, heavy silver knife bright against the delicate white china. "We haven't seen anything yet. The real rebellion is all ahead."

"You don't know that," Richard insisted.

Alberte laughed again. "Of course I do! And you do too. Weren't you a terror during your adolescent years?"

"Indeed I was not. I've always dedicated myself to Father's interests, and the needs of the monarchy."

"I suspect you're engaging in some selective memory, darling. But for the sake of argument, let's say you really were this starchy as a lad. Well, I was enough trouble as a teenager for both of us. If Alex takes after me at all, you'd better prepare yourself."
Whatever did Alberte mean by that? Richard decided he didn't want to know. So he moved on. "With Edward gone, Margaret becomes ours to care for. Charles is old enough to manage, but Margaret – well, the girl is young for her age. We've had to take on a great deal, but that doesn't mean we can't do more."

Since Edward's death, Richard had assumed additional responsibilities within the Firm. He fulfilled most of the tasks of a Prince of Wales, while the country was temporarily without one. Yes, Mother insisted on Charles' investiture in the late spring … but Father had already handed over so much responsibility to Richard, and Charles would be in no hurry to take it on himself. The boy preferred to study arcane scientific theory.

Father had said so many times that Richard was better suited to the role. He leaned on him so heavily. Already Richard felt himself fitting into the gap Edward had left in the world. It seemed the only way to mend the tear.

That gap was one Charles could never entirely fill.

As usual, Alberte seemed to read his mind. "We aren't Edward and Rose," she said quietly. "We can't expect to take their places in Margaret's life, or Charles'."

"Of course not."

"We have our own roles to play, and that's enough."

"Exactly," Richard said. But he could not stop thinking that roles changed all the time.

THREE. (three years ago)

Computer programs for the modern, calculators for the old-fashioned – and for Richard, pencil and paper and his own quick mind. He did the sums in his head first, then on paper for certainty, and came up with the figure six hundred and twelve thousand, four hundred and seventy pounds.

Missing from Charles' account at Coutts.

All withdrawn over the course of a year.

Within a few minutes, Richard was able to ascertain that every single one of the withdrawals had been in check form – and that each of these checks had been made out to Niall Edgerton, formerly in service at the palace.

"Allerdyce," he said to his assistant. "That man Edgerton who worked here a year or two ago. Wasn't he involved with the books?"

"Yes, Your Royal Highness. Mr. Edgerton was an assistant to the Keeper of the Privy Purse."

Meaning that Edgerton could have left employment with a private supply of checks to be withdrawn on the royal accounts. He could have learnt to forge the Prince of Wales' signature – or he could have convinced a secretary to do it for him, one of the ones authorized to sign for the prince from time to time. That could be a conspiracy, or simply subterfuge on Edgerton's part.

But the Coutts people were skilled enough to pick up on such forgeries over a period of time. The
only way so many checks would be drawn on Charles’ private accounts would be if Charles himself were signing them.

Which could mean only one thing.

**

Richard had, to date, handled four such situations. The first had been for Alberte’s family rather than his own; her mother had developed a drink problem, which was bad enough on its own but threatened to worsen when a former servant began hinting about disclosure. The Danish royal family didn’t earn the sort of frenzied media coverage that the English royals did – but still, there were continental papers that would’ve paid well for that news. Richard had done a bit of digging, discovered a few facts about this former servant that would prove discrediting, and scared him off in a jiff.

Then the Wendy Byrnes issue, which had never really risen to the level of outright blackmail but triggered the same concerns: Privacy, containment, control. The third time: some manner of Internet freak had realized who was writing Margaret’s blog. She’d come to him in tears. He had wanted to box her ears for her foolishness. All she’d been doing was talking about films she liked or actors she fancied; was that the sort of thing worth jeopardizing the family’s privacy for? After he was done castigating Margaret, Richard put Allerdyce on the case. Allerdyce, it seemed, knew a handful of individuals involved in “hacking,” whatever that was. At any rate, he had arranged to make it look as though Margaret was not the author at all – that it had all been an attempt to make the would-be blackmailer look foolish – and the entire thing had blown over.

The fourth and most devastating incident had come only one year ago, and the victim had been Alex.

("I didn’t know, Dad," Alex had kept saying. His face had been flame-red, as well it might have been after confessing that a one-night at university had been recording their entire tryst via something called a web-cam. "It’s not like we had a relationship or anything, but – I liked her."

"Be more careful whom you ‘like,’” Richard had replied. Alex had already paid the girl several hundred pounds – enough for him to finally come to his father, but a paltry enough sum for Richard to size her up immediately as an amateur. He’d sent a few members of Alex’s security patrol to follow her, but poorly, so much so that she’d have to notice them and become well and truly afraid. By the time someone from his office phoned her, the young woman had already been at the point of nervous breakdown. She’d turned over her computer and wiped all records of the incident with Alex without even asking for any further funds.)

Now Niall Edgerton. What was he on about?

"Probably there's someone besides Moira," Richard said that evening as he and Alberte prepared for bed, side by side.

"I expect there is," Alberte agreed, as she massaged night crème into the skin of her neck.

"Some other woman. But why would Charles care if he's caught tomcatting around? It's not as if that wretched Scots girl doesn't throw her legs open every chance she gets."

"That was ugly, Richard. And unworthy of you." Alberte took up the dental floss that had been set out for her earlier by her maid. "Another woman. That's honestly what you think?"
"What else?"

"I have some ideas," Alberte said, without elaborating. "Well, you can shake Edgerton off, can't you?"

"I imagine so." Then Richard frowned, noticing that his valet had left the toothbrush in the wrong position after applying the toothpaste. He would have to make a note of this for the man's review. "Blackmailers are cowards, in the end."

Alberte sighed. "Let's hope so for Charles' sake."

The tactics used against Alex's blackmailer had proved effective. Yet no doubt Edgerton was made of sterner stuff than the nineteen-year-old girl Alex had taken up with in a moment of weakness. Insofar as Richard remembered the man, he had a sense of Niall Edgerton as one Shakespeare would have described as "lean and hungry."

But the royal family had more than security staff at their disposal.

Richard had never been forced to call upon British intelligence before – but there was a first time for everything. Besides, with Father ever more aged, Edward gone and Charles still hapless in the extreme, someone needed to step up. To take charge. To use the power the family still possessed.

**

Mother's birthday fell three weeks later. Edward had always argued against a party, saying that Mother would loathe it. This year, finally, Richard was determined to handle things differently. A string quartet was hired, a fine meal prepared, flowers placed into every vase or urn Buckingham Palace could muster, and the entire family invited out to the level of third cousins.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Edward had been correct.

"Such a fuss," the Queen proclaimed as she sat in a corner chair, her chilly countenance warding off most well-wishers. "And so close to the anniversary of the tragedy. How unseemly, Richard."

Was it now his fault his Mother's birthday fell so close to the date of the plane crash?

Alberte responded, sparing Richard the difficulty. "This is exactly when we most need to bring the family together, Your Majesty. To remember that we still have causes for joy and reasons to carry on."

In private, Alberte had expressed her misgivings about the timing of the party, but in public her loyalty was unshakeable. Richard gave her a small, quick smile, but could spare no further attention from Mother.

"And presents." The Queen glared at the table piled high with gifts all wrapped with elaborate ribbon and paper so thick and shiny it might as well have been satin. "What on earth is the point of giving me gifts? I possess everything I require and far more than that besides."

Richard ventured, "It's appropriate to your station, Mother. If you find any of the gifts too extravagant, you can donate them to charity."
Queen Louisa sighed as she gestured to her footman to bring her a drink. "I'm sure the nation's charities are in desperate need of antique silver."

Indeed, several people had given her pieces of silver from the 19th century, which the press always said she collected. (Really she had only insisted upon reassembling one decimated set in the family holdings; after that silver had ceased to interest her in the slightest.) Other popular gifts included excellent wines, pieces of jewelry, a rare first editions of books, and from Richard and Alberthe – the crowning touch – a fine thoroughbred mare for her stables. The Queen thanked everyone with great courtesy, but that was all. No enthusiasm, no laughter, no apparent enjoyment of the gathering.

Then came the gift from Charles.

"From me and Margaret both," Charles said to the Queen. "Moira too." Lady Moira McTaggart stood next to him, the two of them hand in hand. A pretty girl, Richard conceded, though it was all he could do to conceal his dislike. How proper and refined Lady Moira looked in her emerald-green designer dress and creamy pearls. The tabloid photos told the true tale of a woman who carried on behind Charles' back every chance she got.

*He cannot have any proper pride, Richard thought, not if he allows her to behave that way. No pride in himself nor in his position in life.*

The Queen peeled back the paper from Charles' gift to reveal a picture frame – a finely made one, perhaps carved of jade – but Richard's grudging admiration of the gift faded the instant he saw the photo inside. There were Edward, Rose, Charles and Margaret, all heaped together on their couch without the slightest decorum; even the corgi puppies were included, one in Rose's lap and the other cuddled in Charles' hands. They all seemed to be wearing jeans and fleece tops as if they were preparing for a walk in the country instead of spending time at Clarence House. It was startling, somehow, to see Charles and Margaret's youthful faces when their parents had stopped then and there, had never looked older than they did in that hour three years prior. For a few long moments the Queen stared down at it, almost as if she did not understand what she was seeing.

"Glover took it," Charles said. He smiled, but sadly. "The photograph, I mean. It was just before I left for university, and we wanted to take one with all of us together. None of us knew it would be the last time we'd … well. Obviously it means a lot to me and to my sister, and we thought you ought to have a copy."

The Queen nodded. Richard was startled to see that her eyes had turned red, and that her hands shook as she handed the picture to one of her assistants.

His mother was not a sentimental woman, and yet not even she could be sanguine about the death of her eldest child.

"Thank you, Charles," the Queen said. Her voice sounded hoarse, like that of a woman even older than herself. "And Lady Moira. Please express my gratitude to Margaret." With that she rose and swept out of her own party, no doubt to collect herself. Charles looked stricken, but Moira put her arm around his shoulders – a gesture too informal for the Queen's own party.

Richard managed to bite his tongue until later in the evening, when he and Charles met in the quiet hallway that led to the toilet reserved for the use of the Family. "What could you have been thinking, Charles? You know the value Mother puts on keeping her composure in public. So you give her something guaranteed to upset her?"

"I gave her something meaningful." Charles' cheeks flushed as pink as a doll's when he became excited. "Something significant, instead of yet more expensive, useless stuff that will get catalogued..."
and put in a drawer and never looked at again."

"There is a time and place for such a personal gesture."

"It's not as though I handed it to her on the balcony, for Christ's sake!" Charles breathed out sharply. "This is a family gathering. I gave her something important to our family. That sounds like the perfect time to me."

Richard retorted, "You see how it affected her. Can you imagine for one instant that Mother would want to be seen in public in such a state?"

Finally Charles hesitated. "...it wasn't as bad as all that."

"Wasn't it?"

"You're just looking for reasons to take me down a peg," Charles said. "I was wondering when this would start. The attacks. First you run to Parliament with that Regency Act even before the funeral –"

"That was an entirely sensible precaution!"

"They hadn't even found my father's body!" This was as close as Richard had ever heard Charles come to shouting. "You couldn't even wait one bloody day, because it never occurred to you to hope that he might have survived. Did it?"

It had not. Richard was a grown man who understood what it meant when a jetliner went down in a stormy ocean; he had not deceived himself with fantastical thinking about miracles. "The Regency Act is a formality, Charles. In my place, Edward would have done the same."

"In your place. You've spent your whole life wishing the two of you could trade places. Sorry to inform you, Uncle Richard, but you've always been about forty-five minutes late for that."

The old joke. The old burn. Everything Richard knew about Charles' youth, the sensitive feelings he understandably had about his parents' deaths, flew out of his mind in an instant. Angry words bubbled up, all the more furious for being fully justified: *I could tell you a thing or two about your sainted father. I could knock him off that pedestal for you. And as long as we're knocking people off pedestals, why don't you and I discuss the extravagant sums you're paying Niall Edgerton for his silence? What is it you're so desperate to hide, Charles?*

Richard said nothing.

Duty came first. The monarchy came first. Family came first. All of these were bound together, and all of them demanded Richard's silence.

As he and Charles stared at each other, a woman's footsteps began to echo down the hallway – the unmistakable sound of high heels on wood. "Charles?" Lady Moira stepped into view, her soft brown hair falling around her face in a way that made it obvious why a young man might endure much from her. "I was headed to the loo to see if you were ill. You've been in here for ages."

"I'm done," Charles said. "We're done." He didn't look back at Richard as he and Moira walked out.

However, Moira did. "Your Royal Highness, I believe your wife is waiting for you."

Richard relieved himself, then came to find Alberte. She had indeed been waiting for him, as Moira had said, but Moira had left out the part where Alberte was furious.
"I overheard what you said to Charles," she muttered as the two of them stood at an angle in the corner of the room, where the floral arrangement would provide a modicum of privacy. "Richard, what could you have been thinking?"

"What was he thinking, more like, embarrassing Mother in that way – "

"You know what he was thinking. No, it wasn't the best idea to give Her Majesty something so personal in public. But Charles was expressing heartfelt emotion – his love for his parents. You ought to honor that at least."

"Honor. Sanctify, more like. Edward and Rose have become these golden deities for people to worship, nothing like the real human beings you and I knew with all their pride and their flaws."

"Do you hear yourself? Charles and Margaret were orphaned too young in life. If they want to idealize their parents, let them!" Alberte's face had an unfamiliar cast to it; it took Richard a moment to realize that she was on the verge of tears.

Alberte seldom wept. Richard stepped closer to her. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that Edward and Rose's deaths brought out something ugly in you. Yes, I always knew you were jealous of your brother, but I never blamed you for that. God knows I envied Rose at times. But they were family. I could never look on their demise as a card I ought to play to my advantage. For the past three years, you've hardly done anything else."

"Don't be absurd. All I'm doing is defending the monarchy, making sure we weather this crisis. Charles isn't fit for the task, Father's too elderly, and someone has to do it."

Alberte shook her head. Her arms were folded, creasing the long silk shantung jacket she wore. "The monarchy isn't in crisis, Richard."

"Of course it is. I'm only thinking of us."

"You're only thinking of yourself," Alberte said. Given the secrets Richard had kept – even the ones that would benefit him – this felt like a low blow. But his wife kept speaking. "It's become an obsession with you, the fact that you're not the heir. You may have always resented that fact, but it didn't own you. Not when I met you, not during most of the years since. That all changed when Edward died. Now it feels as though you're looking at the entire world through this … dark prism. Like nothing matters more than finding a path to the crown."

"Would it be so terrible if I did?" He could be a good king. A great king. One who might restore some of the grandeur and authority of the monarchy. Then Alex would be his heir – his path in life assured, their son second to none. And Alberte would be queen, honored and revered as she so richly deserved.

But Alberte shook her head. The tears were closer, now. "I miss you, Richard. You've gone so far away from me. I hope you come back."

"Al – "

Already his wife was walking away. Richard watched her go, a hollow feeling in his gut. It seemed to him that she'd said something familiar, something he'd heard before, but he could not think of what or when.

That night, after the party, Alberte took herself off to her separate bedroom. There had been entire years she had never used that space; these days, she'd begun sleeping there more regularly. Richard
told himself he was glad of it, because that meant he was alone when an operative from MI5 phoned. Apparently Niall Edgerton had drunk several pints of beer and set out on an expensive motorcycle, the combination of which had led to his fiery death earlier in the evening.

No great loss, Richard assumed. And problem solved.

FOUR. (now)

That morning had been one of the worst of Richard's marriage. For months he and Alberte had scarcely spoken a civil word, and she was no longer in the mood even to try.

"You've done him out of his crown," Alberte had said as she put on her pearl earrings, staring at the mirror so she didn't have to look at Richard himself. "You're gone behind Charles' back to set him up."

"Set him up? Charles is the one who elected to air his disgraceful personal life instead of keeping it secret. The archbishop learned nothing new from me."

"'Disgraceful'. Is that what you really think? I always knew you were a traditionalist, but I never thought you were a bigot, not before all of this. Is that what you think every time you look at Nicoline?"

Alberte's youngest sister lived with a businesswoman from Austria named Leonie. "That is an entirely different situation," Richard said. "Leonie is from a respectable aristocratic family. She has behaved with the utmost discretion; we've never once heard her boasting about her sex life to a tabloid. Nor is Nicoline in line to inherit the throne."

"Mr. Lehnsherr didn't – oh, never mind." Alberte had turned toward him and said. "If Nicoline were in line to inherit, she'd still be a lesbian! What then? Would you want her to spend her entire life alone, without love?"

"We are not discussing your sister! We're discussing Charles, who apparently has no intention of putting the needs of the monarchy above those of his sex life."

She'd shaken her head, and her voice was very quiet. "You're doing an ugly thing today, Richard. A terrible thing. You cannot possibly take any pride in it. If you somehow do, then you should know – I never thought I could ever be ashamed of you. But I am."

He had refused to continue the conversation any further. When he came back and told Alberte she was to be queen – that their son would someday be king – she'd come around. How could she not? Richard had anticipated coming home in triumph to set everything straight at last.

Instead he slunk in. No other word for it.

Sooner or later Alberte would have to be told. Richard preferred later. At the moment all he wanted to do was climb into his bed – fully dressed, of course, because God forbid his valet should realize what had happened. But if Richard lay down for a few minutes, maybe he would understand how to get up again.

He started up the stairs and was more than halfway there before he heard Alberte's voice. "Richard?"
"Alberte." Heaviness settled in the pit of his stomach. "I thought you had an engagement this afternoon."

"Postponed – the honoree's flight from Liverpool was canceled." She stepped out of their bedroom, so that she seemed to be standing at the top of the stairs. Her face was an unreadable mask, her posture stiff. "Well?"

Richard had not even considered how best to put this. So he phrased the news as formally as possible. "The Archbishop of Canterbury has no objections to Charles' accession to the throne so long as Charles signs a document guaranteeing he will in no sense attempt to alter church doctrine. Charles has agreed to do so."

"Wait. You mean Charles will still become king?"

"...yes."

Alberte sagged against the doorjamb. It took Richard a moment to recognize her reaction as relief.

"Thank God," she whispered. "The sword of Democles has swung away."

Shocked out of his own misery, Richard said, "Were you afraid?"

"Of having to become queen? Of having to surrender the precious little private life we retain? Or needing to move into Buckingham Palace, drafty old barn that it is?" Alberte righted herself back to her usual perfect posture. "The short answer is 'yes.'"

"You didn't want it any longer."

This won him a raised eyebrow. "I never wanted it."

"But – when you and Edward – "

"Edward and I what?"

She truly didn't understand, which made no sense to Richard. "But for Rose, Edward might have married you. Then you would have become queen."

Alberte stared at him for a moment, then did the last thing he would have expected. She laughed.

"Whatever makes you think I would have married Edward?"

"You went out with him –"

"We flirted at one polo match, and I let him take me to a couple of parties." Her smile gentled, and for the first time in far too long, the anger between them faded away. "At one of these parties I met you, after which I never thought about Edward romantically ever again."

Somehow he managed to smile back. Then it was all right to climb the rest of the stairs and let her lead him into the private sitting room just off their bedroom. They sank together onto the sofa. Alberte's hand closed around his – a small caress, but one he'd greatly missed.

She said, "It would be perfectly charming to think that your quest for the throne was all about making me queen. But that's not the truth, is it?"

"Partly. Not entirely." Sometimes he had put it to himself that way. It sounded better, even inside his own head. "I wanted it for myself, too."
"Why? God knows being king is a tremendous bother."

Although Richard had never thought of it precisely that way, he knew this was correct. "Because I thought I could do it well. Because I always wanted a purpose to serve that would be greater than myself. And – and because my entire life, I've been the lesser option. Second best."

"You've never been second best," Alberte insisted. "Only the second son. That's a different thing entirely. And for me at least, you were never the lesser option."

He smiled at her, but of course other opinions varied. When charities sought a royal patron, they asked the King or Queen first. Then came Edward while he lived, and Charles after his death. Some event organizers even preferred Margaret, even the days she was thought to be an addict, because a lovely young princess was always of more interest than her graying uncle. When the family occasionally greeted well-wishers in public, and Richard strode out to do his part, the people in his area always looked let down. Sometimes they groaned out loud. They had wanted Rose, or Edward. They wanted Charles. Not Richard, never him.

Petty, yes. Insignificant. But the slights piled upon each other over time, thousands of paper cuts becoming a deep wound that never had a chance to heal.

For now, Richard decided, he needed to mend what he could – which was what truly mattered most.

"I know I've not been the best husband these past few years," Richard said. It was hard to meet Alberte's eyes. "Please let me make it up to you."

"Oh, Richard." Her hand tightened around his. "You're not the only one who pulled away."

No. But he'd started the process, worsened it. "What do you need? Tell me."

"Perhaps – perhaps we could go away for a while. Take the royal yacht for a bit, head down to the Mediterranean?"

They'd honeymooned on the yacht. At the moment, Richard wanted nothing more than to whisk her away … but he had made a promise. "Soon. For now, though – that hospital Margaret's in wants her to undergo family therapy. Which means we have to take part. Charles asked me to join in, and I said I would."

Alberte's smile only broadened. "Of course you did. Yes. Margaret comes first. But now we have something to look forward to, together."

"Yes." Something wound tight deep within Richard relaxed – just a bit, but enough. He could breathe again.

"What were you doing, before I interrupted you? Maybe I could help."

"If you want to know the truth, I was going to crawl into bed with my clothes on and have a sulk."

That made her laugh. And putting it in such a silly way – somehow it had made Richard feel better too. Alberte said, "In bed, but keeping your clothes on? What a waste."

"I promise to take them off later," he said. It had been too long since he and Alberte made love – only a handful of times in the past six months. Never would he let them drift so far apart again.

"Right now I'm simply … I'm so tired, Al."

Richard had scarcely slept the past few nights, but that wasn't what he was referring to, not really.
The exhaustion was older, and stronger, and he could not hold onto it one moment more.

His wife understood. Of course she did. "Come on. We'll be bad children and take a nap in the middle of the day."

Alberte didn't take her clothes off either, just snuggled up to him atop the covers. Richard rested his head next to hers and breathed in the scent of her hair. For the first time in too long, he remembered how grateful he was for her presence in his life.

His mind drifted back to Edward, specifically to one of the last intimate conversations they'd ever had. Edward had needed help dealing with a woman, someone he'd only gotten mixed up with out of despair about his own marriage to Rose. As much as Edward and Rose had loved one another, they'd never learned how to make one another truly happy. Maybe they would have mastered it someday, maybe not; their premature deaths had taken the chance away.

But Richard and Alberte had almost always been happy together – and even now, when he'd come close to running their marriage into the ground, he had a chance to start over. To learn how to love her all over again.

In this one sense, Richard realized, he was luckier than Edward had ever been.

It was enough.

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