Moments in Between

by DalishEssence

Summary

"You know... I never once resented my best friend. And that's saying a lot, considering he's the Crown Prince of Cordonia. I never resented how he used to get everything he wanted when we were kids, or how the girls threw themselves at him when we were teens. And I definitely never envied those boring dinners and banquets he was obligated to go to.

All that changed the night we stepped into a bar in New York to celebrate his last night of freedom. It was supposed to be his bachelor party; it turned out to be the night Camilla Myers walked into our lives and changed them forever.

She was supposed to be one of his suitors. She turned out to be... everything I'd never known I wanted.

And for the first time... I resented my best friend."

The Royal Romance, from Drake's point of view.
The Waitress

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: I own nothing, this is all Pixelberries.

“Come on, Liam! It's our last night in the big city, and we have to paaaartay!”

I rolled my eyes as Maxwell sing sang the last word.

“I agree.” Added Tariq. “We should do something memorable before returning to Cordonia. A last hurrah, of sorts?”

Liam looked at me, and I clapped his shoulder. “Look, man, it's your bachelor party. What do you want to do?”

He looked to Maxwell, and then Tariq. “Fine, let's go out. We'll find somewhere to get dinner and then we can go to a club or something.”

I shook my head. Liam was always thinking of everybody else before himself.

“Yes!” Maxwell cheered and pulled out his phone. “I'm googling right now: hottest clubs in NYC.”

“I believe Liam mentioned dinner first.” Tariq chimed.

I grabbed my denim shirt and threw it on. “Let's just go, I'm sure there's a bar nearby where we can get a decent burger or something.”

“You mean, go out with a reservation?” I stifled a laugh at Tariq's appalled expression.

“We've made reservations for this and that place since we got here. I say let's just go into the first place we find, for the real New York experience.”

“I agree.” Said Liam. “The pizzas here are famous around the world. I hear they sell them by the slice in some places.”

“Yeah, Tariq. Where's your sense of adventure?” Maxwell came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

Tariq hesitated. “Very well… if that's what you wish to do, Liam, I won't spoil your party.”

“Thank you, Tariq.” Liam nodded.

“Shall I call the car?”

“No, let's walk. We'll go in the first place we find, like Drake said.”

“Good man.” I said, opening the door. “Come on, I'm hungry.”

We stepped out of the room and made our way out of the Waldorf, into the busy streets of Manhattan. We walked down Lexington Avenue and then turned on 47th street, wandering
aimlessly, until we came across a small bar.

“Foxy John's Bar and Kitchen…” Tariq read, raising an eyebrow.

I shrugged and grinned at the guys. “This will do.”

I opened the door and walked in, the shouts of noisy patrons and the smell of beer assaulted my senses. As soon as we were spotted, we were greeted by the host.

“Good evening, gentlemen, and thank you for coming to Foxy John's Bar and Kitchen.”

“Thanks. We'd like your best table. We're celebrating our friend's bachelor party.” I put my hands on Liam's shoulder and shook him.

The man nodded. “I'm afraid we're a little understaffed tonight, but a server will be right with you to seat you immediately.” He turned and headed to what I assumed was the kitchen.

“Okay… I guess we'll wait right here then…” I shrugged.

“Excellent service.” Tariq commented sarcastically.

Liam's phone rang. He looked at the screen before stepping out. “Go ahead, guys. I'll be right in.”

As he left, the kitchen doors opened and out came two servers.

“Waitress! There you are! We need your best table.”

She looked at me, and raised an eyebrow. I smiled at her. “Forget the table! Just bring us whiskey and lots of it!”

She exchanged a few words with her co-worker, before walking towards us, a beaming smile on her face. Her brown eyes shone as she approached us, and her brown hair was tied into a neat braided bun.

“Of course, sir. Would you prefer a seat at the bar, at one of our tables or a booth?”

“Booth, booth!” Maxwell chanted.

I rolled my eyes. “A booth, please.”

She nodded. “Please follow me.” She led us back to a big, ample booth. The seats were lined with red dyed leather, and the table was a deep chestnut wood. As soon as we were seated, she pulled out a notepad from her apron. “Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Camilla and I'll be your server tonight.”

Before she could say another word, Maxwell cut her off. “Waitress, steaks for the table!”

I groaned inwardly. She'd literally just told us her name, and Maxwell was addressing her as “waitress”. Nobles.

“How about some filet mignon, medium rare and prepared with bearnaise sauce?” Tariq piped up.

I watched, mortified, as she raised her eyebrows just the tiniest bit, before schooling her features back to the smile. It was clear she had experience dealing with rude patrons.

“I'm afraid the closest thing we have to filet mignon is our deluxe burger.” She handed each of us
It's a large, handmade burger on a sesame seed bun, grilled and covered with Monterey Jack cheese, lettuce, bacon and tomato, red onions, and pickles, as well as our secret house sauce.”

She looked at me and winked. I smiled at her, while Tarquin's face fell.

“Dare I ask for you wine list?”

“We've got an excellent vintage house red…”

Tarquin's jaw dropped. “*House red*?”

“It also comes in white…”

*Oh, for fuck's sake.* I shook my head. This girl had the patience of a saint. I decided to put her out of her misery and ordered for the table. “We'll be fine with a bottle of whiskey, and four deluxe burgers.”

I plucked the menus from the guys’ hands and handed them back to her.

“Hey!” Protested Maxwell.

“Excellent choice, sir… but four burgers?”

I nodded behind her, just as Liam arrived at our booth. She turned and I saw her eyes widen as she saw him. Her mouth opened the tiniest bit before she once again schooled her face into a beaming smile. Liam returned her smile with one of his own, his eyes never leaving hers.

“I'm sorry I'm late.” He kept his eyes on her. “Thank you for your patience, Miss…?”

“Uh… Camilla.”

He nodded. “Charmed to make your acquaintance, Camilla.”

I shook my head and smiled to myself, as I noticed a light blush coloring her cheeks.

“The pleasure's all mine.” She answered coquettishly. “It's nice to meet you.” She gestured for him to sit down. “Now let me go and place your order. I'll be right back!”

With that, she took off to the kitchen. I shared a knowing look with Maxwell, while Liam watched her walk away.

“So… what are we having?”

As the night wore on, Camilla brought our burgers and drinks, and we laughed and joked as we ate. The burger was really good.

More patrons came and went, but we didn't realize how late it was until Camilla brought us the check. Liam immediately took it from her, his eyes lingering on her, as I looked around and realized we were the last table left. I took out my phone to check the time… 1 A.M. Wow…

Liam handed Camilla his credit card, giving her a generous tip as well. Soon, we were getting up and heading out.

“So… where to now?” Tariq asked.
Maxwell was glued to his phone. “There's, like, a million clubs in this city!”

“Oh, boy…”. I turned to Liam. He was still watching the waitress, as she cleaned up the bar. I cleared my throat and he started. He looked at me, embarrassed, before directing his gaze back to her.

“I'll be right back.” He walked towards the bar and tapped her shoulder. They talked for a while, before she nodded and headed back to kitchen. Liam came back and nodded for us to go outside.

I raised an eyebrow as I followed him. “What's up?”

He smiled. “Let's just wait a few moments. Our tour guide will be right out.”

I shared a look with Maxwell and Tariq. “Okay…”

We waited a while, when we heard Camilla yell “Good night!” as she stepped out. I couldn't stop my jaw dropping, shutting it quickly with an audible clack. She had let her hair down from it's bun - long brown locks falling in waves down to her waist - and she'd changed out of her uniform to a stunning green dress.

“Wow…” She looked at me and blushed.

“Wow?” She smiled at me, and I noticed for the first time the dimples in her cheeks.

“I… almost didn't recognize you.” I looked away, embarrassed, and saw the guys were equally stunned. Liam simply grinned.

“That uniform wasn't doing you justice.” Tariq complimented her, and she nodded her thanks.

“Yeah, the waitress is hot!”

Liam frowned at Maxwell. He cleared his throat. “Her name is Camilla, and I doubt she appreciates you talking about her like that.”

“Right. Sorry, Camilla. I meant to say you look lovely.”

“Thank you. And it's just Milla, guys.”

“Shall we?” Liam offered his arm to her, and she hesitated for a moment before taking it.

Milla led Liam closer to the curb, before hailing a cab with a shrill whistle. She turned to us, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Let's go, boys.”

A short ride later, we stepped out of the cab, right in front of a club. Kismet. There was a long line, but Camilla simply led us to the front, and smiled at the bouncer.
“Hey, Jacob.”

“Hey, Milla.” He smiled and unhooked the chain, letting us through. “Have fun!”

“Thanks!”

We stepped through the doors, and electronic club music hit us immediately. The floor vibrated as the bass thumped, and lights flashed all around us.

Maxwell let out a “whoop” of excitement as he took in the club. “Time to party!”

I groaned and covered my face with my hand. “No one wants to see your running man, Maxwell.”

Tariq spotted a server passing by and called to her. “You there, who do we talk to for bottle service?!?” He followed her to the bar.

“Shall we find us a table, or go to the bar to get you that drink?!” I heard Liam ask Milla.

*Oh, Liam... what are you doing?*

Milla stood on the tips of her toes and looked around. “I'd prefer a table... what about you, Drake?”

She looked at me, giving me an encouraging smile. Liam followed suit, also smiling at me.

“I... I'm going to the bar with Tariq!”

“Suit yourself. Shall we?” Liam once again offered her his arm, and she once again hesitated to take it.

“Sure.” They began walking away, but I saw Milla turn her head and look to me, before looking quickly away.

I made my way to the bar with Maxwell in tow.

“Hey, what's up? You're all broody again! Do you not like Milla?!” Maxwell shouted at me as I signaled to the bartender.

“I'm not brooding. And I don't know her enough to have an opinion on her.”

“Dude, she asked you one question in the cab and you were really rude to her...”

“I was not!”

“She asked you if you'd prefer to go to a club or the beach, and you rolled your eyes and told her to 'ask Liam, it's his party'.

“It is his party!”

“But she was asking all of us, to get a vote! Plus, your tone was...”

“It was not! Besides... don't you think it's a little weird how she'd just agree to go out with four guys she doesn't even know? I mean, she practically took over Liam's bachelor party!”

“Well... Liam invited her... I think he really likes her!” Maxwell said enthusiastically.

“And that's the other thing! Don't you think it's kind of a dick move on Liam's part to invite her? I mean, he's totally leading her on! He's supposed to get married at the end of the season!”
“Well… she doesn't seem to mind…”

The bartender finally came. I ordered whiskey for me and Maxwell. We downed our drinks and Maxwell pulled me in the direction of the dance floor. We'd barely taken three steps when we were approached by a couple of girls.

“How, tough guy.” A gorgeous blonde pressed her hand to my chest. “Wanna dance?”

I smirked at her. “Sure.”

She took my hand, and led me into the dance floor. She pressed herself against me, swaying to the music.

“I love New York!” I heard Maxwell shout, as he danced with his girl.

I looked around for the rest of the guys, and noticed Liam and Milla dancing a few feet away from us. I turned back to the girl with whom I was dancing - who commanded my attention by placing her hands on my neck - when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I turned to find Liam, Milla nowhere in sight. “Hey!”

“Hey! I'm going to take off!”

“Why?! What happened?!”

“Nothing! I'm leaving with Milla! We're, uh… she wants to show me something…!” He grinned sheepishly.

I stopped myself from rolling my eyes. Dude, what are you doing? I shook my head and shrugged. “Ok… I'll meet you back at the hotel!”

“Yeah, thanks, man!” He clapped me on the shoulder before turning to leave, and I turned back to the blonde.

Oh, Liam, I hope you know what you're doing...

The next morning, I woke up to the smell of coffee and maple syrup. I walked into the kitchen, and saw Liam sitting on the couch, a cup of coffee in one hand and his phone in the other. He smiled when he saw me, and put his phone down.

“Morning!”

“Mornin'. You seem happy…”

He blushed. “Yes… I guess I am.”

“Had a good time last night?”

“The best.” He grinned at me.

“Does this have something to do with a certain waitress?” I poured myself a cup of coffee, and grabbed a plate of waffles, pouring syrup on them.

“Yes.”
They totally slept together.

“So, you went back to her place or…?” I looked around the room, but it didn't look like she'd been here in our suite.

“No!” He cried. “No, we, uh… nothing of the sort happened…”

“Oh…” Well… that's good… “So…”

“She took me to see the Statue of Liberty.”

“Uh… what? How?”

“I don't know! I told her I had wanted to see it, next thing I know we're on a ferry and it's right there, in front of us. She said she'd called in a favor.”

“Wow… the bouncer at the club, a personal ferry… she's pretty resourceful.”

“Yes, she is.” He looked down.

“So… the Statue of Liberty?”

“Yeah, I uh… mentioned to her I wanted to see it before we left, but I hadn't gotten the chance.”

“Why didn't you tell me? The whole reason we're here is because of you. This whole week was for you. We could’ve made the time.”

“I didn't want to inconvenience you all. I know Tariq has no interest in tourist spots, and Maxwell prefers to sleep in and go out at night. And I know you'd get bored and grumpy because there's too many people pushing and shoving, and too much noise.”

“I do not get grumpy!”

“Yes, you do! You hate loud, over crowded places.”

I sighed. Poor Liam… always thinking of others before himself. “But I still would’ve gone with you.”

“I know.”

“So… did you get her number or something?”

His face immediately changed. He looked down. “No.” He looked at me, a knowing look on both our faces. “I told her everything, and we agreed to just… have an incredible night and leave it at that. We both know there's no future there.”

“Yeah… well, at least you got a story out of it, right? And she probably had the time of her life. I don't imagine she hangs out with royalty every Saturday night…”

Liam shook his head, smiling softly. “She's not like that. She actually didn't care about my title at all. And she's pretty brilliant. She majored in Creative Writing at NYU.”

“Wow… then why is she-”

“A waitress? It's her day job, or well, night job… I've heard many aspiring writers have jobs such as those before getting published.”
“Still doesn't explain why she's a waitress…”

“Well, she told me she wants to write a novel, but she's also thinking of getting a master's degree, among other things. I guess she's still figuring things out.”

“Wow…” I sighed and clapped his shoulder. He didn't show it, but I knew he was bummed he was never going to see this girl again… I could tell he really liked her. “Well, maybe one day, you'll read a book about a waitress and a magical night with an European prince.”

Liam huffed a small laugh. “Yes… maybe one day I will.”

Maxwell's room opened and he came out shirtless and disheveled.

“Good morning, Maxwell!”

He grunted and went straight for the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup before throwing himself down on the couch.

“How much did you drink last night?”

“Not enough to black out, but enough for my head to start pounding.” He sat up just a bit and turned to Liam. “And where did you go last night? One moment I see you at the table with Milla, the next one you're nowhere to be found!”

“Milla took him to see the Statue of Liberty.”

“At 2 in the morning?”

I nodded. “At 2 in the morning.”

“Well… good for you.” He turned to me, and I noticed a wicked gleam in his eye. “Drake, a word?”

I groaned inwardly. This was going to be trouble.

Liam clapped his hands on his knees and stood. “I'll take that as my cue. I'll see if Tariq is up, we have to be at the airport in a couple of hours.” He walked out of the living room and headed for Tariq's room.

As soon as he was gone, I turned to Maxwell. “What's up?”

“I've got an idea! Just came to me!”

“Oh, boy…”

“Just hear me out!” He raised a finger. “I'm thinking we should sponsor Milla!”

“What?!”

“House Beaumont! We don't have a candidate to sponsor for the whole bride/queen to be contest! We could sponsor her!”

I covered my face with my hands and let out a sigh. “Okay… okay, two things. Number one: how exactly are you going to sponsor her…” I lowered my voice to a whisper, “…when just last night you told me House Beaumont was broke? I mean, I think in order to be able to sponsor someone, you have to provide clothes and other stuff for her to fit in with the nobles. I mean, I don't think this girl just so happens to have a couple of ball gowns in her closet.” He moved to protest, but I ignored him.
“And two: she's a commoner! They'll never accept her at court, much less as a contender for the Crown!”

“Hey! You're a commoner!”

“And two: she's a commoner! They'll never accept her at court, much less as a contender for the Crown!”

“Yeah, and Liam's best friend. Not to mention I grew up in that environment. This girl hasn't. She would have no idea what she's getting into; the plotting, the scheming, the backstabbing!”

“Ok, first of all, this girl lives in New York.”

“So…?”

“New Yorkers are known worldwide for their snarkiness, their sarcasm and their street smarts. I think she can handle court intrigue. Second of all, she's witty and resourceful. That was shown in the way she got us into the club and somehow managed to get Liam on a boat at 2 am to see a bloody tourist site. And third of all… who knows, maybe she does have a ball gown in her closet! Maybe she was a bridesmaid at a wedding, or -or even the bride herself, and that failed, but she kept the dress! Or maybe she has a perfect credit score and can cost her own expenses.”

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me at that point.

“Listen, there's a reason I told you about House Beaumont last night.”

“You were drunk!”

“But not drunk enough to tell Tariq! I told you because I know I can trust you. And I'm telling you this now, because I trust you! I want the best for Liam, I know you want the best for Liam, and I think this girl… this girl could really make him happy. And he could have a marriage based on mutual love and trust, and not just political alliances.”

You know the world must be coming to an end when Maxwell starts making sense…

I sighed. “She'll get torn to shreds at court.”

“Maybe… maybe not. Shouldn't we give her a chance to try? Look, just… come with me to ask her. It'll be up to her, I won't pressure her into anything. If she says yes, we'll see where it goes from there. If she says no, that's that.”

I stared at him for a couple of minutes. We heard a click and a door open and Liam and Tariq stepped out, bags in hand.

“We're leaving for the airport. Drake, are you coming with me or with Maxwell?”

I looked between the two of them. “I'll go with Maxwell. He needs help on a last minute errand, so…”

“Yes!”

Liam raised an eyebrow. “Okay… well, we're leaving right now.”

“I'll call the bellhop.” Tariq went to the phone.

“Try not to be late for the Ball tonight. It is an eight hour flight, after all.”

“Don't worry, it's a quick errand and we'll be on our way to Cordonia within two hours.”
“Okay…”

The doorbell buzzed, and Tariq opened it. The bellhop came in and began loading their luggage into a cart. The guys said their goodbyes and left, just as Maxwell called for a car for us. We drove to Foxy's bar and waited. And waited. And waited. After what seemed like an eternity, Maxwell spotted her and jumped out of the car.

“Milla!” He yelled for her. “Stay here.” He told me as he shut the door and ran across the street.

He nearly got ran over by a cab driver, who honked and threw some choice profanities at him, but Maxwell merely waved him off and kept calling for Milla. I saw their exchange from the car, Milla's face going from shock, to disbelief, to reluctance, until finally, she nodded and gave him a small smile. Maxwell cheered and hugged her, but then she made her way and inside and Maxwell strode to car.

“So…?” I asked.

“Shes coming! She's quitting right now, then heading back to her place to pack. She'll meet us at the airport.”

“Okay… I hope you know what you're doing.”

“I think it's the best desición we've ever made.” He was so giddy, he was practically jumping in his seat.

*Oh, boy… this was going to be trouble.*
At noon, we were already on the Beaumont’s private jet, waiting for Camilla.

“There she is!” Maxwell pointed and squirmed gleefully.

“Yay.” I rolled my eyes, still unsure about this.

Camilla climbed aboard, and I saw her eyes widen as she took in the luxurious cabin. “Wow.”

“Hey, Milla.” Maxwell patted the seat next to his. “Come, sit, get comfy. We’ll take off in about five minutes, so say goodbye to New York, and hello, Cordonia!”

She sat next to him, leaning back into the soft buttery seat, before turning to me. “Hey, Drake.”

“Hey.”

She looked around once more. “I can't believe this is actually happening…”

“Well, believe it. In eight hours, we'll be landing in Cordonia, whether you're ready or not. And if you're not, the other ladies at court are going to eat you alive.”

Her eyes widened at my bluntness, and she raised her eyebrows.

“Drake!” Maxwell hissed. “Don’t scare her! Milla, you okay?”

“Actually, I'm terrified.”

“I knew it.” I rolled my eyes. I knew this was a bad idea. “She's not going to last a week. It was a waste of time, bringing her here.”

“I’m terrified,” she continued, giving me a pointed look “just like I was when I first moved to New York, or when I switched majors to pursue a more… artistic career, or my first day at work… Fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's normal to feel scared when facing the unknown. But it's not incapacitating. Fear is actually a huge motivator to act. Fear activates your Fight or Flight instincts… and I always fight for what I want.”

Okay… she had guts, I'd give her that. I conceded with a nod.

She gave me a soft smile. “I understand why you're unsure about me. The lowly waitress coming to a foreign court to compete for the Crown Prince's hand? It sounds like the plot of a bad romantic comedy…”

I huffed a laugh. “Yeah, it does. Listen, it's nothing personal--”

“I know.”
“It's just that I've seen girls like you come and go.” I thought of Savannah and shook my head. “And it never ends well. Not for you, not for Liam, or the royal family.”

“Milla's not some crown chaser.”

“No, I'm not. But I can understand where you're coming from. I just hope…” Her eyes flickered downward before meeting mine once more. “... I hope I exceed your expectations, and maybe one day we could be friends.”

That… took me completely off guard. I tried to smile at her, but it felt forced. “Yeah… me too.” I said awkwardly.

It was enough for her, it seemed, because she grinned at me before buckling her seat belt and taking out her laptop. Soon we were taking off, and she popped her headphones on and started typing away.

A couple of hours later, Milla was still typing… I stared at her, and as Maxwell stood to go to the bathroom, I got up and took his seat. She smiled at me absentmindedly, before taking off her headphones. They were loud enough that I could hear her music… Celtic music… I didn't see that coming.

“Hey.”

“Hey… So you've been typing for hours now… What are you writing?” She raised her eyebrow inquisitively. “Liam told me you were a writer.” I explained.

“That's right. Well, right now, I'm just writing on my journal. No steamy stories about princes just yet.”

“Huh. I hadn't pegged you for a 'Dear Diary' girl.”

She rolled her eyes, a small smile playing in her face. “I'm not. It's just something they teach you first year in school. Writing's hard, and if you don't do it everyday, it gets harder when you actually want to. The problem is that, since we consider ourselves artists, we sometimes don't want to write, or lack inspiration. So the journal exercise is something to keep you on your toes, until the muse deigns to show herself.” She gestured dramatically.

“Huh…” I saw Maxwell coming back and got up. “I'll leave you to it, then.”

“Oh… okay.”

I went back to my seat, and the rest of the flight was spent in silence. Maxwell caught up on some sleep, Milla kept writing and I… might have dozed off as well. Hours later, the pilot announced an ETA of 20 minutes and Maxwell jumped and shook Milla's shoulder.

“Hey, look, you can see Cordonia out the window! Milla, look! You don't want to miss this!”

I watched as she looked out the window, her eyes widening and her jaw dropping. “That's Cordonia? It's so beautiful. The sparkling ocean, the swaying trees-”

“If you burst into song, I'm jumping out of the plane.” I quipped.

She turned to face me… and burst into song. “Look at the world, so close, and I'm halfway to it.”

I groaned and covered my face with my hands. “Really?”
She kept singing, her voice smooth and velvety. “Look at it all, so big, do I even dare? Look at me, there at last, I just have to do it!” She accompanied the song with theatrical movements and expressions, and I couldn't help but smile and shake my head.

“Should I?” She looked to Maxwell, a faux questioning look on her face. “No! Here I go!” She posed theatrically. Maxwell snorted beside her, barely able to contain his laughter.

“To smell the grass, the dirt, just like I'd dreamed they'd be!”

“What?!” I started laughing.

“Just feel that summer breeze, the way it's calling me! For, like, the first time ever, I'm completely free! I could go running, and racing, and dancing, and chasing, and leaping, and bounding, hair flying, heart pounding, and splashing and reeling, and finally feeling that's when my life begins!”

Milla raised her arms as the song escalated, before bowing low, flipping her hair as a dramatic finale. Maxwell whooped and laughed, clapping as she raised her head.

“The escape door's right there, if you still want to jump out.”

“Funny…”

“Unless, of course, you were so moved by my performance, you want an autograph and a picture?”

“Not a chance.”

She shrugged good humoredly, “Your loss.”

The captain turned on the seatbelt sign and soon we were landing in Cordonia. Home sweet home.

The Masquerade was in full swing when they announced Maxwell and Camilla. She was wearing a long white gown, a halo and of course, a mask.

“Lord Maxwell of House Beaumont! Lady Camilla Rose Myers of New York!”

Camilla Rose Myers? I grinned. It was actually a very classy name. It suited her. She and Maxwell reached the bottom of the stairs, and he rubbed her shoulder and walked away. She looked panicked for a split second, before steadying herself and looking around. As soon as she spotted me, she smiled in what I can assume was relief, and came my way.

I bowed. “Good evening, Lady Camilla Rose Myers.”

“Just Milla.” I snickered and she shot me a dirty look. “It's nice to see you've actually got manners.”

“Yeah, well… I almost didn't recognize you. You clean up well.”

“Drake… did you just compliment me?”

“Yeah, I guess.” No point in denying it. “But looking the part doesn't mean you're going to be welcome here, you know.”

Her face fell just a bit. “Well… you're as charming as ever…”

“Trust me… compared to most nobles here, I'm your best friend.”
“I know. I mean, I believe you.”

“That's the first smart thing you said.”

“Hey! What about when I explained the insides of a writer's mind in the plane? And let's not forget my awesome musical number…” She smiled warmly at me, as I brought my hand to my face.

“I'm still trying to forget that.”

“Should've jumped out of the plane, then. My musical numbers are unforgettable.”

“I can tell.” We sipped our drinks in companionable silence, and I sighed. She was… actually pretty nice, and smart. Charming, just like Liam said. It made me feel kind of bad for being a little bit of an ass. “Look, Myers… I'm not trying to be jerk. I'm trying to help.”

“I know.” I shot her a dubious look. “You're a no bullshit kind of guy. I can tell. You're honest.”

I swallowed. “Good.” It was… strange, meeting someone who actually understood what I wanted to say, who didn't get offended or upset… “I'm just saying the things I wish someone had told me a long time ago.”

She touched my arm, and for some reason, I felt myself blush. “I know. Thank you, Drake.”

“Excuse me.”

And just like that, I felt all the blood drain from my face. Olivia Nevrakis.

“But I must steal her away.” She took Myers' arm and led her away, while she looked back at me with WTF written all over her face. I just rolled my eyes and shook my head. 

*I need a drink.*

The next time I saw her, she was finally talking to Liam, who was wearing the first genuine smile I'd seen all night. I smirked. I was glad he was happy. He deserved it. I just hoped she could keep up, for Liam's sake.

A while later, I decided to go outside to get some air, when I spotted Myers with Olivia and some other suitors. I quickly turned around to avoid them, when Lady Hana ran past me, crying. I shook my head.

*And another one bites the dust.*

“Olivia, you're acting like a child.” Myers voice ran clear and true. “If this is how you behave, I wouldn't trust you with childproof scissors, let alone a kingdom.”

“I…” Olivia gaped at her, and I struggled not to laugh. “You can't…”

“I just did.” And with that, she turned - as did I, to avoid being seen - and went after Hana. I snickered as I saw Olivia gaping after her.

*Well, well, well… Maybe she stands a chance after all.*

Later that night, Liam came into my room. “So *that* was the errand Maxwell needed help with?”

He looked… ecstatic. “Uh… yeah.”

“I just can't believe she's here!” He sat on my bed. “I thought… I thought I'd never see her again!”
I sat next to him and clapped his shoulder. “I'm happy for you.”

“Thanks.” He looked at me with big puppy dog eyes.

Oh, no…

“I need a favor.”

There it is.

“Milla… she's smart, and charming, and driven. I've no doubt she can manage to impress the court, the Queen and the people of Cordonia. She has already made a great impression on my Father. But she's still going to need all the help she can get.”

“Yeah, well, she's got House Beaumont on her side. And I can already tell she's the Crown Prince's favorite.”

“She needs more than that. She needs you.”

“Me?!”

“Yes! Drake, you've been my best friend since childhood. You're smart, and honest, and loyal.”

I know… I hate that.

“She's going to need that if she wants to get through the competition, and all the plotting and schemes that come with it.”

I groaned. “Did you tell her that?”

“I did. I told her the ladies tend to get… competitive.”

“Ha! That's one word for it.” I sighed, relenting. “What do you need me to do?”

He wrapped me in a giant bear hug. “Thanks, Drake.”

I patted his shoulder awkwardly. “Yeah, yeah… now, what do I have to do?”

“Just keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't run into any trouble. As much as I'd like to, I can't be with her every step of the way throughout the competition… but you can.”

“Fine.”

“Thank you.” He clapped my shoulder one last time and stood. “I'll let you sleep.”

He made his way out and I sprawled myself on the bed.

Oh, boy… what did I get myself into?

As it turns out, Myers needed my help sooner than expected. The day of the Derby, she got lost and when I found her, she was literally about to get run over by a horse.

“Whoa, there. Whoa.” I called the horse down, grabbing a fistful of its mane, and patted it's neck. “Easy, big fella. Easy.”

“Drake! You saved me!” She gasped in between breaths.
“Really? I thought I was saving the horse… these Derby runners are like athletes. Can't risk an injury tripping over a stray human.”

“Charming. Did the horse knock the sense out if you too?”

I turned to look at her, and she was genuinely upset. “Nah. In fact, I got away without a scratch.”

She rolled her eyes, exasperated.

“What are you even doing here?” She asked wearily.

“Look, I…” I ran my fingers through my hair. “Truth is Liam told me to keep an eye on you, to make sure you don't end up in the wrong place… exactly like now.”

“He told you that?” Her eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Yeah. Good thing I followed his instructions, huh? Speaking of which, you should get back to the race tracks and your adoring fans…” I began leading the horse back to its pen.

“I'd love to, but I'm lost. Maxwell told me I should look for the pink tents?”

“He's wrong. You're looking for the white tents next to the starting line. You can't miss them. Good luck!”

“You're not coming with me?” I looked at Myers and she was staring at me with what I could only describe as puppy eyes. I rubbed the back my neck.

“No… I'm due to meet Liam. He's got his own private tent. We usually just hang out, get some drinks, watch the ceremonies, place our bets on the horses… it's pretty sweet.” I smiled at her.

I saw as she got this steely look in her eyes. “In that case… I'm going with you!”

“What?”

“It sounds more fun where you're going. Take me with you.”

“I don't think you're supposed to…”

“Please?” She batted her eyelashes slowly at me, and gave me a slow smile. I rolled my eyes; I knew exactly what she was trying to do. When she figured out it wasn't going to work on me, she sighed. “Come on, what are they going to do? Put me in Princess Jail?”


She beamed at me. “Thanks.”

At least Liam would be happy. I led her to the tent and excused myself to get drinks, letting them have a bit of time alone. I went to get beers and when I came back, they were laughing. “I hope I'm not interrupting.”

Myers gave me a warm smile. “Of course not, we're happy to see you.”

“You are?”

“Yeah, come join us!” This is usually my spot, but sure… I shook my head and smiled.
“I was just telling Liam of my… horse phase when I was a girl.”

“Really?”

“Yeah… I has my whole room covered with horse posters, and paintings and photographs. I read books about them, researched the different breeds… I think I read the whole ‘Misty of Chincoteague’ series…”


“Anyhow, I think my dad was pretty happy when it was over.”

It was actually… pretty cute to picture her; an awkward little girl with glasses, reading a book about ponies.

“Any way, you're just in time! The final race is starting.” Liam told me.

We placed our usual bets, and explained the terms to Myers. Liam lost, as usual, and paid his bet. Soon, it was time to head to the lawn party. I ducked out with the excuse of finding Maxwell to give them more time alone.

“Thank you for coming, Milla. I'm not lying when I say you've made my day.”

“You've made mine, too.”

I grinned and went to look for the Beaumont's car. As soon as I spotted it, I headed back. I cleared my throat before entering the tent and offered to show Myers the way back.

As we got close to the suitors’ tent, I heard the ladies complaining they didn't get to see Liam. I shared a look with Myers, and smiled. “I guess I leave you here. Good luck.”

She sighed. “Sometimes I feel like facing a rampaging horse that deal with the others…”

“I don't know… you didn't fare so well with the horse.”

“Ha. I guess that's true.” She looked at me, before looking down at the ground. When she looked back up, she held my gaze. “Hey, Drake… thanks for saving me.”

I huffed. “I know I can be a jerk, but I'd have to be a real lowlife to let a horse trample a girl.”

“Well… thanks, anyway.”

Before I knew it, she rose on her tiptoes and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, before walking to join the other ladies without looking back.

I brought my hand to my cheek, staring after her. What just happened?

A couple of days later, Liam and I were hanging out in the maze, when Bastien came jogging towards us.

“Your Highness. Drake.”

“What is it, Bastien?”

“We've just got informed there is currently a bidding war between various tabloid magazines for
pictures of your bachelor party. They feature Lady Camilla prominently.”

*Oh, shit. This is one of the reasons I hate this place.*

“Do we know who took them?”

“Not yet, Your Highness. There will be a full investigation on this, but right now, we're more focused on actually buying the pictures back so they never go to press.”

Liam sighed. “Very well. Thank you for informing me, Bastien.”

“Do you have any leads yet?”

“No, but…” Bastien looked at Liam. “I've personally seen digital copies of the photographs. From the angle some are taken, the photographer would have had to have been… in close proximity.”

“Are you saying it could've been one of the guys?” I asked, looking over to Liam. He was frowning, disappointment clear in his eyes.

“We can't make any assumptions. All we know was that the photographer was in close proximity to your table.”

Bastien's phone chimed. He glanced at it briefly before turning to us. “We have the photographs, both physical and digital copies.”

Liam sighed in relief. “Well, that's… good.”

“I'll keep you updated on our investigation. We'll begin to look into it immediately.”

“All right. Just do what you can. Thank you, Bastien.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Drake.” He bowed, and left, purposely walking away.

“Hey, man, you okay?” I clapped his shoulder.

“I'm just… relieved we were able to buy them back.”

“I know.” I murmured.

“Do you think… it could be one the guys?”

*Honestly…?*

I sighed. “I don't know. I hope not. I know… you consider them your friends.”

“They're your friends, too.”

“Heh “ I shrugged. I placed a hand on his shoulder and shook it. “Don't worry about it. We'll figure out.”
Chapter Notes

I was actually fully intent on romancing Liam, but then Lythikos happened and I just completely fell for Drake. This is one my favorite chapters in book one. I hope you all enjoy.

The morning before we left for Lythikos, I decided to wake up early and go pick up some cronuts for breakfast at that bakery Myers took us to the other night. I walked to the family parlor, where I found Liam on the couch, watching the news.

“Hey, man.” I tossed the bag of warm pastries into his lap. “I brought us breakfast.”

“You went back for more cronuts?”

“Yeah! Breakfast fit for a king!” I laughed and sat next to him. “What were you watching?”

He hummed as he bit into his cronut. “Just the news… I wanted to see the press coverage from the Derby”

“And?” I asked between bites.

He pointed to the TV. “See for yourself.”

“And last week, the Annual Royal Derby took place, followed by the customary Garden Party. This Derby was Cordonia's first opportunity to see the Royal Family after the abdication of former Crown Prince Leonardo “Leo” Rhys. It was also our first chance to meet the new Crown Prince's suitors; who include Lady Olivia Nevrakis, the Scarlet Duchess of Lythikos, Lady Penelope of Portavira, and last year's winner, Countess Madeleine of Fydelia.”

“There's also an interesting newcomer on the scene: Lady Camilla Rose Myers of New York, representing House Beaumont.”

The anchors debated amongst themselves as they superimposed a picture of Myers on the screen.

“Now, Bob, what is the story with Lady Camilla? Why is she so interesting to the press, and of course, the people of Cordonia?”

“Well, Joan, you may dub this Cordonia's own Cinderella story. According to inside sources, Prince Liam and Lady Camilla met during his stay in New York City, at a pub where she was his waitress. It's said the Prince was immediately taken with her, and she with him.”

“I assume that's the reason House Beaumont decided to sponsor her.”

“Exactly. Now, what's so interesting about this is, in the past years, we've seen a sort of revolution, if you will, within royalty around the world. Many royal houses have begun discarding ancient traditions - such as arranged marriages for political alliances - choosing instead to marry for love.”

“Like Prince Charles with Camilla Parker Bowles, Prince William with Kate Middleton, Prince
“Even Queen Elizabeth with Prince Phillip. Even though he was of noble birth, he wasn’t exactly a favorable match for her at the time. Anyhow, it would appear that royals around the world have become more flexible with such things… And yet, that hadn’t been seen with Cordonia’s royalty until now.”

“That is what’s so groundbreaking about Lady Camilla being accepted as a competitor, and quite possibly, future Queen.”

“Yes! Now, when asked to comment on herself, Lady Camilla replied:”

They played an interview Myers had given yesterday.

“Lady Camilla, can you tell us about yourself?”

“I’m just a regular woman, like many out there. A girl from New York, whose heart has led her to get swept up in the affairs of the nobility.”

“And how’s that going for you?”

“It feels like I’m living a fantasy.” She gave the reporter a warm smile.

“Now, early rumors already establish you as Prince Liam’s favorite. What do you think makes you stand out?”

“Prince Liam first noticed me because I was his waitress.”

“A real Cinderella story. Last but not least, who are you wearing?”

I rolled my eyes at the question. They always asked women what or “who” they were wearing. Why couldn’t they just say “we like your white top and hey, that’s a lot of roses on your skirt!” and be done with it?

“Oh! Well… the dress is Channel, the shoes are Christian Louboutin, and of course, Philip Treacy.” She pointed to her hat.

“Lovely. Can I get a picture of you?”

They showed Myers posing for the camera before turning back to the anchors. I looked away… reluctantly admitting that dress hugged her figure in all the right places.

“Well, Bob, she certainly has style, and seems very agreeable and down to earth.”

“That, she does, Joan. We certainly wish her luck. Be sure to stay tuned to see how Cordonia’s very own Cinderella story plays out. And in other news…”

Liam turned off the TV and slumped back on the couch.

I nodded. “Not bad…”

“No, not bad at all. She was honest, charming… and she looked gorgeous.” He shot me an embarrassed smile.

I clapped his shoulder. “She did. Now, at what time are we leaving for the Ice Queen’s palace?”
He chuckled. “Soon. Are you all packed yet?”

“Sure…”

Liam gave me a pointed look. “We'll leave when you're ready.”

“Well, in that case…” I sunk deeper into the couch, and Liam threw a cronut at me. “Okay! Okay! I'll go now!”

We laughed and I stood. Oh, God... I was already dreading this trip.

We arrived in Lythikos and the servants showed us to our rooms. Liam had to go greet our hostess, so I went outside and found Myers with Maxwell and Hannah.

“This is Lythikos? It's so beautiful!”

I looked at Myers as she took in the view. Her eyes shone as she took in the lake, the snow and the mountains.

“And cold.” Hanna shivered, rubbing her arms.

“I know!” Myers said excitedly. She pulled tighter on the neck of her coat, wearing a dreamy expression on her face. She sighed. “I love winter… it's my favorite season. The snow, the crisp, cool air, the rain… and the clothes! I love that time of year when I break out my coats, and hats and scarves!”

“The winter look suits you.” Hannah complimented. “You just look so enamored with winter.”

She really did. Her smile was wider, her eyes were brighter, and I had to admit she looked pretty cute with that wool beanie.

We kept on talking for a bit, before Maxwell led Myers to her room. They came out a few minutes later, and I watched as Maxwell distracted Olivia, and Myers skated gracefully towards Liam. They talked for a while, until Maxwell failed to keep Olivia occupied and she went back to claim Liam. Poor guy...

After one final lap around the lake, Olivia finally let go of Liam and announced it was time to hit the slopes. Finally, something fun.

As soon as we got up there, I saw Myers get off her slope and skid to join her. “So, Myers, you finally made it to the slopes.”

“What's wrong, Drake? Were you starting to miss me?” she asked cheekily.

I rolled my eyes. “Hardly, I was just getting bored.”

“You didn't go skating?”

“Figure skating isn't really my thing.”

“Really? I think you'd look good in a tutu.”

“Some mental images aren't worth the effort.”

She closed her eyes. “Yeah, yeah they are! Oh Drake, you'd look so cute with an ice blue tutu, with
lots and lots of tul.” She opened her eyes. “But I guess skiing is manly enough for you.”

I looked around. All the nobles were fumbling with their skis, or their poles… all seemed hesitant. I huffed a breath. “I’d hardly call what going on around here skiing. But I’m looking to change that. How about a race?”

She raised an eyebrow. “And what makes you think I can ski?”

“Maybe I’m starting to have faith in you, Myers.” I looked down, but didn't miss the way her eyes softened.

“Drake… I might have a little faith in you too.”

“It’s the apocalypse, after all!” I feigned shock. “But anyway… I’m going to start skiing down this slope, and if I get to the bottom before you… well, let's just say I'm calling that a win, and I might never let you hear the end of it.” I got into position and… “Ready… set… don't wipe out!”

I took off down the hill, hearing her yell, “Hey!”

I whooshed right by Liam and Olivia, with Myers on my tail. I saw a branch on the path and quickly swerved past it. “Watch yourself, Myers!” I turned my head for a moment just in time to watch her jump over it. “Wow.”

With uninterrupted momentum, she sped past me and began jumping up and down. “I won! I won!” She stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry at me.

I rolled my eyes, but smiled nonetheless. “With a jump like that, I guess you deserve to win… Nice moves, Myers.”

“Thank you.” She lifted her chin, clearly proud.

I looked around, at the mountains, the trees and the snow. “You know, this trip hasn't been half bad. Shame that tomorrow it's back to waltzing and bowing and all that.”

“At least I can ski better than I can waltz… which is barely at all.”

I looked at her in shock. I was sure Maxwell had prepared her for tomorrow. “Wait, you can't waltz?? I was sure you danced with Liam!”

“Uh… yeah, but he did most of the work…” her eyes slowly got bigger. “Why? Is it important?”

“Oh, Myers…” Damn it, Maxwell. “What would you do without me?” I shook my head. “There's a ball tomorrow. All of the ladies are expected to dance the Cordonian Waltz in front of everyone.”

“Well… shit.”

I snorted.

“It’s fine. I'll figure it out.”

“It's very complicated.” I warned.

She shrugged. “No biggie. I've survived this far.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “Whatever you say, Myers.”
She gave me this sly, impish look. “But let's say I'm curious…” she brought her hand to her chin, thoughtfully narrowing her eyes. “How does one dance the Cordonian Waltz?”

I shook my head. “Sadly, I can't help you there. I don't know the steps.” Her face fell, and an idea popped into my head. “You should ask Hannah! If anyone knows everything backwards and forwards, it's that one!”

“Yeah… maybe.” She still looked a bit unsure, but I wasn't sure what else I could do to help…

“May I please get everyone's attention?” Olivia called. “It's time to head over to my spectacular lodge to warm up!”

“Hey…” I waited for her to look at me. “Thanks for the race. I actually had fun.”

“Me too… Maybe you're not as bad as you seem.”

“You're going soft on me, Myers.”

“Dream on, Drake.”

We began walking back to Olivia's chateau. Once inside, the servants poured us steaming cups of hot chocolate with tiny marshmallows, and I sat with Myers, Hannah and Maxwell. We were having fun, laughing and joking, until Olivia came to welcome us.

“Watch yourselves. We've got incoming.” Maxwell whispered as the Ice Queen made her way towards us.

“Well, hello, my dear guests. I hope you're enjoying my spectacular hosting.”

Murmurs rose around the table in agreement.

“It's… something.” I said.

Olivia’s smile grew thin and she narrowed her eyes at me. Here we go… I tried my best to keep from rolling my eyes.

“Did you see that we have eclairs, Drake? They always remind me of dear, darling, little Savannah. She'd gobble them down like a sow at the trough.”

I immediately tensed up, gritting my teeth. “Don't talk about my sister.”

“Why ever not? She was such a fixture at court, then she just up and disappeared. You never told us what happened, and usually gossip is quick to spread.”

“She left because of people like you.”

“She always was the sensitive sort.” She replied with mock affection. She tsked her tongue. “Oh, well. Ladies like that don't last here at court.” She eyed Myers, who was just as tense and frowning.

I looked at my cell phone and shook my head. It was almost time for the showers, and I was ready to get out there. “You know what? I've just remembered I've got somewhere I need to be. If you'll excuse me…” I stood and walked right past Olivia.

She gaped and called out to me. “Wait, Drake, dear! Come back! I wasn't finished with you!”

I rolled my eyes. Bitch.
I was at the door when I heard Myers stand. “Leave Drake alone before I slap that smile off your face!”

I have never heard a room go so quiet so fast. I hesitated at the door for a second, wanting to tell her not to bother. Olivia would never change… but instead of causing more trouble, I decided to just get out of there.

I trudged along in the snow, going closer and closer to the woods. I couldn't believe Myers had stood up for me… not even Liam had ever stood up for me - to Olivia, that is. “Just let it go.” He would say, “You know why she's like that.”

Just… What was she thinking? If Olivia had it out for her before… Why would Myers do that? She obviously has no clue what women like Olivia are capable of in order get what they want…

Not to mention the scandal this could cause at court. Threatening the hostess in her own home? Oh, Myers… the other nobles wouldn't see this as her sticking up for a friend, they would see it as offensive and rude; a sign that the girl from New York is a brute with no manners. A troublemaker.

Slowly, the sky began to darken. I knew there was storm coming soon, but I still wanted get a glimpse of the stars. I was still thinking about Myers, and about Savannah… I missed her so much… and she didn't even tell me why she left… or where she was now…

“Hey, Drake…”

“Camilla?” I was so shocked I let myself use her name. “What are you doing here?”

“I saw you going off on your own, close to dark, with a storm coming, and… I wanted to make sure you were okay. After what Olivia said to you… I could see it struck something inside you.” Her eyes were wide with sincere concern and I had to look away from her.

Oh, Myers, you've already gotten yourself in enough trouble for me… and the worst thing is that you're completely oblivious to it.

“No offense, but you're the last person I need looking out for me.” I said, but it came out harsher than I intended.

Her face fell, and she looked away. “Okay… I'll leave you be. I'm sorry I bothered you.”

Aw, shit, Myers… I brought my fingers to the bridge of my nose and took a deep breath. I'm such an ass.

“Wait, Myers! That's not what I… Oh, hell…” She stopped and turned to look at me. “I'm not trying to be a jerk, Myers. I only meant you shouldn't have to worry about me. You should only be looking out for yourself.”

“I… can't do that.” She shrugged.

We stared at each other for what seemed to be the longest moment ever. She stepped closer and placed a hand on my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze, before dropping it.

“What exactly did you come out here to do?”

I gave her a small, half smile. “If you really want to know… you'll have to trust me.”

“I do.”
“Ok…Here goes.” I shoved her back, but at the last moment she grabbed my shirt and took me down with her!

“Drake!”

I fell on top of her, but somehow I managed to catch myself, landing on my forearms before crushing her completely. And then, I realized my face was inches away from hers. I heard her sharp exhale and met her eyes. Saw how they strayed from my eyes to my mouth then back to my eyes again. She licked her lips as a blush colored her cheeks. I could feel my heart start pounding on my chest, I could hear thumping in my ears.

_Say something!_ A voice screamed inside my head, and I realized I was still on top of her. “Sorry!” I rolled to the side. “That did not go like I intended! You okay?”

“I-I-I'm fine!” Was she… stuttering? “Oh!”

I turned my head, thinking she was hurt, but she was staring at the sky, completely marveled by the stars.

“Oh, Drake…”

She looked… _beautiful_. I mean… Of course, I found her attractive, even though she wasn't _the_ most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. There were plenty of attractive women at court — _all_ the suitors were gorgeous - but… in this light… this moment… she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

“Yes, my lady?”

“This is… absolutely gorgeous!”

I kept my eyes on her face. “Yes, it is.”

She turned her head to look at me. “Thank you… for sharing this with me.” She reached for my hand and gave it a quick squeeze before letting it go.

I felt my face grow hot and looked away. “You're welcome.” I cleared my throat. “Nothing beats a clear view of the sky during a meteor shower.”

“I'm glad I didn't miss this.”

“Really? Would've figured you'd rather eat bon-bons and dress up tiny dogs, or whatever Olivia had planned for tonight.”

“Not exactly my scene.”

We turned our eyes back to the sky, in comfortable silence. Soon, storm clouds crept closer and closer. Myers sighed.

“Looks like we're just in time to see this before the storm comes.”

“Yeah, I didn't want to miss it. I used to do this with my younger sister, Savannah, every year.” I didn't know why I was telling her this… but I found myself wanting to. “We grew up around the royals. My dad used to do security for Liam and his brother, and my sister and I were allowed to play with them. Liam and I ended up getting close, even though I didn't have the lineage to merit it. Savannah, on the other hand, got along with everyone, and they were all friendly to her. She _loved_ living at the palace when we were kids, being around all the pretty dresses and jewelry. But it got
harder when she was older…”

“What happened?”

“She…” I felt myself tense. I gritted my teeth and tried to get a hold of my emotions. Breathe. “It was hard on her. She couldn't take it, I guess. Not after what happened with…” I don't even know who… I knew something happened with someone, but I didn't know who. “I failed her. I-I couldn't protect her. I couldn't protect her from this place… from these people.”

I felt my eyes watering. I blinked quickly and covered my face with my forearm. But then, I felt her take my hand and squeeze.

“Drake…”

“Sorry. I'm sorry.” I shook off her hand. “I guess I'm still not ready to talk about it. This is more than I've talked about it with anyone for the last year, actually.”

“Really? Does… does this mean you trust me?” She asked hesitantly, and when I turned to look at her, she looked so… hopeful.

“I don't trust anyone, Myers… but if I did, I'd start with you.

She gave me a beaming smile, and I grinned back. “Drake, that's probably the nicest thing you've ever said to anyone.”

“Heh. Maybe.”

I laughed and turned to look back at the sky. Those storm clouds were rolling in fast, and the snow began to fall faster and faster. I sighed. Back to the Ice Queen's castle. “We better get back. It'd be quite a scandal if I let one of the Prince's suitors freeze to death out here on my watch.”

“I'd hate for my untimely demise to cause you any difficulty.”

“Not to mention that Maxwell would never let me hear the end of it.”

“I'm sure even Bertrand would be upset, in his own way.”

“Bertrand? He'd only be upset if he couldn't turn it into some press event. Now, let's go.”

I stood and dusted myself off, before offering a hand to her. She took it and I helped her up.

“Thank you.”

I nodded, and we began making our way back. Suddenly, she grabbed my hand. I looked at her, and some of the shock must've shown on my face, because she blushed and quickly said, “For… y'know, safety.”

I laughed and secured her grip, our fingers intertwining. “It is really slippery out here.”

“Yeah!”

“We should both be careful.”

“Exactly.” She nodded enthusiastically, and I laughed. What are you doing? I shook my head and shut out the voice in my head. Because, for some odd
reason, *this* - her hand in mine - felt *right*. And when I sneaked a peek in her direction, I knew she felt the same way… her expression was of calm contentment.

And before long… we were back at the castle. And yet… she didn't let go of my hand, and I didn't let go of hers…

We began climbing up the stairs, when…

“There you are!”

I let go of her hand.

I saw a flicker of disappointment flash through her eyes, before she quickly schooled her features into a smile. *Her waitress smile*, I realized.

“Hi, Hannah! You're up late.”

“I couldn't sleep! With you and Drake out there in the storm…”

“Oh, Hannah! I'm sorry we kept you up!”

“Oh, I'm just glad you came back before it really started coming down out there! Drake, you must be freezing!”

*Oh, right*. I looked down at my clothes. *Well, now I am.* “Uh, yeah… I'm going to go get changed. Good night, ladies.”

“Good night...” Myers looked at me, something in her eyes I couldn't quite read… so I simply nodded and went upstairs to my room.

Once inside, I slammed the door and tumbled on the bed. I shut my eyes, trying to stop myself from overthinking what just happened.

*She's here for Liam. Not you.*

*Well, thank you for that, self-deprecating voice which seems to live inside my head.* I rolled my eyes. I know she's here for Liam. And I'm his best friend. I'm just keeping an eye on her, just like he told me to. And that's that.

*Then, why the hand holding?*

For safety… just like she said. The path was slippery. I didn't want her to fall.

*And before...? Why tell her, of all people, about Savannah?*

Because… she was *right* there! A-and I was upset after Olivia, and I was shocked she stood up for me, and…

I'm overthinking this. I growled and threw a pillow at the wall.

Myers is here for Liam. Liam is my best friend. I want him to be happy. For that to happen, she has to win. She'll win, they'll get married, they'll live happily ever after, and that will be that.

I'm just here to help her - help *them*. Nothing more, nothing less.

With that final thought, I closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep.
I woke up the next morning still tired and frustrated. I tossed and turned all night - it was like I couldn't turn my mind off.

I kept thinking about Myers, about her hand in mine, her eyes as she looked at the sky, her smile, my body on top of hers…

Don't go there…

I groaned and shook my head. So instead of staring at the ceiling and letting my thoughts run away to places they shouldn't… I decided to watch something on Netflix. After perusing the titles for a while, I picked a documentary on World War II and eventually fell asleep with my earbuds still in place. Of course, I woke up again to the sound of shooting and gunfire loud in my ears, and I fell off the bed.

All in all, a great night.

The day passed quickly and uneventfully - I figured everyone was getting ready for the Ball. So after stopping by to check on Liam, I went back to my room, showered and got dressed.

I got to the ballroom, unsurprised to find out Olivia had placed me in the farthest table - the loser table. I went to take my seat, when I spotted Myers and Hannah heading my way.

“Welcome to the table is exiles.”

“Drake? I'm so glad to see you! Here I thought we would be stuck sitting with a bunch of stuffy nobles.”

“It's probably meant to be an ever bigger slight we're sitting with a commoner.” Hannah looked at me apologetically.

Myers looked at me and grinned. “Well, Olivia really missed the mark this time.”

“Thanks, Myers. That actually means something, coming from you.”

She took my hand and squeezed quickly before letting go. We talked and, after a dramatic performance by Myers, we ate.

Soon, it was time for the Waltz and I watched as Myers danced with Maxwell as if she'd been dancing her whole life.

I was at the bar, trying - and failing - to get a decent drink, when I heard a collective gasp around the room. I turned, silently wishing the commotion was caused by a servant accidentally spilling something on Olivia, only to find her passionately kissing Liam. My eyes immediately searched for Myers on the dance floor. I felt myself getting angry at Liam, who after a long while, finally stopped the kiss and led Olivia outside. I found Myers, her face calm and aloof, talking to Kiara, Penelope and Madeleine. Had she seen it? She looked so calm… maybe she hadn't seen it.

Then, our eyes met across the room and she nodded, giving me a knowing look. And yet, she shrugged and winked at me, before turning back to her conversation with Kiara.

I shook my head. Women… I didn't understand… wasn't she upset about Liam and Olivia? Maybe she knew it was just Olivia trying to show up the other ladies, get ahead in the competition.

Or maybe… she doesn't care, because she's not interested in Liam…
I put a stop to that train of thought right away. She was here for Liam. The whole reason she was here was for Liam.

I took out my phone and looked at the time. It wasn't late, but I left anyway. No one would notice the Prince's commoner friend was gone. I made my way down to the wine cellar, and after a quick lap, picked a spot and opened the bottle of whiskey I bought earlier. I picked up a glass from a wooden case and poured myself some whiskey.

I drank alone and was ready to call it a night when I heard the creaking sound of the door opening upstairs. I looked up to find Myers descending the spiral staircase, her delicate heels clacking loudly in the silent room.

I chuckled. “There you are, Myers. I was beginning to think you didn’t have the guts to show. Y’know, breaking the rules, out after curfew and all that.”

She shrugged. “I wanted to see you.” She said simply, taking a seat next to me on the floor.

“Aww, come on, Myers. You’ll make me blush.” I nudged her shoulder with mine, and she smiled and looked down at the floor.

“Now that I'd like to see.”

We sat in companionable silence, and I looked at her, sitting next to me, on the floor, wearing this beautiful ball gown. “Myers, should you be sitting on the ground in a gown like that?”

She gasped and stood upright. “Oh, no!” She twirled around frantically, dusting off her skirts and turning her head to look at her… backside. “Did I get anything on it? Is it dirty? Ugh… why did I have to pick a white gown… Should’ve gone with the blue one with the puffy skirt…” She kept on mumbling.

I looked quickly at her… “No, it’s fine…” I could feel the blood rush to my face. “I have to say, I never thought you'd be one of those girls.”

She stopped flailing and raised an eyebrow. “What girls?”

“Well, you know…” I raised my hand to my forehead and mimicked a high pitched voice “‘Is that dust on my gown?! Oh, no, I can't wear this now! My life is over!’ I raised my hands and waved them dramatically.

“Hah!” She snorted.

“Very ladylike.”

She hit my arm playfully, and sighed. “I'm not usually like this…”

I looked at her.

Myers ran her hand through her long hair, looking everywhere but me. She almost seemed… embarrassed. “How do you think a waitress can afford a couture gown?”

“Oh…

“The truth is… she can’t.” I watched as her lips curved downwards. “I’m going to return this dress after tonight.” She lifted her arm, and pulled out the tag from underneath the side of her gown. “But to be able to do that, it has to look like I've never worn it…”
“Oh… Myers. I'm sorry. Maxwell--”

“It's not his fault…”

“Yes, it is!” I stood, exasperated, and ran my fingers through my hair. I knew this would happen! “I told Maxwell he shouldn't sponsor you! That he literally couldn't sponsor you!”

“Maxwell's only mistake is that he should have told me sooner, so I could've come better prepared.”

“He should be able to provide for you.”

“Hey!” She touched my arm gently. “I've been taking care of myself for the past 25 years, thank you very much. I don't come from money, but we've always gotten along just fine. I worked my way through college, and kept working after graduation. I'm responsible with my money, and I have some saved. I'll be fine.”

I shook my head, looking straight ahead. She shouldn't have to go through this…

“Drake.” I looked at her. “It's really not that big a deal. It's not so terrible… having to return clothes I'll never wear again.” She grasped her skirts, lifting them and letting them fall. “I mean, when, other than tonight, will I ever wear this again? On the subway back home?” She smiled, trying to lighten the mood.

I took a deep breath. Let it out. I looked around the room, and saw that way in the back, there were a bunch of chairs piled up. I went and brought two of them to where we were. I wiped her chair down, wiping all the dust and dirt off of it, and gestured for her to sit.

“Thank you.”

“It's the least I can do…”

“Drake…”

“Trust me. So…” I looked at her and gave her a small smile. “What are you drinking?”

“What've you got?”

“Nothing yet. It seems Olivia's got herself a very extensive collection of fine Cordonian wines. I'm no expert, but from the names I recognize, nothing in here's under a thousand dollars.”

“You want to drink Olivia's wine? Pass me a bottle! She's got so many here, she'll probably never even notice.”

I laughed. “Before you pop something open, I also brought a bottle of whiskey down for myself… but I'd share it with you. So pick your poison.”

“Well, in that case… Whiskey, please.”

I couldn't help but grin, as I poured her a glass, and then poured one for me.

“Cheers.” She said, and I clinked my glass with hers and drank.

“So. You come to the wine cellar to drink whiskey. Doesn't that seem a little silly?”

“I came down here to get a little commoner time to myself where I don't have to bow and kiss hands for a few minutes.”
She nodded and poured herself another glass. Then she moved to refill mine. She raised her glass.
“To commoner time.” She toasted.

“To commoner time.”

We both drank; Myers hissing after swallowing. “Drake… if you hate the nobility so much, why do you stick around?”

“It must seem ridiculous to you.”

“To be honest, I don't understand why you put yourself through it.”

I sighed. Sometimes, neither do I… “It's Liam. It's always been for him. I would've left a long time ago, but Liam needs me. I know he's got nobles and courtiers all around him, but most of them would stab him in the back of they thought they could profit from it. I've seen so many underhanded moves, that I don't trust any of them anymore. And these are from our friends! And this latest one…”

Her eyebrows shot straight up. “What happened?”

“I…” Crap… “I don't know if I should tell you. It's still being resolved.”

“You're always saying I need to watch out… It'd be nice to know what for.”

I sighed. “You remember Liam's bachelor party?”

She smirked. “Of course.”

Of course. I stopped myself from rolling my eyes at her dreamy smile. ‘It was when I met my Prince Charming!’ Okay, okay, don't be a dick. “We found out that someone close to us was trying to sell pictures to the tabloids.”

“But who? Who would do that?”

“We haven't tracked down the source yet, but Bastien told us that we were able to buy the photos back before they were printed.”

“Call me crazy, but I don't remember anything that scandalous happening…”

No, you wouldn't, because nothing did. But that's not how they see it. “You know how the tabloids are… A picture with a drink in his hands and, suddenly the Crown Prince of Cordonia is on a drunken rager. And then, there's the pictures of the two of you together.”

“What?! But we weren't -- we… nothing happened that night…”

“Myers, relax! I know… but you two were talking and dancing, and he was clearly interested in you. That's enough for them to speculate on. What was the headline the tabloid was going to run? ‘The Prince's Drunken Fling before the Ring’.”

She shook her head. “That's bullshit. And you have no idea who would do this?”

“Not really. There are a lot of people who could be desperate for those photos… I just… really hope it wasn't one of the guys. The pictures they had… Those would've been hard to take unless that person was someone close to us…”

“Drake… I'll watch out.”
“Good.” I reached for her hand. “Money and power make people do crazy things, Myers. I just don’t want to see you get hurt because of it.”

“Drake…” she said sweetly. I could practically hear her inner voice going ‘aww!’ I let go of her hand.

“I mean, sometimes I look at you and I see this wide eyed baby deer who just stumbled into the hunter’s campsite.”

“A baby deer? So you think I’m cute?”

“Uh… that’s not what I, er…”

“My, my, it seems for once you’re speechless.” She grinned teasingly. “You totally think I’m cute.”

“Heh. Your unique talent, Myers, seems to be putting me in my place.”

She shrugged. “Well, someone’s gotta do it.”

I shook my head. “What is it about you? You’re so frustrating, but…” I trust you… for some odd reason.

“You know, nothing someone says before the word ‘but’ really counts.” She gave me a pointed look.

“Yeah, I know.”

“So… but…?”

I shook my head. “Forget it. How about another toast instead?”

She took in a deep breath, clearly annoyed, and let it out. “Fine… what are we toasting to this time?”

“To the moments in between.”

“Huh?”

“All the nobles think about are the big events. The grand balls, the press appearances, the banquets… They don’t even realize that the moments that matter the most are the ones they’re missing. Moments like right now, just the two of us and some cheap whiskey. The ones that really mean something. At least, it means something to me, anyway.”

“Drake…” Again with that ‘aww’ voice! “It means something to me, too.”

I raised my glass and Myers joined me. “To the moments in between.”

“To the moments in between.”

She clinked my glass and we downed the rest of our drinks. Soon after she yawned and settled deeper into her chair. I checked my phone: 2 AM.

“Myers.”

“Hmm?”

“Let me walk you to your room. It’s getting late, and I don’t want to get you into trouble.” I stood, grabbed the bottle and offered her my hand.
She took it and stood. “That's so thoughtful of you.”

“Well, I'm a gentleman, even if not one by birth.”

She clicked her tongue. “People put way too much importance on blood and birth.”

“Huh… you might be right.”

We walked through the foyer and up the stairs, down the corridor and soon, we were at her door.

“So…” Myers turned and leaned against her door.

“Here we are. Safe and sound.”

“Safe and sound. I... had a good time tonight.”

“Me too.”

We stood there, awkwardly staring at each other.

“I have an early morning tomorrow - I mean, Maxwell's probably going to wake me first thing in the morning - so I should…” She trailed off.

“Yeah, yeah, no, go ahead… Have a good night.”

“You too…”

“Sleep well.”

“Yeah, you too.”

She looked down, before meeting my eyes. “Good night, Drake.”

“Good night, Myers.”

With a final withering look, she went inside. I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding and headed to my room.

I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.
After a week in Lythikos, we were finally back at the Palace. The staff had prepared a small welcome back dinner for the King and the court - but, as can be expected, the food served at dinner had been small, tiny portions of pretentious food, which left me very hungry. I made my way to the kitchens after midnight, when I knew the staff would have finished their shifts, and I would be free to raid the larder. So, you can imagine my surprise when I saw the lights on and voices coming from inside.

“Dad… I promise, I'm fine. I'm great, having the time of my life.”

“Camilla…”

I peeked in the kitchen, only to find Myers flipping pancakes on the stove, with her phone on the counter, on speakerphone. Not wanting to eavesdrop, I tapped on the door frame a couple of times. She turned and smiled at me, motioning with her hand for me to come in. I went to the counter, sitting across from her.

“Dad, give me a minute.” She covered the mic with her finger. “Hey, I'm making pancakes. You hungry?”

I nodded vigorously, giving her a thumbs up.

“Camilla? Camilla?!”

“I'm here, Dad! Sorry.”

Her dad sighed. “Well, as I was saying… Honey, I just don't want you to spend all your savings over there… You've worked very hard these last couple of years, I don't want to see it all go to waste…”

“*My dad.*” she mouthed to me, shaking her head. “You know, it amazes me that after all these years, you would think I'm not responsible with my money…” she covered the microphone with her finger. “He worries too much.” She told me, rolling her eyes.

“Well, he's your dad. It's normal.”

“I never said that.” Her dad continued “I know you’re very responsible - I don't doubt that for a second… but I'm not stupid either. After years of watching the Oscars together, I can only imagine how much a Chanel dress and Christian Livitan shoes cost.”

“It's Louboutin, Dad.”

“I honestly don't care, honey.”

I smirked. I liked him already. I watched as they continued to talk, a small smile on Myers’ face. In the past three weeks, she'd never once mentioned her family. She could've been an orphan, for all we knew. It made me curious… this side of her that she had yet to show us.

“Well… don't worry about that. I didn't pay for that dress. My sponsor set up a deal with the designers to lend me the outfit. Since there was going to be press at that particular event, it's good publicity for them. So they gave me a dress and I modeled it, basically.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. Myers saw me and nodded. *Well, it's good to hear Maxwell's at*
least doing something to help.

Her dad was silent for a moment. “Ok… well if you need anything, just call. Even if it's 4 am here.”

“Okay. Thanks, Daddy.”

Huh. Didn't peg her as a Daddy's girl.

“Now… Wendy! It's Milla. Honey, I'm going to put you on speaker.”

“Okay.”

“Milla?!” The woman's high pitched voice made me cringe a bit. “Hi, honey!”

“Hey, Wendy.”

“We miss you! How's everything going?”

“It's going okay.”

“Oh, honey we saw you on the E! Channel last week! You looked gorgeous! And the Prince is so handsome!”

Myers gave me a pointed look and rolled her eyes affectionately. “My step mother.”

“Ah.” I whispered, reaching out to grab a berry from a platter on the counter.

“Thanks, Wendy.”

“So what's he like?”

“He's… princely, I guess.” She looked to me and shrugged. “He's a true gentleman. He's been nothing but kind to me.”

“And have you made any friends?”

“Wendy, I'm not in elementary school… but yes, I've made a couple good friends…”

“Tell us about them.”

“Well, first there's my sponsor, Maxwell. He's the one who whisked me away to Cordonia. He's the funniest guy you'll ever meet, literally the life of the party.”

“Ooh, I like him already.”

“You would like him. He's really sweet, too. Then, there's Hana. She's… literally the smartest woman I've ever met.”

“Smarter than Professor Jadue?”

I gave her a questioning look, tilting my head to the side.

“One of my professors in NYU. I was one of her TA's.” She told me, before going back to her phone call. “Hmm… no, not like Professor Jadue. Hana's like one of those women in a Jane Austen novel. There's nothing she can't do; she sings, dances, plays piano, archery, baking, anything. You name it, she can do it. But she's really sweet and humble, too. She's incredibly talented, but she's not stuck up about it.”
“That's good.”

“That's a sign of low self-esteem.” Her dad chimed in.

I nodded.

Myers hesitated. “Yes... it is. Sadly Hana is a bit insecure... I think it's because of her upbringing. Her parents put tons of pressure on her, to be the perfect lady, to marry the perfect husband…”

I rolled my eyes.

“Well, I'm sure you'll help her out with that.” The woman, Wendy, chimed in. “You have a way of helping the people around you without even knowing it.”

“I hope so... I'd love to see her come into herself, and see what a kick-ass woman she really is.”

“She will. And... is that all?”

“No, then... there's Drake.” She grinned at me. “He's actually here with me right now. We're sort of having a midnight snack in the kitchen.”

“You do know she's googling each and every one of them as you speak, right?” Her dad asked.

“Yeah, I figured. That's why I left out everyone's last name.”

“I'll just add the words 'nobles Cordonia' after their names. But let's get back to Drake... Are we on speakerphone? Can he hear us?”

“You are and he can.”

“Oh, good. Hi, Drake!”

“Hello, Mrs. Myers, Mr. Myers...”

“Hello, Drake.” Her father said.

“Oh, honey! He's got such a beautiful, deep voice! Hi, sweetheart! It's nice to meet you!”

I felt myself blushing, which caused Myers to snicker. “Wendy, you're embarrassing him.”

“Oh, honey, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“That's okay, Mrs. Myers.”

“Wendy, sweetheart. Mrs. Myers makes me feel old.”

“Uh... ok... Wendy.”

“So how do you know the Prince?”

“You can just call him Liam, you know. And Drake's actually his best friend. They've known each other since they were kids.”

“Aww, that's so cute!”

I looked at Myers, whose eyes were light with laughter.
“Yeah… he's great. He's helped me out a lot since I got here.” She gave me a thankful smile.

“Aww, Myers, you're making me blush.”

“It's true.” She said simply.

“How so?” Her dad asked. I didn't know why, but I was suddenly nervous.

“Well, for starters, he saved my life.”

I snorted.

“What⁉️”

“Relax, Dad. He saved me from getting run over by a horse.”

“It was nothing, really.” I said.

“Thirteen year old you would've been heartbroken.” Wendy joked.

“How did that happen?” Her dad asked.

“Well… twenty five year old me got lost and found herself in the stables. A horse got spooked and nearly ran me over until, out of nowhere, Drake showed up and put himself right between me and the horse, and managed to calm it down.”

“Very brave, Drake.” I smiled at Wendy's approving tone.

“It was nothing, Wendy.”

“Yes, very brave indeed.” Myers agreed. “Anyway, I think you'd really like him, Daddy. He's smart, loyal, and has a great sense of humor…” She placed her hand on top of mine and squeezed.

I turned my hand over, interlacing our fingers together. “Seriously, Myers. I'm blushing hard over here.”

“Well, you'll have to invite him over when you come back. I'll take him out for a beer and a couple burgers.”

“Well, how could I say no to that? I'd be honored, Mr. Myers.”

“We'd love to have you over, Drake. All of Milla's friends are welcome in our home.” Wendy commented.

“I'd love to, Wendy.”

Wendy sighed. “Glad to hear that honey. Okay, sweetheart, I have to get to work now. Bye, baby.” She made a kissing sound, and I figured she kissed Myers's dad goodbye. “Goodbye, honey. I love you so much. Have fun out there.”

“I love you too, Wendy. Have a good day.”

“Bye, baby. Goodbye, Drake! Take care of our girl!”

“Bye, Wendy. And I will.”

“I should get going too.” Her dad said.
“Ok, Daddy. I love you.”

“I love you too, Milla. Hey, listen, before I go… I talked to your mom yesterday…”

Milla’s expression changed immediately. She tensed up, and let go of my hand. “And?”

“Well, she's a little hurt you haven't called her…”

“Dad, I don't exactly have a lot of free time - I didn't exactly come here on vacation - and when I do, it's either too late or too early…” She pursed her lips, her eyes guarded as she looked at me for a split second, looking quickly away.

“You could call her now…”

“Dad.” Myers sighed, bringing a hand to her forehead. “I'll call her when I can, okay? I promise.”

“Good. You know, if you ever need anything…”

“Dad!” Her eyes widened. “I'm not asking her for money.” She whispered harshly.

Her father sighed, weary. “Honey, she's your mother. She only wants to help.”

“I don't need any help. I've never asked her or Armando for anything in the past 12 years. I'm not going to start now.”

“You're too proud, Milla.”

“Ok, Dad… I have to go. I'll call you soon. Love you.”

“I love you too, sweetheart. Goodbye, Drake.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Myers.”

“Bye, Dad.”

She slammed her finger against the screen, her phone beeped as she ended the call. She slumped on the counter, taking a deep breath and releasing it, before going back to the pancakes on the skillet.

“Myers…”

She refused to meet my gaze, flipping a pancake. “Hmm…”

“You okay?”

“Fine.” She shrugged nonchalantly.

“Myers.”

“Yes?” She practically hissed at me.

“Look at me.”

“Drake, I'm fine.”

I raised my hands. “Okay… but I'm here if you want to talk about it.”

She sighed, and finally looked at me. “I'm sorry.”
“That's okay.”

“It's just... family stuff that happened a million years ago.”

“I'm assuming this has something to do with your mom?”

“Yeah...” She ran her fingers through her hair. “It's just typical stuff that comes with being a product of a failed marriage. My mom, she, uh... she left me and my dad when I was twelve.”

“I'm sorry.”

“That's okay.” She placed a stack of pancakes in front of me, garnishing the plate with berries and a dash of maple syrup.

“Thank you.” She nodded as she prepared a plate for herself. “Talk to me, Myers.”

“What's there to say? I mean... in the US, 1 in 3 marriages end in divorce.”

“Still doesn't mean it didn't affect you. You were a kid.”

She sighed. “Well, if you really want to know...”

“I do.”

She finished arranging her plate, and I gestured to a small round table. We both took our plates and sat down.

“Fine. My mom had an affair with a guy she met at a party - one she went to with my dad, by the way - and they were lovers for two years, before she finally left my dad for him. Armando.” She rolled her eyes. “In the months before the split, she used to take me and my brother for ice cream, and he'd join us. She told us he was just a friend, but then when we got home, she'd tell us not to mention Armando to Dad.”

Wow... I took a bite, and couldn't help but moan, as the different flavors invaded my tongue. A hint of vanilla, the tang of the berries, the buttery sweetness of the syrup. “Mmm... I'm sorry, but... Myers... this... is really good.” I said between bites.

“I'm glad you like it.” She smiled.

“What happened with Armando?”

“Well, one day my mom finally told my dad, and filed for divorce the next day. My dad didn't even see it coming. I still remember his face...”

“Oh, Myers...”

“Anyway, when she told me and my brother, she begged me to come with her. My brother was seven, and he didn't have a clue what was going on. My mom used that and just decided to take him. But not me. I refused to go with her. I told her I wouldn't leave my dad to go live with 'some guy she was fucking’. Then, I just remember going to my room and locking my door. I refused to come out until my dad got home. She'd already packed all of her and my brother's stuff, and just... left.”

“I'm sorry.”

She shrugged. “That's okay. It's all in the past now. Three years later, my dad married Wendy - who was a secretary at his autoshop - and my mom's still with Armando.”
“And you're okay with that? With Wendy? With your mom?”

“Oh, Wendy's great! She's really good for my dad, and she was a great stepmother. She's more of a mother to me than my real mom. But, as you can probably tell, my relationship with my mother is… distant, and strained.”

“Because of the divorce…”

“I think that played a large part in it, but it's not just that… My mother is… she's very beautiful, and very vain. Shallow. All she cares about is looks and money. I swear when I used to visit her and Armando, she'd always be commenting on my looks, my clothes, giving me tips to look prettier. Like a pageant mom. And don't even get me on when I started dating… it didn't matter if my boyfriend was smart or kind. To her, all it mattered was that he was good looking and came from money.

Wendy, on the other hand, always supported me. She was my rock in high school. She always gave me the best advice, taught me to respect myself, to never settle for anything, and to never change for anyone. It was great having her through my teen years.” She smiled fondly. “That's why I've…” her smile disappeared into a grimace.

“That's why what?”

“That's why I've been avoiding calling my mother… She'd be over the moon that I'm here, competing for Liam. Her daughter and a Prince!” She yelled in a haughty voice. “I mean… I was an honor student in high school, graduated with honors from NYU, and have been living independently, holding my own for the last three years, but this would be my greatest accomplishment in her eyes! Bagging a Prince.”

I let her rant, knowing she needed it. Who knows how long she's kept all these feelings towards her mother bottled up. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to calm down.

“I'm sorry… you shouldn't have to listen to this. See, this is why I didn't want to talk about my mother. She just makes me so…”

“That's okay, Myers.” I gave her a small crooked smile. “Let's talk about something else, like… What did your dad say? When you told him?”

“He didn't really like it. He made a Bachelor joke, much like the one you made when we got here. But he supported me, anyway. He still worries, as you can see, but…”

“Yeah, well… he's your Dad. I mean, if my daughter told me she was going off to Europe to compete with other women for some guy's hand in marriage, I wouldn't exactly be thrilled either. The whole concept is outdated and… misogynistic.”

“Yeah, I guess so… Anyway… that's the story of my parents.”

“And your brother?”

“My brother? Well… he's five years younger than me, and he grew up with Mom and Armando. We, uh… we aren't very close either.”

“How come?”

“It's… complicated. I guess it's a mixture of age difference and being raised differently. With my dad, when it was just the two of us, I always tried to help out as much as I could. I remember I used to try to have everything ready
by the time my Dad got home, so he could relax after working all day.

But with my mom… I think she babied him, spoiled him. I know that sounds really judgemental of me, but… it bothers me to see how lazy my brother is… he doesn't help out around the house, he graduated high school a couple years ago with mediocre grades, and decided not to go to college. But then I tell myself ‘whatever, he's his own person, and I don't live with him, so why should it bother me?’” She shook her head. “Anyway, he's working with Armando now. Armando owns his own landscaping company.”

“And your dad?”

“My dad’s a mechanic, one of the best in the business. He also owns his own shop and everything. I guess, now that he's married to Wendy, it's a family business.”

“And you never thought to work with him? Instead of…”

“Waitressing?” She shook her head. “No… I…” She sighed. “I know it might not make sense to you - or to a lot of people, since it's not the first time someone asks me that, my dad and Wendy included - but I… I guess I wanted to stand on my own two feet. I didn't want to get a job at my Dad or Armando's businesses, because I didn't want anything handed to me… Besides, both my parents live in New Jersey, and after college… I just couldn't imagine leaving New York.”

“That's... really admirable, Myers. I mean it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah…”

“Thanks. Most people would call it stupid.” She laughed.

“Well, most people are stupid.”

“Very true.”

We finished the rest of our meal in silence, both deep in thought. I looked at her and slowly, the wide eyed, baby deer image didn't seem to fit her anymore. Sure, she was somewhat naive to court life, but that's because she was still adapting to the environment. The real Myers was a strong, independent and hard working woman.

“Hey, Myers…”

“Hmm…?”

“Thanks for the pancakes.”

“You're welcome.”

She got up and reached for my plate, but I stood and pulled it away from her reach. “I'll wash the dishes… you cooked; it's only fair.”

“Thanks.”

I went to the sink and placed the dirty dishes inside, and Myers came and placed the mixing bowl, the measuring cups, and the skillet, as well. As I began watching the dishes, I looked to Myers, only to find her staring at me.
“What?”

She shook her head, a coy smile on her face. “Nothing.”

“You're staring.”

“I am.”

“Why…?”

“I was just thinking… we keep running into each other. And… I'm really growing fond of these moments in between. I guess I just like… spending time with you.”

I felt a blush creeping up on my neck, and cleared my throat. “Still trying to make me blush, Myers?”

“Nope.” She reached out to tickle my neck. “I think it's clear I don't have to.”

“Hey!” I splashed some water at her, while squirming to dodge her fingers.

She gasped, shocked, before reaching for the faucet, and splashed me right back. We began a brutal water fight all across the kitchen, her excited squeals filling the room. Soon, we were bringing out the big guns.

Anything within reach that could be used to hold water was a weapon. Myers grabbed a glass and splashed me as I ducked for cover. I got a few shots in with the measuring cups she'd left on the sink. She grabbed a pitcher full of ice water from the counter and poured it over my head, as I went in for the kill. The ice water ran down my back as I grabbed Myers and lifted her over my shoulder like a potato sack.

She kicked and squealed, laughing wildly as I set her down on the sink, quickly grabbing the pull out tap and cranking the water.

“No! Drake! No!” She screamed between laughs as I hosed her.

“Yield!”

“All right, all right, I yield!” she screamed, between giggles.

I turned off the tap, and from behind her back she took out a full glass and poured it right over my head.

“Seriously?” I chuckled.

She shrugged, “All's fair in love and war.”

I shook my head, shaking out the water from my hair while she wrangled hers, squeezing water from it. Suddenly, she began sliding deeper into the sink, and wrapped her legs around my waist for leverage. I quickly wrapped my arms around her waist to steady her.

“Whoa! Sorry!”

I chuckled. “Careful, Myers. Wouldn't want you to get stuck in there.”

“What's going on here?”

We both jumped apart, Myers letting out a yelp, and nearly falling on the slippery floor.
“Bastien!” He stood near the door, arms crossed across his chest and an amused grin adorning his face. “Uh…”

“We were… just here for a midnight snack. Sorry we didn't save you some pancakes.” Myers said sheepishly.

Bastien locked eyes with me, then Myers, his gaze impenetrable as he looked between us back and forth.

“We were just finishing cleaning up…” Myers continued. It was clear Bastien was making her uncomfortable. I narrowed my eyes, giving him a pointed look. You can stop now… you got what you wanted, she's officially freaked out.

“Very well. You should get to bed now, Lady Camilla. Drake and I can finish cleaning up.”

“But--”

“You want to be well rested for the Regatta tomorrow, don't you?”

Myers pouted, looking every bit like a scolded child. “Ok… good night, then…”

She looked to me and I gave her a reassuring smile. “Night, Myers.”

“Night. Good night, Bastien.”

“Good night, Lady Camilla.”

She stepped out of the kitchen, and I headed to the broom closet to grab a mop. I slowly began wiping the floor, feeling Bastien's eyes on the back of my head. The silence began to grow heavy, until I finally turned around only to find him smirking at me.

“What?” I growled.

He shook his head. “Nothing… I was just thinking how close you and Lady Camilla have grown these last couple of weeks.”

“We're just friends.”

“Ah, so you do consider her a friend.”

“No! I- maybe. I don't know. We're just--”

“So you don't consider her a friend.”

“I don't know.” I said through gritted teeth. “It's too soon. I don't know her that well to go as far as calling her a friend.”

“And yet, I think I've seen you smile and laugh more in the presence of this non-friend the last few days than in the last ten years.”

I shrugged. “So?”

“Drake…” his tone softened. I finally looked him in the eye, and saw he was no longer smiling. He looked worried. “She is here for Prince Liam.”

Those words hit me like a punch to the chest. Even though I always repeated them to myself - they'd
become like my bloody mantra these last few days - it still hurt when someone else said them out loud.

“I know.”

“Are you sure?”

“Listen, Bastien. The only reason I even started to spend time with her is because Liam asked me to. He asked me to keep an eye out for her, to keep her out of trouble, to keep her safe.”

“Spoken like a true King's Guard. And as a King's Guard myself, allow me to share something I've learned over the years. We may become King's Guard out of duty to our King and Country, or out of loyalty to a friend.” He gave me a pointed look. “But you'll find out that the more time you spend watching over a person, the more you learn about them. You begin to see a different side to them, a side they may not show to anyone else, and… inevitably, you begin to care for them. Care soon turns to affection, which soon turns to love.”

I scoffed. “There's nothing going on between me and Myers. Yeah, I kinda care about her - for Liam's sake - but--”

“I would take a bullet for King Constantine, and for Prince Liam, not out of duty, but out of love. I love them both, and wouldn't hesitate to give my life for them. That is what happens after 20 years of being a King's Guard.”

“I've known Myers for a little over a month!”

“Which is exactly why I'm worried.” He said simply. “I've known you since you were a boy, Drake. You are almost like a son to me. And I have never seen you get so close to someone so quickly.”

“Bastien…”

“I just don't want to see you get hurt, Drake.” With a final look, he turned and left.

The next morning, before the Regatta, Liam came to my room. “Hey.”

“Hey, man. What's up?”

“I was hoping you could help me with something…”

“Ok…”

“Well, I'd like to surprise Camilla today at the Regatta. She's come all this way for me, excelled at every single event so far, and I'd like to do something to thank her.”

“Something like what?”

“Well… I was hoping you could make something for her. Some American food she'd like and we could all eat at the beach party tonight.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Sadly, nothing comes to mind. I am not very familiar with American cuisine.”

“Hah! Ok, I'll see what I can do.”
“Thank you, Drake. If you need anything, let me know.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it.” We walked out of my room together, him heading for his rooms and I headed to the kitchen.

I opened the fridge, looking around for something I could do. Burgers? Nah, too much work and too many ingredients needed. Pizza? Nah, don’t have time to make the crust from scratch, nor the time to drive down into town to buy it. I was running out of ideas, until I opened the freezer and saw some ground beef and frozen meats. Barbecue and sloppy joes! Heck yeah!

I hadn’t had sloppy joes since I was a kid, and I bet neither has Myers. I took out the ground beef, some chicken, and ribs and set it in the sink to defrost. Then I went to the pantry, grabbing onions, garlic, red peppers, tomato sauce and some slices of cheese, and got to work. This was going to be so good!

Time passed quickly and soon I was at the docks with the catering crew, instructing them on where to leave my food. Suddenly I spotted Maxwell running towards me.

“Drake!” He swerved just in time to avoid crashing into a waiter. “Drake, thank god!”

“What!?” Dread suddenly crept up my back. “What is it? Did something happen to Myers?”

“No, no, Milla is fine!” He stopped to catch his breath. “It’s our crew…”

“What about them?”

“Well, they… sort of… quit.”

“What?”

“Apparently, Bertrand couldn’t pay them up front, so… they quit.”

“So… who’s going to sail the boat? Myers is…” I stopped as I saw his big puppy dog eyes. “Oh no…”

“Please, Drake! You’re the only one who actually knows how to steer a ship! Please!”

“Ugh… fine, fine! But Myers is going to have to help too. We can’t do this just the two of us.”

“Yes, yes!” He said eagerly. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

We walked to the boat, and waited for Myers. She showed up a couple of minutes later, looking very pretty in a simple striped top and navy blue shorts.

As soon as she saw us prepping the boat, she ran towards us, looking around the deck. “Drake? Hey, what are you doing here? And Maxwell, didn’t you leave with Bertrand? And shouldn’t there be more people, like a crew?”

“Yeah, Maxwell.” You have to tell her. “What happened?”

“Well, I have good news and bad news.”

“Bad news first.”

“Ok, that bad news is the actual crew dropped out… something about not paying upfront? But the good news is… we have Drake!” He gestured exaggeratedly to me. “He volunteered to help us out!”
“He volunteered?” Myers eyed me, her eyes twinkling with laughter.

“Maxwell begged me.”

“I thought I was rather dignified.”

“Practically in tears, actually.”

“And you both know about sailing?”

“I used to own several boats, and Drake's an excellent boatsman.”

“Ok, great. Let's do this. Wait, what about Bertrand? Why isn't he here?”

“I believe his exact words were, and I quote, 'Have we fallen so far? Is this what becomes of House Ramsford?' And then he muttered something about ruin and reducing our name to rubble and the I hope he went to get a drink or something after that.”

Wow... you know, for a guy who's always berating and belittling Maxwell, Bertrand's the first one to rage quit when something goes wrong, always leaving Maxwell to try to fix it.

“Wow, Maxwell, I'm sorry.” Myers reached out and gave him a hug. “Don't worry, it'll be fine. I'll help out in any way that I can, even if I don't know anything about sailing.”

“Thanks, Milla.”

“Yeah, well… I'm sorry to say, Myers, you're not going to be cruising around like the other ladies. You're going to have to do some work to help us win. I hope you're up for the job.”

“Always am, Drake. I just hope you can keep up.”

“You're on, Myers.”

“Hey what about Tariq? He looks like a guy who can sail a boat.”

I let out a big, sarcastic laugh, and Myers rolled her eyes.

“Okay, it was only a thought.”

I finished prepping the boat and steered it to the starting line. Soon, the King fired the starting shot, and we were off!

“The wind's changed!”

Maxwell and I hurried to readjust the sails, Maxwell throwing a rope haphazardly at Myers and ordered her to tie it. I was surprised when she managed to tie it into a nice sailors knot.

Soon, we saw the bouy that marked the halfway point. We swerved around it, coming in a little too fast, but soon we were back on track.

“Myers, secure the jib!”

“And that means to…?”

“Catch the wind coming from behind us.”

She raced to the front of the deck to redirect the sail. She adjusted it to catch the wind and soon we
were sailing past Olivia's boat.

The look on her face was priceless.

We crossed the finish line, and Myers ran to me and jumped in my arms. “We did it!”

I was momentarily caught off guard by her momentum, and nearly fell, but managed to catch myself and spin her around. She then let go of me, and ran to hug Maxwell.

“Woohoo!”

“We kicked ass!”

I laughed, shaking my head. *Myers really likes winning*, I thought, remembering how she also celebrated beating me at our ski race.

I went to stand next to her and clapped her shoulder. “You really pulled through for us, Myers.”

“It was a team effort.”

“Hell, yeah!”

As we approached the harbor, Liam and his dad were waiting for us, to offer their congratulations. Soon, we all separated to watch the rest of the races. I went with Liam and the rest of the Royal family, placing our usual bets. For the first time in a long time, I lost, and paid my debt of 10 push ups.

After that, it was time for the beach party. I went out back to the caterers’ tent and grabbed the trays of food. I set them up on a table over in the picnic area, catching a clear view of Myers’ grimace as she tried the caviar. She caught my eye and I waved them over. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the spread.

“I hope you're all hungry, because the real food has arrived!”

“Drake! You're a lifesaver!” Myers reached out to touch one of the trays.

“There's so much of it!” Maxwell commented, jumping giddily.

“Is this… barbecue?” Hana stared open mouthed at the different cuts of meat.

Myers and I shared a look. *Oh, my sweet naive, little child*, she seemed to say.

“Oh, yes! Classic Americana. You've got your pulled pork, chicken kebabs, brisket, ribs, vegetables, and sauces unique to different regions of the world.” I pointed to each of the dishes as I listed them. “And you can't forget the classic sloppy joe.”

“You've literally made me the happiest person on Earth right now.” Myers sat and gingerly took a plate, filling it with a sloppy joe, a couple of ribs and some pork.

“Milla… are you going to eat all of that?” Hana asked, shocked.

Milla looked at her - her mouth wide open ready to take a bite - before digging in. She hummed appreciatively, half her face covered in tomato sauce. “Drake. This. Is. Amazing! I love sloppy joes! They're basically all I ate through middle school.”

“Thank you, Myers. Someone else can appreciate a simple dish.”
“A sloppy… joe?”

“Seasoned ground beef with onions, tomato sauce and whatever else you feel like throwing in there.” I explained to Hana.

Maxwell sat down, filling his hamburger bun with beef and some cheese. “You had me at not fish.”

“It looks messy, but intriguing. It does seem strange to have such casual food here.”

“Liam thought Myers would appreciate it. A little taste of home.”

Myers looked up from her sandwich. “This was his idea?”

“ Mostly.” I grinned. “From a purely selfish angle, I'm not exactly a caviar and oysters kind of guy, so… But, any way, let's dig in!” Maxwell and Myers lifted their head from their plates. “Those of us who haven't already.” I gestured for Hana to sit. “I love barbecues. This reminds me of cookouts on the lawn or summers with the family.”

“Aww.” Myers grinned at me. “Drake, that's so sweet.”

“It is not. Eat your ribs, Myers.” I quipped. She rolled her eyes, but obliged nonetheless.

I filled my plate and dug in. We joked and teased each other as we ate, laughing at Maxwell's face after eating or explaining to Hana how to actually eat a sloppy joe. Soon, most of the food was gone and we were all lying down on a giant towel in the sand.

“That was so good!” Maxwell groaned.

“I'll have to ask the chefs back home to add barbecue chicken to the rotation.” Hana added.

“It really was delicious.” Myers turned to look at me. She touched my arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Thanks, Drake.”

“You're welcome. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to hit the water.”

Maxwell huffed as he stretched out on the sand. “I'm ready to stretch out like a beached whale.”

“Suit yourself. You coming with me, Myers? Hana?”

“Hang on. We need to put on sunscreen before we go.” Hana sat upright and began rummaging through her bag.

“Do we really?”

Myers sat up, placing her elbows on her knees, and stared at the ocean. “I'd love some sunscreen.” She turned to Hana, before resuming her gazing.

She looked… not troubled, but preoccupied, maybe. I nudged her with my shoulder. “Hey. You okay?” I whispered.

Myers raised a corner of her lips, giving me a small half smile. “I'm… I'm fine.”

I was about to ask if she was sure, when Hana shouted “I found it!”, triumphantly swinging the sunscreen in the air.

Myers stood and swiftly removed her top, revealing a light green bikini underneath. She proceeded
to wiggle out of her shorts, and I had to turn away in order not to gawk at her. I felt heat rising to my cheeks, looking out of the corner of my eye every now and then as she rubbed sunscreen on her arms, her torso, her legs - *wow, she had great legs!* - before turning to Hana and doing her back.

“Drake, are you coming?”

“Uh… yeah.” I stood and took off my shirt. I couldn't help the surge of manly pride as I took in her reaction - her eyes roaming appreciatively over my torso, before looking away, embarrassed.

She shot me a furtive glance, biting her lip, before stepping towards me. “Here. I'll do you.”

“This really doesn't seem necessary.”

“Sun safety is no joke.”

I rolled my eyes, grinning, before turning around. Myers began applying sunscreen all over my back, gently massaging it into my skin. I… may have flexed slightly, for her benefit, as her hands roamed up and down my shoulders, my back and my spine. “Is the lady satisfied?”

I turned, noticing the slight pink tinge on her cheeks and her neck. Myers refused to look me in the, instead dotting five drops of sunscreen on my face - on my forehead, my nose, my chin and my cheeks.

“Spread it out.” She ordered. “Or you'll burn there.”

“Yes, ma'am.” I rubbed the sunscreen onto my face. “I assume you want me to do your back?”

“Actually, yes, I do “ She turned, lifting her long, brown hair, exposing her long, elegant neck and her shoulders.

I almost failed to stifle my groan. “You're killing me, Myers.”

I began massaging the sunscreen on the her back, marveling at the feel of her soft skin under my rough fingertips, admiring the graceful curves of her neck and shoulders, down to her waist--

“Ready to go?”

“Uh, yeah. More than ready. I hope you're not wearing that swimsuit for nothing, Myers.” I challenged, noticing the wicked gleam in her eye come to life. “Who's with me?”

“Me!” Hana yelled.

“Let's do this!” Myers took off running, immediately diving into the water under a wave.

Hana and I soon followed, Hana squealing and jumping back as her toes touched the water. “It's colder than I thought!”

“You just need to adjust. Here, let me help.” I splashed her and soon it was her and Myers against me.

“Okay, okay!” I coughed. “I get it!”

They stopped splashing me and soon, we were all just floating in the water.

Myers sighed contentedly. “I missed the ocean.”
“Did you grow up near it, Milla?”

“Yeah… I'm from this little town in Jersey that's right on the coast. And to top it off, our apartment was two blocks away from the beach. I remember me and my friends used to sneak into a private beach that was near a hotel.”

“And you never got caught?”

“Not once.” She grinned, floating gently in the water.

“That sounds lovely. Growing up in a small town, with close friends, just getting into all kinds of adventures.” Hana said wistfully.

Myers snorted. “It's not all it's cracked up to be. I remember by the time I was in high school, I couldn't wait to get out of there.”

“Why?” Hana probed.

She looked thoughtful. “It just wasn't for me.”

I could sense she didn't really want to talk about her hometown, for whatever reason. Maybe she was just a private person, since as far as I could tell, she had yet to mention her family to anyone other than me. I felt sort of proud about that… that, for some reason, she actually trusted me. Anyway, I decided to bail her out before Hana could ask more questions. “Hey, Myers.” I called to her. “Let's race.”

“You're a glutton for punishment today.”

“We'll see how scary you are without Hana helping you out.”

“All right, you're on.”

“I'll be the judge!”

“We'll swim onto the far end of this beach and back to these rocks.”

“Agreed.”

“Ready… set… channel your inner mermaid!”

I began swimming as fast as I could, kicking my legs and pushing myself through the water. Myers was hot in my tail, but in the end I won.

“Yes! I am Triton, King of the Ocean!” I raised my arms in the air triumphantly.

“Well done, Triton.” She raised her hand and high fived me.

“Huh… I was sure you'd be a sore loser. I mean, I've seen how much you like to win.”

“Yeah, I'm competitive, but I'd like to think of myself as a graceful loser.”

I regarded her with raised eyebrows. “You really are, Myers.”

Her face suddenly changed, contorting with pain. “Ow! Drake, Drake!”

I rushed over to her and let her lean against me, her arms grasping me tightly around my neck.
“What?! What?!”

“Cramp! Cramp! My leg!” She yelped.

I picked her up quickly, but gently, and carried back to shore. She buried her face in my neck, hissing and taking shallow breaths. I set her down on the sand, and she covered her eyes with her forearms.

“Which--”

“My left leg, my calf!”

I set to work massaging the tight muscles, rubbing it in soothing circles, adding steady pressure. From the corner of my eye, I saw Maxwell and Hana rushing towards us, then Liam and Bertrand.

She whined and hissed in pain, and I drew my attention back to her, maintaining the pressure, working her calf. Slowly I felt her muscles relax. I felt her sigh, and take deep breaths, letting them out slowly.

“Milla!” Liam knelt towards her, taking one of her hands. “What happened? Is she okay?”

“Milla!” Hana and Maxwell shouted.

“Camilla, are you hurt?” Bertrand asked.

“Liam, guys, it's okay. It was just a cramp.” She turned to me. “Thank you, Drake. That hurt like a bitch.”

Liam laughed, squeezing her hand, and Bertrand shook his head. *Oh, the profanity*, I could hear him saying.

“You're welcome.” I said sheepishly.

Between me and Liam, we helped her stand. She placed one arm around my neck, the other around Liam's, and we walked towards a table. I placed my arm around her waist to steady her, and saw she was placing most of her weight on her right leg, limping slightly.

“Shall I carry you?” Liam offered.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Bertrand gleam with pride and rolled my eyes. He was probably ecstatic Liam was paying her this much attention. *Sure, she could've drowned for all he cares, as long as it was the Prince giving her mouth to mouth. Nobles.*

“No, that's okay.”

“I insist.” Liam shot me a pleading look, and I let go of Myers’ waist.

“You probably should let him, Myers. It wouldn't do you any good to strain that leg anymore than you have to.”

She rolled her eyes affectionately. “Fine.”

Liam smiled as he placed an arm beneath her legs and the other on her back, bridal style. *How very fitting.*

I shook my head and headed back to where Maxwell and Hana. I stayed with them, till Maxwell left
to go speak with Bertrand.

“It was lucky you were here, Drake. God knows what would've happened if…” Hana trailed off worryingly.

“Nah.” I placed a hand on her shoulder. “It was just a cramp, probably from the race.”

“Or maybe because we jumped on the water too soon after eating.”

“Sure…” I didn't know anyone still believed that; in my opinion, it was something parents told their kids so they could relax for awhile before having to go in the water with them.

“Ugh, I can't believe the Prince is still fawning over Camilla. It was only a cramp, for God's sake, it's not like she drowned.” Olivia's voice carried from the refreshments table. “I wish I was that good an actress.”

“Je ne sais pas. I don't think Camilla would fake a cramp only to get the Prince's attention.” Kiara said.

“I don't believe so, either.” Penelope added. “She doesn't seem like the kind of person who would resort to such cheap tricks.”

“Well, of course you wouldn't. Neither of you are so bright to have thought of it yourselves; of course you wouldn't think another would be able to do so.”

“Oh, I can't believe how rotten she is!” Hana clenched her fists, frowning. It was the first time I'd seen her angry, and I couldn't help smiling. Even when she's mad, she looks pretty. “Milla would never do that.”

I shrugged. “It's clear she feels threatened by Myers, and is trying to turn the other ladies against her.”

“Thankfully, it doesn't seem like it's working.”

Huh… “Aren't you upset about that? I mean, technically Myers is your competition as well…”

She smiled warmly. “Yes, but more than that, she's my friend. Milla's been nothing but kind and supportive of me since the moment we met.”

That sounds like Myers.

“Besides, I think we both know the odds of the Prince actually choosing me are slim to none, so why not make my peace with that and be happy for my friend?”

“That's very noble of you, Hana.”

“It's just common sense, really.”

I followed her gaze to where Liam and Myers were sitting, talking quietly.

“They make a lovely couple.”

I tried to drown the wave of disappointment that seemed to course through me. “Yeah…”

I turned my attention back to Hana, and soon we were joined by Maxwell again. He looked a bit down - Bertrand must have been berating him for something again - so we joked and teased each
other trying to cheer him up.

The afternoon passed quickly, Liam leaving Myers to tend to his other suitors, Maxwell leaving to get Myers to do some campaigning for allies, Hana leaving to do… something, and I found myself sitting on the beach, watching the sun go down. I didn't mind, though. It was good to get some time to myself.

“Hey, stranger.” Myers sat next to me, landing on the sand with a thump.

*So much for alone time.*

“How's your leg?”

“Fine, now. Thanks for saving me… again.” She bumped me with the shoulder.

I snorted. “I'd hardly call that 'saving you'.”

“Suit yourself. I'm grateful nonetheless.”

She turned her gaze to the water, staring at it with an intensity I'd never seen before.

“Myers.”

“Yeah?”

How should I phrase this? There was something going on with her today. It was like she wasn't fully here; like her body was here, but her mind was somewhere far away… There was something bothering her. Instead of telling her all this, I opted for eloquently stating, “You're weird today.”

Her brows furrowed, and yet she gave me a whimsical smile. “What?”

“You're… you've been sorta distracted today. You okay?”

“I'm…” she hesitated, her eyes shifting back to the water for an instant, before landing on the ground. “I feel weird today. I woke up weird today.” She shook her head.

“Did something happen?” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Did you call your mom?”

She laughed and shoved me. “No! It's not that. It's… it's going to sound stupid and you're totally going to laugh if I tell you.”

“Probably, yeah. But you can still tell me.”

She regarded me for a second, her deep, dark eyes boring into mine. “Okay. I kinda… had this weird dream last night. Maybe it was because we ate too late, or the water war or…” she trailed off.

“How should I phrase this? There was something going on with her today. It was like she wasn't fully here; like her body was here, but her mind was somewhere far away… There was something bothering her. Instead of telling her all this, I opted for eloquently stating, “You're weird today.”

Her brows furrowed, and yet she gave me a whimsical smile. “What?”

“You're… you've been sorta distracted today. You okay?”

“I'm…” she hesitated, her eyes shifting back to the water for an instant, before landing on the ground. “I feel weird today. I woke up weird today.” She shook her head.

“Did something happen?” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Did you call your mom?”

She laughed and shoved me. “No! It's not that. It's… it's going to sound stupid and you're totally going to laugh if I tell you.”

“Probably, yeah. But you can still tell me.”

She regarded me for a second, her deep, dark eyes boring into mine. “Okay. I kinda… had this weird dream last night. Maybe it was because we ate too late, or the water war or…” she trailed off.

“Anyway, I was with my friends at this hotel - I think it was a hotel, anyway - and we were dancing in this grand ballroom, when my friend Carrie tells us she's going to the pool. Turns out 'the pool' is this massive sort of one-way infinity pool on the top of the hotel. And it had this tunnel that was the only way to get back to the first floor of the hotel, for some reason. Like, if you went up there, *the only way* to get back down to the lobby was through this underwater tunnel.”

“Okay…”

“Anyway, for some reason, there was this guy I really wanted to impress, and he dared me to go to the infinity pool and come back through the tunnel.”
“And you can never back down from a good dare.”

She nodded. “And I can never back down from a good dare. So I went with Carrie, and we dove together. She literally carried me on her back, and dove all the way down and through the tunnel. I remember being underwater, and holding my breath, but when I ran out, I could still breathe underwater… And the water was so clear, and so blue… it was so beautiful.” She turned back to look at the vast ocean.

“And that's it?”

“No. When we got back to the lobby, the guy was all ‘that doesn't count, your friend helped you, la la la la la’. So I went back up there, intending to dive by myself. But when I got there, I started to panic. I didn't want to go through the tunnel again, I was scared I'd run out of breath faster, that I wouldn't be able to breathe underwater this time… I went to talk to the lifeguard, the people in charge, anyone, asking them if there was another way down - there had to be another way down - I told them I was feeling unsafe, that I did not want to do it, that they couldn't make me do it… and then I woke up. But I woke up with this sour taste in my mouth, and this awful feeling of impotence, angry with myself and the people in my dream for trying to make me do something I didn't want to.”

“Yeah, but it was just a dream, right? I mean, you woke up, and that's that.”

She hummed. “I don't know… I'm still trying to figure out what it means.”

I snorted, and she glared at me. “I'm sorry!” I laughed. “I just didn't peg you as the type to search for the meanings of her dreams.”

She rolled her eyes. “I am, but not in the way you think. I don't believe clear water means prosperity and murky water means hard times ahead, like my grandma used to say. But I do believe that our dreams are subconscious manifestations of our innermost thoughts, feelings and/or desires. Things latent within us that we've repressed, or that we don't realize we're feeling.”

“How very Freudian of you.”

“Hah!”

“Anyway, to me it's pretty clear. Maybe you feel someone's making you do something you don't want to.” A thought came to mind. I frowned. “Has Bertrand - or Maxwell--”

“Stop right there.” She interrupted me. “Bertrand and Maxwell have never pushed me to do anything I'm not comfortable with. Yes, they both want me to win, Bertrand loves to give me instructions and tell me what to do, how to behave - but the second I ask him to stop, he does. They've treated me with nothing but respect.”

I let out a sigh of relief. Why was I relieved?

“I think…” she trailed off, and I followed her gaze to see Liam over by the refreshment table, talking to Olivia.

As if he felt her eyes on him, Liam met her gaze and flashed her a brilliant smile. The corner of her lips quirked up in a small half smile that failed to reach her eyes.

She broke eye contact and turned back to me. “I think that, maybe, the person that's making me do something I don't really want to is… me.”

“What…?”
She rose quickly. “Nevermind. Forget you heard that. I'll, uh… see you later.”

She quickly trotted over to the other side of the beach, where Maxwell and Bertrand were, leaving me very confused.

Was she… having seconds thoughts about the competition?
A couple days after the beach party, Liam and I were training in the gym. He was really distracted as we sparred, so much so I was able to knock his feet out from under him. He fell to the floor with a thud.

“What's up with you today? You're not even fighting back! That's the third time today I've knocked your royal ass down.”

He huffed a laugh, shaking his head. “I'm sorry. I guess I am still trying to process everything.” He sighed, and I knelt next to him. “I knew I was going to be King one day… I just didn't expect it would happen so soon.”

“Eh, I wouldn't worry about it, if I were you. You're going to be the greatest king Cordonia's ever seen.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

I clapped his back.

“Do you think she has what it takes to be queen?” He asked, and I knew he was talking about Myers.

“I… don't know. She's surprised me by getting this far. I didn't think she'd last a week, to be honest.”

“I remember. I'm glad to see you're getting along now. You're good opinion means a lot to me.”

I hummed thoughtfully. “Yeah, well. You were right; she's smart and honest and kind. And I don't know if she'd be a good queen, but I know she'd try her best to do a good job, a job worthy of you and of the people of Cordonia.”

“Do you think she wants to be queen?”

*I think the person who's making me do something I don't want to… is me.* Myers’ words echoed in my head.

I sighed. *No... I don't think she does.* And yet… “Well, she wouldn't be here if she didn’t.” I argued, trying to convince myself as well as Liam. “She knew what she was getting into when she signed up for this.”

He regarded me thoughtfully. “You’re right. Thank you, Drake.”

“Anytime.” We stood and hugged it out. I could tell he was freaking out over his father's announcement, even if he didn't show it. “Feeling better?”

“A bit…”

*Oh, no... I know that look.* He was pursing his lips, staring intently at the floor. “What else is bothering you?”

“Nothing—”

“Liam.”
He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “I think… something happened with Milla.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something happened in Lythikos. She's… distant is the wrong word… I can't explain it, actually. She's nothing but kind and attentive when we speak. I know she's concerned about me, always asking if I'm okay, if I need to talk…”

“Okay…?”

“But it feels… different.”

“Different how?”

“Different in… a friendly way. It feels as if she's asking those questions out of concern for a friend.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You think Myers is friend-zoning you?”

“I… I don't know. It just feels different.”

“Is this just how you feel or did something happen to make you think she just wants to be friends?”

“Well…” he looked awkward and uncomfortable. “during the ball in Lythikos, I invited her up to my suite, but before she could answer, we were interrupted by Lady Penelope.”

*Oh, no…*

“After that ball ended, I waited up for her until a little after midnight, when I received a text from her, apologizing for not being able to make it, since she was rather tired.”

*She lied.* I froze for a moment.

*Why would she lie to him? And worse, why would she pass on some alone time with Liam, to go down to a dusty cellar to drink with me?*

“And at the beach party… well, I invited her to come with me to the Forgotten Falls, but…”

“Ok, back up for a second. Did you invite her to the falls before or after her leg cramped up?”

Realization dawned on him, his eyes widening, and he covered his face with his hand. “After.” he admitted sheepishly.

“Ok, so you can probably understand why she wasn't really feeling going on a hike. I mean, she was literally limping. You had to carry her to the table.”

“Yes, I know. It was foolish. But there's still Lythinos…”

*Yes, there's still Lythikos. Wait…*

“Did you ask her to your suite before or after Olivia kissed you?”

“Do you think she was upset by it?”

*Ok, so… after.*

“I don't know. Have you talked to her about it?”
“I didn't think I'd have to. I thought I'd made my feelings known to her. She has to know Olivia is just a friend.”

Oh, Liam… I fought the urge to facepalm myself.

“Ok, first of all, she doesn't 'have to know’. At the end of the day, this is still a competition and she knows you have to pick a suitor that would make a good queen, regardless of feelings. So the fact that you do have feelings for her and she knows that doesn't guarantee her anything.”

“So you think she rejected my offer because she was upset about Olivia?”

“I honestly don't know. I'm just saying don't dismiss the possibility that she was, only because you've told her how you feel.”

“You're right.”

“And… you should talk to her. Explain things. She clearly likes you; she wouldn't be here if she didn't. Maybe she was just… hurt.”

“I never meant to hurt her.”

“I know, buddy.” I clapped her shoulder. “That's just what happens when you have multiple women vying for your attention.”

Liam punched my shoulder, and we both laughed.

*That has to be it, I thought. She was hurt over the kiss, and just didn't feel like hanging out with Liam. That has to be it.*

A week later, we were driving to Applewood Manor for the Apple Festival.

“So… what do you want to do tomorrow?”

I groaned. “You had to bring that up, didn't you?”

Liam laughed. “Of course. It's not everyday your best friend turns 26.”

*I want to find my sister…*

It hit me then how alone I felt. I was dreading this birthday, because it'd be the first that I'd be spending all alone. Mom was on the ranch, and Savannah…

“Drake.” I felt Liam's hand on my shoulder. “I'm here for you.”

“I know. Thanks.”

“Bastien is doing everything he can to find her. We will find her.”

“I… hope so.”

“I promise.” His eyes were filled with determination. I really wanted to believe him.

I felt a lump settling in my throat, so I nodded and turned back to the window.
I woke up the next morning, already wishing the day was over. I spent almost all morning just laying on my bed, staring at the ceiling, until my stomach began to ache from hunger.

I got up and headed for the kitchen. I was barely out of my room when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Happy birthday, Drake.”

I turned to see Bastien, who wrapped his arms around me in a warm hug, clapping me in the back.

“Your father would be proud.”

“Would he?” I raised a brow. *Would he really? After I failed to protect his only daughter?*

“Don't start with that. He'd be proud to see the strong, loyal man you've become.”

I looked away. “Thank you. Hey shouldn't you be with Liam at the festival?”

“I'm going right now.” He pulled me into a hug once more, before walking away.

I finally made it to the kitchen, grabbed some ham and cheese, made myself a sandwich and headed back to my room.

My phone rang. I looked at the screen and the corner of my mouth quirked up in a smile.

“Hello?”

“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Drake! Happy birthday to you!”

I laughed, blinking rapidly as my eyes welled up. “Hi, mom.”

“Hi, baby. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“I miss you so much. You know, I actually woke up today feeling the contractions again. Just like I did 26 years ago.”

“Well, try not to hurt yourself… I really miss you too.”

She laughed. “Oh, my baby. How are you doing? Are you okay?”

“I'm fine, mom.”

“Okay…” She knew I was lying. I lied not to worry her, but she always knew anyway. She tried changing the subject. “Do you have anything special planned for today?”

“Oh… just drinks with Liam. You know everything's pretty hectic with the festival and the whole competition. I'm actually amazed he found some time to hang out.”

“Well, I'm not. You are his best friend after all.”

An awkward silence ensued. I knew she wanted to ask about Savannah. But she didn't.

“Okay, baby. I just wanted to wish you happy birthday, and to let you know how proud I am to be your mother.” She sniffled. “I have loved watching grow into a smart, caring, loyal young man. And I known your Father is looking down on you with pride.”
“Thanks, mom. I… love you, too.”

“Okay, baby. I'll let you go now. Try to have some fun today.”

“I'll try. Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, honey.” My phone beeped as she hung up.

I slumped back in the bed, stuffing my face with my sandwich. I laid there, doing nothing, for god knows how long, before finally grabbing my phone to check the time. 11 am...

The Apple Festival would be in full swing, with the suitors tasting the first apples of the season, followed by brunch. Today, especially, I did not feel like sucking up to nobles, so… back to the ceiling it is.

A couple of hours later, I woke up to the sound of someone knocking on my door. *When did I doze off?* I reached for my phone as the knocking grew more insistent.

“Yeah?”

“Drake? Can I come in?”

“Sure.”

Maxwell stepped into my room while I continued to search for my phone. *Fuck it.*

“Were you sleeping?”

I sat up on the bed as a yawn escaped my lips. “Uh… yeah.”

“Oh! Sorry to wake you! I didn't know! I just wanted to come by to wish you happy birthday!”

“Yeah, thanks, man.”

I stood and we hugged it out.

“Hey, what time is it?”

“2 pm. Brunch is over, but the party's still going on in the gardens.”

“Wow… ok. I guess I'll go find Liam.” I sighed. Gotta save him from those nobles.

“I'll go with you! Last I saw, he was with Milla.”

I smiled as I pictured Myers’ face after tasting the Cordonian Ruby. “Hey, how'd she do at the apple tasting?”

“Surprisingly well… she just smiled and nodded for the cameras.”

“No spitting or throwing up?”

“Nope.”

As we entered the gardens, we were approached by Hana.

“Hello, Drake! I haven't seen you all morning.”
“That's because he doesn't leave his room when it's his b--”

I clamped my hands over Maxwell's mouth, glaring at him. I turned back to Hana. “What Maxwell meant was, I wasn't feeling well. I actually just woke up.”

Hana immediately scrunched her face with worry. “Oh, Drake, I'm sorry! Are you okay? What is it?”

“Nothing, don't worry about it.”

We were almost to the gazebo, when Myers spotted me. Her face lit up as she rushed past Liam, arms wide open.

“Drake!”

“Why do you look so happy to see me? Oof!” I nearly lost my balance when she crashed into me, wrapping her arms around me neck. The scent of her hair wafted around me - some kind of fruity, coconuty, tropical smell - as I looked to Liam, who was smiling warmly as me. “Oh no… god, no…”

“Yes!” She looked up at me. “Happy birthday!”

She let me go as Liam stepped towards us. I whirled on him.

“Liam, you told her?”

Liam raised his hands in surrender. “My deepest apologies, Drake. I forgot it was such a closely guarded secret.”

“It's fine. It doesn't matter because this is the last we're ever going to speak of it ever again.”

“You don't want to do something fun on your birthday?” Hana pouted. “Even I was allowed petit fours and and hour playing with my father's cat each year.”

“Man, Drake, even Hana feels bad for you.”

“I don't need fun to enjoy myself.” I glared at each of them. I could feel myself getting defensive. “Besides, what could you jokers possibly want to do that would be fun for me?”

“Are all Americans as fussy about birthdays as Drake is, Milla?”

Myers' eyebrows shot up. “Drake's an American?”

I rolled my eyes. “Drake's an American?”

“Where from?”

“Texas.”

Her eyes widened, and I could practically see the wheels turning in her head, the little lightbulb light up on top of it. “I've got an idea! Do you have American Western themed bars here in Cordonia?”

Maxwell was already typing on his phone. “Checking on my phone now…”

“How about that, Drake? Whiskey, mechanical bull riding, and some good, ol American fun?” She looked at me with her cute puppy dog eyes, and I found myself fighting hard to resist.
“I… guess it doesn't sound horrible… but I can't ask you guys to sneak out for that.”

“Nonsense. I'd love to.” Liam tsked his tongue, annoyed.

“Drake, we snuck out for cronuts.” Myers gave me an exasperated look. “Of course we'd sneak out to celebrate your birthday. We're your friends!”

“Exactly! And I'd love to learn more about Milla's American culture!” Hana clapped her hands excitedly.

“And I'll take any excuse to dance and drink the night away! Besides, I just found the perfect place!”

I looked at all of them, disbelieving. I just couldn't believe they'd really do this for me. “I don't know…” I looked to Myers. “Do you really want to do this, Camilla?”

She blinked a couple times as she noticed I'd called her by her first name.

“I think we almost have to, with that outfit she's got on!”

Myers looked down at her dress and winked at Hana. Then she looked me straight in the eye. “I say… we're going out tonight!”

Maxwell and Hana whooped, and Liam shook my shoulders, while Myers simply watched, an affectionate smirk adorning her face.

_Something tells me this is going to be a night to remember…_

That night, we managed to successfully sneak out and soon, we were driving to the bar.

As soon as we arrived, Maxwell slammed the double doors open and screamed, “The party had arrived!”

I looked around the small watering hole, taking in the rustic decor, the wooden tables, and of course, the bull.

“Oh? Where?” Hana looked around the bar.

“It's us, Hana. He means us.”

“Exactly, my good man. As in, we are the life of the party!”

“We are?”

“Well, some of us.”

“I can't believe you actually talked me into this.” I facepalmed myself.

“Ooookay!” Myers stepped up next to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. “We have to get you a birthday drink.”

“I'll buy the first round.” Liam offered.

Myers looked appalled. “On his birthday? Any bartender with a heart would give him a free drink to start the night off, don't you think?”

I looked at Liam, then Maxwell, the three of us sharing a look.
“Free drinks are something that happen when you're a woman, Camilla.” Why did I keep calling her by her first name? It seemed to just slip out! Maybe I'm a little sensitive - what with this birthday and all... I shook my head. Anyway… “Even on my twenty first birthday, I didn't get so much as a free drop from anyone.”

“Wow… that is so sad! Well, let me see what I can do. Come on, Drake.”

She took my hand and started literally pulling me towards the bar. Before we got there, she tied her hair in a messy - and kinda sexy - bun, that showed off her neck, chest and shoulders.

She then proceeded to lean on the bar, flashing the bartender a beaming smile. “Hey, bartender.” She waited until she had his full attention, “My friend here is celebrating his birthday. Can we get a free drink on the house?”

I saw as the guy considered her, eyeing her up and down, as she looked him straight in the eye. He gave her a slight smirk and nodded. The guy didn't even look at me! What the hell?!

“What'll he have?” The bartender leaned on the bar, closer to her.


“And for you?”

“It's not my birthday.” She smiled coyly.

“It is to me.”

*What did that even mean?! Like… if you wanna give her a free drink, 'cause she's hot then whatever, it's your job you risk losing, but don't use lines like that!* 

She nodded. “Make that two, then.”

“You've got great taste.”

I rolled my eyes. *Will you just shut up and make the drinks already?*

“Thanks.”

“Ahem!” A patron behind us cleared his throat loudly. He glared at the bartender, who quickly turned and began working on our drinks. Myers turned to me, grinning smugly.

“It's like everything I know is wrong.” I said, sarcasm oozing from my tone.

“Heh. Good of you to admit it.”

I snapped my fingers. “No, wait. I figured it out. Of course he'll do it for you! No one says no to a hot girl.”

The smug grin on her face seemed to widen. “Drake… you definitely just call me hot.”

Oh, shit… “I just meant… from his perspective.”

“Mm-hmm…” she crossed her arms as the bartender came back with our drinks.

“Oh, will you just get our drinks already? You're holding up the line.”
She took the drinks, flashing the bartender another brilliant smile, before handing one to me. She raised her glass and clicked it with mine.

“Heh. It's really starting to feel like my birthday now.” I took as sip. “I gotta admit, I thought you'd make me suffer. Order one of those prissy, fruity cocktails.” Although watching that whole exchange was cringe worthy enough.

She shrugged. “It's your birthday. Everyone deserves at least one day out of the year where people are nice to them.”

“A guy could get used to this.”

She placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed, giving me a small half smile.

“There you two are!” Hana called us to the table.

“Liam just paid the guy operating the mechanical bull. He wants Drake to ride!”


“I figured you wouldn't want to, but Liam says you're something of an expert.”

“Is that true?” Myers looked to me.

“There's only one way you'd find out, and I'm not nearly drunk enough to make a fool of myself.”

“Well, in that case… I'd better go back to the bar!” Myers teased, effectively getting a groan out of me.

“Personally, I'd like to see Hana give it a try…” Maxwell shot a look… I'd never actually seen before… It wasn't creepy, it was… endearing.

Hana seemed horrified. “Oh, no! I couldn't possibly! I wouldn't even know where to begin!”

“Yeah, that's why it'd be fun!”

Myers rolled her eyes.

“Okay! Tie breaker vote! Milla, Drake or Hana?”

“Hmm…” Myers brought her hand to her chin, before fixing me with a devilish grin. “Well… you are the birthday boy, Drake.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you keep telling me.”

Maxwell whooped. “Drake! Drake! Drake!” He began jumping, shaking me.

“Okay, okay! I'll do it! Just quiet down! You're… kind of embarrassing me.”

“I think that's kind of the whole point.”

I glared at Maxwell as I got on the bull. “How do you start this thing?” The bull kicked into gear, starting out slow. I rode it easily, rolling my hips as it bucked and kicked. “Hah! Not even a challenge.” As soon as I said that, the bull started to buck faster. “Ok… that's a little harder…”

“Come on, birthday boy! You can last longer than that!” Myers shouted.
I shot her a look as I tightened my legs around the bull. From the corner of my eye, I saw Myers biting her lip, her eyes roaming my body. I grinned, remembering that same look from the beach party -- when suddenly the bull spun around and bucked hard, throwing me off!

I barreled into Myers, landing on top of her. We shared a look, before she burst out laughing. I chuckled, and moved to stand. “Whoa. Sorry, Myers.”

Her laughter died down a bit. “Heh. My own fault for making you do it.”

I offered her my hand, pulling her up. “True.”

At Maxwell's suggestion - or insistence, in my opinion - we grabbed more drinks and hit the dance floor.

We danced in a circle, Maxwell in the middle, when Myers danced her way over to me, and Liam took Hana's hand and twirled her.

“I'm, uh… not really the kind of guy who dances.” I said, shifting awkwardly from side to side.

“Really? Just sway side to side, and you're basically set.”

“Really? According to Maxwell, there's more to it than that…”

I pointed to him, as he dropped to the floor and began breaking out his moves.

“I'm never going to be like Maxwell.”

We both looked to Maxwell, who was now approaching a group of girls. “Ladieees!”

Myers snorted. “I think the world can only handle one Maxwell.”

“Heh.”

“Besides, there's a reason I picked you to dance with, and not him.”

“Didn't want to try to keep up with the acrobatics?”

She shrugged. “Maybe I just like your style better.”

I rolled my eyes. “Come on, Myers, it's more like a lack of style than anything else.”

“Is this a new, humble Drake?”

“Only on the dance floor, my one weakness.”

She stepped closer. “I thought I was your one weakness.”

“I…” Uh… I could feel blood rushing up to my face, all the way to my ears.

“I mean, I'm the only one who doesn't get away with anything…” she continued, and I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. “And I got you out here tonight, didn't I?”

I quirked the corner of my lips into a small half smile. “As far as weaknesses go, you're not the worst, Myers.”

She smiled warmly at me, stepping closer to me as we danced well into the night. Soon, the bar was closing and we were getting ready to leave.
“We shut this place down!” Maxwell yelled, happily drunk. Truth be told, we were all a little drunk, even Hana.

Myers placed an arm around her shoulders, shaking her up a bit. “So…? What did you think, Hana?”

“This was scary… but a fun kind of scary?”

“You'll learn to love going out. Just wait till next time.” Maxwell winked at her.

“Next time?” Hana's jaw fell.

“I hope there's a next time!” Liam grinned at her. “As long as we can find another way to sneak out.”

Myers bumped him with her shoulder. “We'll make it happen.”

I watched their whole exchange with a small smile on my face. For the first time in a long time, I'd actually enjoyed my birthday. I kind of didn't want it to end. It started out as such a miserable day, but as it went on, I actually had fun… with my friends. They really helped take my mind off my dad and the things we used to do, and Savannah...

“Not ready for your birthday to be over?” Myers voice startled me out of my thoughts, making me jump. “Whoa! Easy there, cowboy. It's just me.”

“I know… and maybe.” I looked at her, and saw her staring warmly back. I looked away. “You know… I used to dread my birthday when I was a kid. My parents tried hard, really hard, to give me the best birthday they could.” I looked at Liam. “But I kind of always knew that whatever they did, Prince Liam's parents were going to top it.” I shook my head. It wasn't resentment… not exactly. I never envied Liam. “My parents got me a toy T-Rex? Liam's parents got the whole palace staff to dress up like dinosaurs for his birthday. My parents got me a cake shaped like a car? Liam's parents got him a cake the size of a car.”

“Drake…” Seriously? The “aww” voice again? I met her gaze, nearly losing myself in those deep brown eyes. She squeezed my arm. “That must've been hard.”

I blinked. “Sure… I mean, it wasn't easy, but I knew we were lucky to live at the palace, and even be invited to Liam's birthdays. So I never really cared about this stuff. Never saw birthday parties as competition. But… they were hell on my parents. They knew they could never even come close to what my best friend was getting.”

She gave me a small half smile, and squeezed my hand. “So when I was nine or ten, I made the decision to stop trying. No more birthday parties, no more cakes, no more presents… all I wanted was to spend the day with my family, doing something fun.” I smiled, thinking fondly of the camping trips, the barbecues, the days at the beach, or fishing with my dad... “My parents loved it. Made them feel they could really give me something special.”

“Aww…”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm a total marshmallow.” I nudged her. “Just don't tell anyone else.”

“No promises…” she gave me a cheeky grin, “but…” she looked to the ground.

“But…?” I prompted.

“Drake, I hope I didn't get in the way of any family traditions tonight.” She looked at me
apologetically.

“Nah. My family's not here anymore, so I wasn't really expecting to do anything tonight. Anyway, tonight has been… it's been really fun. And if I'm being honest with myself, it felt a lot more like those special birthdays with my family than I thought it could…”

“Drake… I--” she looked to the floor, shaking her head slightly. “I'm happy you're happy.” She looked back at me, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

I stared at her, searching her eyes. Those beautiful, deep, so very expressive brown eyes. They were staring back at me, also searching my face for something. As time passed, they went from inquisitive to nervous.

“This is you happy… right?”

I chuckled. “About as happy as I get.” I rubbed my neck, suddenly nervous. I looked to Liam, noticing he was watching our whole exchange curiously. “Anyway, we should, uh… call it a night.”

Myers glanced at Liam. “Yeah…” He gave her a warm smile, before turning back to Maxwell and Hana. As soon as his eyes were off us, I felt Myers’ arm on my neck, pulling me into a tight hug. I breathed in the scent of her hair, as she whispered into my ear, “I'm here for you… anytime.”

She gave me a quick peck on the cheek, before pulling back. My mouth opened in surprise. “Myers!” I looked frantically back to our group, but they were already out the door. I turned back to her, and while she was looking pretty pleased with herself, her eyes held a hint of vulnerability. “...Thanks.” I gestured to the door. “We should go…”

“Yeah, let's go. Happy birthday, Drake.”

I let myself give her a last one-armed hug, before we headed out the door and back to the palace.
In a Different World

Chapter Notes

Yay! This is one of my favorite chapters in Book 1, and I hope I did it justice! I hope you enjoy and please leave a comment or a review with your thoughts!

Throughout this whole competition, I'd never seen Myers look as uncomfortable and out of place as she did now.

It was the day of the big hunt, and we were riding on the mountain trail. While Myers looked very pretty in her blazer and riding boots, and her face was perfectly calm, it was her eyes that gave her away. They darted ever so often to the horse, as she patted it nervously every now and then. Liam noticed it, too. Every few minutes he'd turn to look at her, until his Father or the Queen demanded his attention.

The woman was unafraid of the nobles at court, of beating the Queen at croquet, of standing up to Olivia and of sneaking out of the palace… but get her on a horse, and she was as wide eyed and skittish as a baby deer.

I frowned as Olivia approached her, ready to step in, but they seemed to be talking cordially. Olivia even smiled… which I couldn't tell if it was a good thing or bad thing. Then, she rode along and Hana took her place next to Myers. Myers immediately sighed in relief, smiling at Hana. They talked briefly - Hana showing off her riding skills, and attempting to teach them to Myers - before she was called away by Lady Kiara and Lady Penelope.

A panicked looked flashed briefly in Myers’ eyes, before she closed them, taking a deep, steadying breath. I rode up to her.

“Hey, Myers! There you are!” Hey eyes once again conveyed her relief, and she smiled warmly at me. “You look… very dignified today.” I complimented, trying to boost her confidence a little.

“Hey, Drake. Thanks.”

“You okay?”

“I'm fine.” She let out a breath, her eyes darting to her horse. “It's just…”

“Let me guess… you're a little nervous about the 900 pound mammal under you?”

“Yeah… I guess I thought it would be easier… given how much I loved horses when I was little, I thought this would be a dream come true, but when I got to the stables I kept thinking about…” she looked away.

“About…?”

“About the last time I was there…”

Oh.
“And I guess I'm just… a little nervous. I mean, yeah, this girl's beautiful,” she patted her horse's neck as she rambled, “but she is a living, breathing, wild-at-heart animal, who also gets nervous, or could get spooked or—”

“Whoa, Myers. Whoa. Easy.”

“I'm sorry.” She took in a deep, shaky breath. Let it out.

“Listen, you've heard of horse sense, right?”

“Right…”

“So, if you're nervous, the horse will feel it and get nervous. So just relax.”

She scoffed. “Just relax, says the man who looks like he's been riding all his life. I'm from New York; the wildest thing I've ever ridden is a cab with an angry driver at rush hour.”

“Easy, Myers.” I kept my voice soothing for the helpless baby deer. “Easy. I'm right here beside you.” I wished I could take her hand, but we were in public and it would look bad.

“Thank you, Drake.” She smiled gratefully, letting those cute dimples come to life. “So… I'm surprised you're here with all the nobles today.”

“Turns out, I had an opening in my schedule today. And there's something oddly satisfying about watching nobles fuss over their stuffy blazers.” I pointed to Tariq, who looked utterly dismayed, wiping dust off his sleeve.

“Hah!” She covered her mouth, as several nobles turned their heads to look at her. She waited for them to look away before speaking again. “Is this why you're not frowning? As much as usual, anyway…”

“It has more to do with the company I keep.”

She blushed. “Wow, a second compliment?”

“One more and you win the jackpot.” I quipped.

“Ah, well in that case, I hope it's all your whiskey.” She quipped right back.

I smiled, shaking my head. “You know… when we first met I wanted to dislike you so badly…”

She looked hurt for a split second, before covering it up with an ironic grin. “I could tell.”

“Heh, I guess I wasn't too subtle about it, was I?”

“Subte like a freight train.”

“Well, that was a long time ago. Somewhere along the way… things changed. Hell, Myers, I don't even know why I'm telling you this.”

“Drake… you're easy to talk to as well.” I looked at her, shocked. She grinned. “Once you get past the grumpiness.”

“Most people find me unapproachable.”

“Sorry. Not me.”
“Heh. I guess I haven't been trying hard enough.” We shared a look, and I grinned. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Liam staring at us. I turned to look at him, and he shot me a look that screamed ’help’!

Shit… I sighed. Sorry, Myers. “Well… as touching as this has been, I'm going to go rescue Liam from his family for a few minutes.”

Myers face fell, but she composed it quickly. Ugh, she gave me her waitress smile! “Okay.”

“You'll be fine. Remember, horse sense. You get nervous…”

“...and she'll get nervous. I know.”

“Okay.” I nodded and rode on ahead. As I passed by Bertrand and Maxwell, I whispered to him, “Maxwell, go ride with Myers. She's really not comfortable riding and could use some company.”

“On it!” He hung back to meet her and I rode on.

“Your Majesties, your Highness, Lady Madeleine.” I nodded.

“Ah, Drake!” The King greeted me. “How are you enjoying the ride?”

“Very much, sir. I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I steal Prince Liam away for a moment. I must speak to him.”

“Of course.”

As Liam and I fell back, I chanced one look at Myers and Maxwell, and frowned. What happened? Maxwell looked panicked, rambling incessantly, and Myers just looked… miserable. Her eyes were downcast, staring intently at the ground, and she was biting her lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Finally she took a deep breath, closing her eyes, and when she opened them, they met mine before looking quickly back at Maxwell, nodding once.

“I wonder what happened…”

I turned to Liam, and saw him staring at Myers as well. He frowned, worried.

Honestly, I was pretty worried too, but I tried to pretend I wasn't, for Liam's sake. Horse sense. If I get nervous, he gets nervous. “Eh. It's probably Maxwell just being Maxwell. I told him to ride with Myers, because she wasn't really comfortable on horseback, and I bet he's telling that story of when he was 9 and fell off the horse, nearly killing himself. Not much of a confidence booster.”

“I hope you're right…” He sighed. “I really thought she would like it.” I shot him a questioning look, and he elaborated, “The horse, Marabelle's Dream. She was for sale and I thought… given Milla's love for horses when she was younger, I thought she would like it.”

“Wait, you bought her the horse?” So that's how she got it. I honestly wondered… she couldn't even afford her gowns, and the Beaumonts were broke, so I wondered how she got the Derby Champion.

“Yes… though now that I think about it, it seems it wasn't the best idea.”

“Nah, she loves it. I can tell. It's just first ride jitters. I mean, think about it. She hasn't even had a chance to get properly acclimated with the horse before she's thrust into the fox hunt. I bet in no time, Myers will be riding Marabelle's Dream like she's a centaur or something.”

“Thank you, Drake. I hope you're right. And it's not Marabelle's Dream anymore.”
“No?”

“No. She named her Midnight Rose.”

_Huh… Nice name._ I looked back, and even though her posture was still tense, Myers was stroking the horse’s mane lovingly.

“Nice name. See?” I bobbed my head towards Myers. “She’ll be fine. Hey, come on. I’ll race you to the village. Loser does 10 push ups!” I shouted, kicking my horse to a gallop.

Liam raced behind me and soon, we made it to the village. Once the rest of the court trickled down the path, King Constantine announced the suitors’ race. They all lined up and we watched as Myers kicked Midnight Rose into a gallop, holding on for dear life. She won the race, but to be honest, Myers didn’t seem to care -- in fact, she seemed pretty happy to finally get off her horse.

She was greeted by Tariq - who, for some reason was talking to her for the first time since New York - before being interrupted by Liam.

“Hello, Drake!” Hana walked up to me with Maxwell.

“Hey, Hana.”

“Hey, dinner’s about to be served. Should we go get those two?” Maxwell nodded towards Liam and Myers.

“Yes, let’s.”

We stepped towards them. “Hey, the feast is being put out.”

“And they’ve got dishes supposedly blessed by the spirits of the nearby ruins.”

“Ooh! I’ve heard legends of those ruins!” Hana squirmed excitedly. “They sound magical! People travel from all around the world just to see them.”

“Really?” Myers looked to Liam.

“It’s a shame we’re not scheduled to see them.” Liam looked at Myers apologetically.

“We aren’t? I was so hoping to…” Hana trailed off, her face falling.

“Why don’t we just go, anyway?” Maxwell shrugged. “Sounds like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

“Are you sure we should?”

“It’d be nice to spend some time together without this crowd.” Liam looked at Myers, his gaze longing.

I couldn’t help the hint of… _something_ that wove its way through me as I saw how he looked at her. It wasn’t guilt… not really. And it wasn’t jealousy either.

“I say we go!” Myers announced. “Let’s have an adventure!”

“Alright!” Maxwell cheered.

“Yay! I can’t wait to visit another piece of Cordonian history.”
“Follow me. I know how to get there.” Liam offered Myers his arm, and her eyes flicked to Maxwell uncertainly, before accepting it with a gracious smile.

And into the forest we went. After a few minutes, we finally got to the clearing.

“Wow…” Myers eyes widened as she took in the ancient temples.

“Here we are.” Liam smiled down on her.

“It's gorgeous!” Myers took two steps forward, her eyes never leave the decrepit, old buildings.

“It's so beautiful and serene.” Hana said, gaping.

“Yep… sure are a bunch of old things here.”

“It's so much more than that.” Liam mused. “There’s something so calm about this place. Can't you sense it?”

“The only thing I sense is about a million snakes and probably a couple of rock monsters getting ready to attack us.” Maxwell elbowed me. “Am I right?”

“Rock monsters? Do you have rock monsters in Cordonia?”

Oh, Hana…

“It was a joke… just forget it.”

Myers sighed contentedly, still admiring the ruins. “I just want to take it all in…”

“It's a lot to see.” Hana placed a hand on her shoulder.

“I want to get closer.” Liam grinned mischievously.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let's see some old rocks.” I clapped my hands and we all went in different directions. I walked towards the nearest temple and sat down on one of the giant roots that covered it.

I watched as all my friends explored the clearing with a small smile on my face, when I noticed Myers heading my way.

“Hey Myers.”

“Hey yourself.” She sat next to me and bumped me with her shoulder. “You look like you're having a good time exploring.”

I shrugged. “Archeology's not really my thing.”

“You could at least look around… it's not like you come here often.”

“I looked around. There's some old buildings. That's about it.”

“Don't you want to know where you come from?” Her face lit up enthusiastically. “And what about insight into how people lived long ago?”

“They could've ridden dragons for all I care. Doesn't matter much now.”

She regarded me for a moment, determination steadily creeping into her eyes. She took my hand and
pulled me up.

“Myers!” I looked around frantically, but none of our friends were anywhere nearby.

“Come with me.”

She began pulling me towards the temple entrance.

“I don't know if it's safe to go in there.”

“We'll survive.”

She led me in, and let go of my hand. Her face took on a dreamy, wistful expression as she studied the ancient carvings on the wall.

“Myers.” I whispered. “I really don't think we're supposed to be in here. This place could collapse any minute.”

“I doubt that. It's held strong for the last 2000 years, I think it can hold for 20 minutes.”

She took out her phone and began taking pictures of the inside, mindful to turn off the flash.

“You know, when I was a kid… I was this huge nerd.” I snorted. “It's true! I used to get obsessed with a topic and research it like there was no tomorrow. Whether it was horses or… ancient history and cultures.”

She raised her hand, gesturing around the room. I looked around when I heard her phone click. I looked back to her to see she was aiming her camera at me.

“Hey!”

She walked towards me and showed me the picture.

“There you are, reluctantly admiring your surroundings.”

I scoffed. “What that really necessary? Delete that.”

“Nope.” She quickly pulled her phone away from me and tucked it into an inner pocket of her blazer. I rolled my eyes. “Anyway, I remember in fifth grade social studies, we studied the ancient Egyptian empire, the Greeks, the Roman Empire… I became obsessed with their culture, their religion, their architecture, everything. And so for spring break my dad took me to the MET.”

“The museum?”

“Yes!” She smiled approvingly. “I still have pictures of the pyramids, the temple, the sculptures, the different kinds of armor…”

“Why didn't you study archaeology?” I blurted. Not that I was questioning her talent as a writer, but… she just seemed so passionate about this stuff. I personally didn't understand it.

She blushed. “I just… I'm a writer at heart. I've always been a writer. It started out with writing some very cringe-worthy short romance novels about me and whatever boy I was crushing on in middle school, to fanfiction when I was in high school--” I couldn't help my snort. “Hey! I'm twenty five but I'm not ashamed to admit I still read fanfiction. There are so many authors out there that are very talented!”
“Okay, okay! I'm not judging you!” I raised my hand in a placating gesture. *Down girl.* “Okay, maybe I'm judging you a little.”

“I stand by it.”

“Okay… so, short stories in middle school, fanfiction in high school… what happened in college?”

“I started out as a chemistry major… before finally admitting it wasn't for me and switched to an English major, minoring in creative writing.”

“Didn't want to declare a double major? You really seem to like this…” I gestured to the temple, “stuff.”

“It inspires me.” She shot me an embarrassed look. “I know that sounds corny, but… seeing this makes me wonder about how these people built it… why? What was the purpose? A shrine to honor their deities? Their ancestors? Or was this someone's home?” *I'm pretty sure it's a temple.* “And that's where things get interesting. If this was someone's home, whose? Why did they live here? With whom? Who were they? Farmers, priests, royalty?” She began making a circular motion with her hand and wrist. “And that's where I start imagining things; things that might have happened here so long ago, with people who are long gone… so many different stories this place could tell…”

She trailed off, looking around once more. I stared at her, my chest suddenly tightening as I took in the sight of this beautiful, passionate, intelligent individual. How was it she could see things, really see them, for the extraordinary things they were? I looked around here and saw rubble and dust, but she saw… people, history, culture… She saw true potential in everything, in everyone.

She turned back to me, and shook her head slightly. “Sorry. I get carried away sometimes.”

“No, I, uh… that's okay.”

“Let's go back, before you start feeling claustrophobic.”

“Please.” I rolled my eyes.

We began walking outside, back to the spot I was initially sitting on. There was no sight of our friends, so we sat down and kept talking.

“So… why did you come out here of you don't really care for these sorts of things?”

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. “I don't think we're going to get many more times like these.” I admitted. “I mean, Liam is going to be King soon.” I shot her a pointed look. “And you could very well be his queen.” She looked away, down at the ground, clenching her jaw. “Everything's going to change.”

She considered me for a moment, her eyes meeting mine as she studied me. “You know… you're right. Liam doesn't need to associate with the riff raff.”

“Hah!”

“I mean, really. What could you provide for him? A sense of grounding and humility?”

“I see what you're trying to do here. It's not going to work.”

“Or maybe someone to sneak him out of the palace? Why would he want that when he's drinking champagne and shaking ambassadors’ hands?” She brought her hand to her cheek thoughtfully.
“Yeah, yeah. Keep on punching down.”

“Or maybe…” she bit her lip hesitantly, before placing her hand over my heart, “maybe, he'll need a reminder that no matter how tough someone might seem on the outside, there's a big, lovable softie on the inside.” She grinned.

“Hey!”

“Come on, Drake. There's a smile inside of you somewhere.” She removed her hand from my chest, punching my arm playfully.

I shook my head, but couldn't help as the corners of my lips turned upwards. “You're the worst, Myers.”

She grinned back. “Would you have me any other way?”

“No… no, I wouldn't.”

“In all seriousness, though. Liam will make time for you. You're his best friend after all. Your adventures together are the stuff of legend.”

“They're more like footnotes.”

“Drake… he's not going to push you out like that.”

“You don't know that for sure.”

“This is Liam we're talking about.”

“I know… it's just that I've seen this play out before.”

“If anyone will be different, it's Liam.”

“Yeah… if anyone will buck the trend, it's him. Myers…” I sighed. “We may have had some ups and downs between us, but I want you to know I've enjoyed this little adventure with you.” I felt the blush creeping up my neck. “Not just the ruins, but the whole thing since I walked into your bar in New York. You're… you're not bad.” I finished lamely.

“Drake.” She looked me directly in the eye, and I was overwhelmed by the intensity of her gaze. “I care for you, too.”

“Me… I…” Could she really…?

She looked down, a pretty pink blush tinged her cheeks, before looking back at me. She stood, pulling me up with her. “Now, we really need to get you out of here before you completely lose it. All this reflecting isn't healthy for you.”

“You're right. If I stay much longer, I might melt into a big ball of mush.” I shuddered playfully. “Let's go find the others.”

That night, I flopped on my bed, exhausted. I shut my eyes, hoping to get some blessed sleep, but my mind was running a thousand miles an hour. I kept thinking about Myers… about the way her eyes shone when she took in the ruins, that cheeky grin that made those dimples appear, they way she
looked when she laughed…

“I care for you, too.”

I tossed and turned in my bed. Just… the way she'd said it. She was so sincere, so honest. It was refreshing, here in court, to have someone speak so openly. And she looked so… vulnerable when she said it.

I knew, after every conversation we've had, after every time we've hung out, after… Lythikos, and my birthday, that we'd gotten to a point where you could say we were friends. But…

_I don't want to just be her friend._

I opened my eyes. _I don't want to just be her friend._ I sat up, rubbing my eyes. What the fuck was I doing? When did this happen?

Lythikos.

It happened in Lythikos. It happened under a star filled night. It happened after drinking whiskey in a wine cellar. It happened in the kitchen, eating pancakes after midnight. It happened in a bar the day of my birthday. It happened in the middle of ancient ruins.

Fuck! How in hell could I have been so stupid?

I turned to my mantra. _She's here for Liam._ As I repeated those words over and over again in my head, I couldn't help but notice how they hurt.

Whiskey. I needed whiskey. I went to the liquor cabinet and poured myself a glass. Then another. And another. I figured the only way I'd get some sleep tonight was to drink myself to bed. And when I finally climbed back to bed in a drunken stupor my last thought was _Myers._

I woke up the next day bitter and hung over. I decided the best way to get over these feelings was to distance myself from Myers, and Liam, and every thing for a little bit. So I decided to skip the country games, opting to just stay in my room and clear out the mini bar.

I went to the bathroom, showered and took two Advil for the pounding in my head. I opened the small refrigerator, and took a bottle of water and some mint chocolates. _Ooh, they have gummy bears!_ I happily took those, as well, and plopped on my bed.

I woke up some time later, with the chocolate wrappings and some gummy bears strewn all over my bed. I groaned. Oh well, at least the headache and nausea had subsided. I got up and began to clean up a little, picking up the bears and popping them in my mouth, and throwing away the wrappings.

My phone buzzed. It was a text from Liam.

“Hey, I haven't seen you all day. Are you coming?”

I sighed. “Not feeling well. I think it'd be better if I skip it.”

“Are you ill? Do you need a doctor?”

“Nah. Just a headache.”

“Ok. I hope you feel better soon. Try to get some rest.”
“Thanks.”

I laid back down on the bed and opened Netflix, my faithful companion for the day. A couple of hours later, my stomach rumbled. I looked out the window, at the setting sun. Dinner would be served soon. Reluctantly, I got up.

The way I saw it - now, with a clear head not numbed by alcohol - the real way to get over these feelings was to get used to seeing Myers and Liam together. At this point in the competition, everyone knew that Myers was Liam's favorite, and that she was most likely going to win. And if - when, the voice in my head interrupted -- she won… well, it's not like I'd leave court, leave Liam alone, just to spare my feelings.

So, I got up and headed for the gardens. Liam was the first one to spot me. He immediately ended his conversation with an ambassador and walked up to me.

“Hey. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah. It was just a headache. Don't worry about it.”

“Good. I'm glad you're here. Sorry you missed the games, though.”

“Nah. Not really my cup of tea.”

“Well, I hope you're hungry. Dinner will be served soon.”

“Good, I'm starving.”

“Liam!” The Queen called, gesturing for him to sit down.

We went to our table, and Liam stood, clinging his glass. When everyone was seated, he began his speech.

“If I may have everyone's attention, please. I'd like to say a few words before we close this evening. First, I'd like to thank you all for joining us out here in the country estate. I've had the honor and privilege to have you in my court, and I couldn't have asked for better company. As I step into my father's place in a few days, I can only hope that I am half the man he's been for Cordonia.”

“Long live Prince Liam!” Maxwell shouted from his table.

My eyes immediately found Myers sitting next to him, shaking her head just a bit, staring at Maxwell with an indulgent smile on her face.

I turned back to Liam. “Thank you all. When next we meet like this, it'll be the last event of the social season. As per tradition, this event will be hosted at the illustrious Beaumont House.”

The crowd erupted in cheers, as Bertrand stood and bowed, before sitting back down. “An honor, to be sure.”

Myers raised her eyebrows, before plastering a smile on her face and leaning to whisper to Maxwell through gritted teeth.

Liam continued. “The Beaumonts will surely give us another legendary night to remember. Until then, I thank you again and wish you a good night.” He raised his glass, the rest of the court soon following. “Cheers!”
“Cheers!” I toasted, downing my drink.

Dinner passed quickly and uneventfully, and as soon as it was over I headed back to my room. As I walked through the halls, I nearly jumped when I heard a scream from one of the rooms. It sounded like it came from… Myers’ room! I ran to her room and threw the door open.

I saw red.

I saw red when I saw Tariq forcefully kissing Camilla, his hand clutching the back of her neck to keep her in place, while she tried and failed to push him away. “Get away from her!”

I stalked up to him, forcefully grabbing his shoulder and pulling him off her.

“Unhand me! How dare you enter my room without my permission!” Tariq protested. He sucker punched me, and I reeled back, clutching my jaw.

Son of a bitch! I ran and tackled him to the ground, getting a couple good hits in, while he tried to push me off.

“Drake!” I heard Myers yell. “Stop!”

I looked up at her, momentarily distracted, and Tariq used that to kick me off. I landed on the floor with a thud, but stood up quickly, ready to beat the living shit out of him.

“Drake!” Myers stood in front of me, hand on my chest, her other hand outstretched on Tariq's direction. “Drake, look at me. Look at me!”

I huffed, breathing heavily, but finally looked at her. Her eyes were wide with fear and worry, and while they did nothing to abate my anger, I managed to calm myself down.

“Who the hell do you think you are bursting into my room?”

Are you fucking kidding me? “This is Camilla's room! And I heard a scream. I think she wanted interrupting.”

“Drake…” I looked down at Myers. “Tariq just really misread the situation. I know he deserves to have his ass kicked, but--”

“So this isn't to be the bold, romantic beginning to our love story?” Tariq cut her off.

Myers turned and glared at him. “No!”

“But… I'd heard…”

“You heard wrong! And for the record, before you try to kiss someone, ask first!”

Tariq flinched, whether at her tone or her words, I don't know. “Let me deeply apologize here. I'm so sorry for this transgression. I was incredibly wrong. Now, before I humiliate myself any further… let me take my leave.”

“Just... get out.” Myers said wearily.

I followed him out, slamming the door behind him.

“Drake…” Myers let out a shaky breath. She was trembling, I realized. “Thank you.”
Oh, Myers. “Aw, shucks, Myers don't go getting soft on me now.”

She shook her head. “I meant it. You were there when I needed you.”

“I'll always be here for you.” My eyes widened as I realized what I just said. “I mean… for Liam's sake, of course. Liam would never forgive me if something… bad… happened to you.”

Her face fell a bit, and she looked to the floor. “Oh.”

“And you know what? I'd never forgive myself, either.” I admitted.

She looked up, lifting the corner of her lips in a small crooked grin. I grinned back, before really looking at her.

Oh, fuck…

Before I could stop myself, I let my eyes linger on her body, only covered by a simple white bra and lacy white panties. I couldn't help my eyes from following the gentle curves of her body, from her small breasts to her trim waist, down to her toned legs. She really had great legs. Enough! I berated myself, quickly looking away.

“Er… Myers…”

“What?” She looked down at herself, finally realizing she was in her underwear. “Oh!”

Flustered, she scrambled to get her dress back on. I rubbed my neck, quickly squashing down the tinge of disappointment at seeing her fully clothed again.

“Anyway, you can see why it looks bad. I heard a scream, saw you half naked with Tariq all over you…”

“Yeah, I get it.” She ran a hand through her hair.

“Are you okay?” I stepped closer, genuinely concerned.

“I'll be fine.”

Ok… I hated to leave her - I could tell she was shaken - but… “Well, I should get out of here before we really cause a scandal.”

I reached for the door knob, when a sharp pain shot up my ribs, making me wince. In a couple long strides, Myers was right next to me.

“Drake, you're hurt!”

“Heh.” I shrugged. Ow! “Nothing a few shots of whiskey won't fix.”

“Let me take a look. It's the least I can do.” She took my arm, eyes filled with concern.

“You trying to get me to take my shirt off, Myers?”

“I just want to help.”

God, stop with the puppy eyes! “I'm fine. Save your fussing for somebody else.”

She drew her eyebrows in a frown as she moved to stand in front of the door. “Drake, you got hurt for me. I'm not letting you leave this room until you let me take a look at you!” I gaped at her. “You can start by taking off your shirt. I think he hit your ribs pretty hard. They could be broken…”
“Wow, you've got a real bossy side to you, you know that?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You think I'm being bossy?” She challenged, hands at the collar of my denim shirt. I froze for a moment. “I'm taking that shirt off you myself.” With swift ease, she pushed the shirt down my shoulders until it was a heap on the floor.

“Hey!” Realizing she really wasn't going to let me leave, I raised my arms, letting out a small hiss as a shot of pain coursed through me. Myers slowly and carefully pulled up my white undershirt, and I tried not to blush, as the gesture felt incredibly intimate. “So doctor, do you see anything alarming?”

With cautious fingers, she felt my ribs and my back, grimacing. “You're going to have a few spectacular bruises…”

“Yeah, Tariq hits harder than you think. He almost impressed me.” Her eyes flicked to mine before quickly looking away. “What is it?”

Myers sighed, her lips down turning into a grimace. “I can't believe you got hurt because of me.” She whispered. “It's all my fault.”

I fought to contain the anger that rose in my chest. “No, I got hurt because of Tariq.” I lifted her chin. “Nothing that happened tonight was your fault. Don't ever let yourself think like that, okay, Myers?”

Her eyes gleamed with a mixture of sadness, guilt, and concern. I took a step back, running a hand through my hair. “God, you can be so…” frustratingly selfless and naive. “Nevermind. Hey, weren't you supposed to be tending to my wounds?”

“Oh! Right.” She walked towards the mini bar. “I think one of the servants fills this bucket with ice every night. You know, just in case I need to chill some champagne…”

“Or ice down a friend's bruises.”

“Exactly.”

I walked towards the mini bar. “And it looks like someone left a fully stocked liquor cabinet in the corner here, so…”

I perused the selection of bottles before finding the whiskey. As she wrapped a handful of ice in a cloth, I poured a glass for myself and looked at her with an eyebrow raised.

She merely nodded. “I wouldn't make you drink alone.”

“Heh, thanks.” I poured her a glass, taking the bottle with me as she led me to the bed. I downed my glass, as she knelt in front of me and pressed the ice cloth to my ribs. I hissed in pain. “Hey! That hurts.”

Her face softened as she gave me an apologetic look. With unexpected tenderness, she pressed the cloth to my skin ever so softly. “Is that better?”

“...Actually, yeah. Didn't realize you could be so gentle, Myers.”

“I've got a gentle side… you just don't see it very often.”

“I could stand to see more of it.” Her eyes flicked to mine, and I looked away. “Thank you.” I poured myself another glass. She still hadn't touched hers. “I know I don't act very grateful for anything most of the time, but I do… care about you.”
“I care about you, too.”

There they were. Those sweet little words that made my heart soar. “You… do?” I asked cautiously, still having a hard time actually believing her.

Myers shifted, so she was no longer kneeling, but sitting on the bed next to me. She kept one hand on the cloth, but reached to take my chin with the other. Ever so gently, she turned my face sideways, until my eyes met hers. “Yes,” she whispered, “how many times do I have to say it until you believe me?”

Her hand traveled from my chin to my hair, settling in my cheek, her thumb slowly caressing my cheekbone. Her eyes were filled with an immense vulnerability, and I knew… No. I looked away, shaking her hand off.

“You shouldn't say things like that, Myers.”

“Why not?”

I let out a shaky sigh. “You're here for Prince Liam.” The words hurt a lot more out loud. But I had to remind her, and myself, of her place here, and mine. “All the suitors are. And, well, so is the entire court. All of the nobles, all of the royals, all of the servants, even. Everything and everyone in this place exists to orbit around Liam.” I said, my words filled with resentment. I'd never resented my best friend, until now. “You could almost hate him for it, if he weren't so damned likeable. It's dangerous for people like you and me to forget that.”

“Drake, I…” I saw her reach for me again, but she pulled her hand back. She closed her eyes, steeled herself. “What are you getting at, Drake?”

You know exactly what I'm getting at.

“Hell, Myers. Don't make me say it.”

Say it, her eyes challenged. Say it.

I downed the last of my whiskey. “If we'd met somewhere else… anywhere else. At a club in New York, or in an airport, or at a party… if you hadn't been our waitress that night, and I hadn't been sitting next to Liam…” I steeled myself. “Do you think all of this… do you think it could've been different… between us?”

There. I said it. I'm saying I have feelings for you that go beyond friendship, and I hate myself for it, but I want to know if -- in a different world, in a different universe, in a different dimension -- you might feel the same…

A part of me wanted her to say no, to hear her say “I'm here for Liam”, but the other part… Please just say it. Say you're here for Liam, so I can finally get over--

“Yes.”

Time seemed to stop.

I stared at her, her eyes were filled with an immense sadness.

“It would've been different. Sure, you would've still been gruff, and I wouldn't have let you get away with anything…” she smiled wistfully, “But all the rest? Yeah, it would've been different. Maybe everything would've been different.”

“Camilla…” I reached for her hand. God, I wanted nothing more than to take her hand and pull her
closer. And then Liam’s face popped into my head. My best friend… I shot up off the bed. The ice cloth fell to the floor. “What am I doing? I need to go.”

I walked towards the door, picking up my shirt on the way. But before I could put it back on, I felt her arms come around my waist, and she pressed herself against my back. “Myers… you shouldn’t.”

“Don’t you get tired of being so careful all the time?”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. My white shirt slipped through my fingers. “Constantly.”

I turned, her arms still around me, and she pressed herself closer, burying her face in my chest. I was sure she could hear my heart racing in my chest. I wrapped my arms around her, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair. God, I wanted to stay here forever… she lifted her face, and her hands traveled from my back up to my neck.

Her eyes bore into mine, searching them. It would be so easy to just lean in and kiss her. And it appeared she had the same thought, as she rose on her tiptoes ever so slowly, her eyes lingering on my mouth. I wanted to lean in so badly, but… it's not right… she's your best friend's girl...

Gathering all the resolve I had left, I gently took her hands and pushed them away. Pushed her away. Her eyes filled with hurt she failed to conceal, glistening with unshed tears.


“Okay…” she turned, wrapping her arms around herself.

The sharp pain I felt in my chest had nothing to do with my bruises, and all to do with the image of her back turned to me.

I once again picked up my shirt and threw it on. I grabbed my denim one and headed for the door. “And for all our sakes, lock your door this time…” I stared at her door handle. There was… “Huh.”

“What?”

“Myers… There's no lock on your door handle.”

“I thought they were all like that.”

“No. All of the other rooms on this floor lock.” Oh, no… “It’s probably nothing.” I said, trying to convince myself as well as her. Probably just a bad handle or something.

“Probably?” From the expression on her face I could tell she was worried. Honestly, so was I.

“Just… be careful, okay?” With one last look at her, I walked out and shut the door.

I stormed back to my room, slamming the door, cursing Tariq, cursing Liam, cursing Myers and, most of all, cursing myself. A part of me still refused to believe what happened tonight.

I should've just stayed in my room…

But that wouldn’t really change anything, would it? I rolled my eyes. There it was -- that stupid, annoying, irritatingly rational voice in my head.

I mean, think about it… you didn't even talk to her at dinner. In fact, if you'd stayed in your room,
you would've never heard her scream, and who knows what Tariq could've done to her.

I groaned. A chill ran down my back when I looked at it that way, followed quickly by an all consuming anger. I slammed my fist on the wall. I wanted so badly to go down to Tariq's room and beat the living shit out of him.

_Breathe._ I willed myself to relax. _Beating Tariq up wouldn't change anything._ I tried to reason with myself, _you're just focusing on him to avoid thinking about Camilla._

_Shut up!_ I covered my face, tumbling back on the bed. I couldn't think about Camilla right now! I couldn't deal with that right now! How was I supposed to deal with the fact that I had feelings for my best friend's future fiance?

"Everything would've been different."

Her whispered words echoed in my head. The way she'd looked at me, the way she'd pressed herself against me. And the way she turned away after I pushed her away. The way she'd hugged herself, the way her eyes teared up...

I was so torn. I'd _never_ in my life felt this way about a girl before. And yet... I couldn't do this to Liam. My best friend. My only friend, up until Myers came along and made me a part of her little group of misfits. I couldn't do this to him... Even if she felt the same -- which I still didn't really believe -- it was wrong.

It's betrayal.

I couldn't do that to him. I won't do that to him.

_I won't do that to him._
I woke up the next morning to my phone ringing incessantly. I groaned as I fished for it under my pillow.

“Hello?”

“Drake! Drake, thank God!” Maxwell screamed in my ear. “Oh, sorry did I wake you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! I'm so sorry! I didn't realize how early it was.”

Yeah, but don't worry about it, I just stayed up almost all night and literally just got to sleep, but whatever. “Fine. What's up?”

“Well... we kind of have this situation, and we really, really, really need your help! See, we got here and Bertrand found this note, and the catering crew canceled and the house staff won't be here until tomorrow, and--”

“Maxwell!” I breathed in deeply. “What do you need?”

“Do you think you could come over and help with the arrangements? Please?”

I looked at my phone. 10 am. “I'll be there in a couple of hours.”

“Thank you! Oh Drake thank you so much!”

“Uh huh. I'll see you.”

“Ok--” I hung up the phone, my head falling back onto my pillow.

I rubbed my face, trying to get rid of all this exhaustion. I got up, showered and went to the kitchen for some coffee, before getting in my car and driving to the Beaumont Estate.

It was eerily quiet when I got there, with not a soul to be seen. “Hello?” I cupped my hands around my mouth, “Hello?!?”

Nothing. I could hear the crickets. Well, there was only so many places they could be... in this giant mansion. I decided to check the kitchen first. I remember Maxwell said the catering crew cancelled, so odds were that he was in there trying to make something for tomorrow.

“Hello? Anyone in here?”

“Drake!”

I walked into the kitchen to find Myers and Maxwell preparing the appetizers. Myers stared at me with big brown eyes, and I had to look away.

“Drake! Drake! Drake! You came!” Maxwell cheered, jumping in his spot behind the counter.
Thank God he's here... I don't think I could handle being alone with Myers right now. “Yeah, yeah. Calm down, it's not that big of a deal.”

“Yes, it is! We are friends!”

“You promised me whiskey.”

“Friendship whiskey!”

“Drake… you made it.” Myers kept looking at me with wide brown eyes, almost as if she couldn't believe I was really here.

“Yeah, yeah. Behold your knight in shining armor. Alright, I'm here now. What needs to be done?”

“Milla and I are plating some fancy appetizers. Come join us…”

I deliberately took a spot next to Maxwell and began assembling the caviar-paprika disaster. I really just couldn't be next Myers, could barely look at her without remembering last night. And I definitely avoided all the furtive looks she gave me, refusing to meet her eyes.

Between the three of us, we finished pretty quickly. Maxwell was about to get started on the main course, when his phone rang. He looked down and sighed in relief.

“Oh, thank heavens. Bertrand found another company to handle the main courses. Let me tell you, nobody would've wanted the science experiments I was about to produce.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dodged a bullet there.”

“What's next on the 'We're in Panic Mode' list?” Myers asked.

“Hmm…” Maxwell looked around. “I should stay here and clean the kitchen, but Bertrand might need help in the main hall. Last I saw of him, he was looking for cleaning supplies…”

“Oh boy.”

I jumped at the chance of sending her away. “I'll stay here and help Maxwell. We'll come find you once we finish down here.”

My stomach turned at the disappointed look on her face. What is it with you and the sad puppy eyes?

“Okay…” she pursed her lips and with one final glance, she left the kitchen.

Maxwell looked back and forth between me and the door, but since I really didn't want to deal with it, I picked up a cloth and began wiping down the counter.

“It's you!” Maxwell shouted suddenly.

I turned. “Yeah, it's me. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You! You're the guy!”

I threw the cloth back in the sink. “What guy? What are you talking about?”

“The guy! You're the other guy Milla's falling for!”

My heart nearly stopped. Quick, play it cool! “What?! What are you-- That's so-- Why would you think--”
“You're stuttering!” Maxwell pointed his finger at my chest. “You never stutter!”

I rubbed my face, stifling a groan. *So much for playing it cool... dumbass. Okay, since I can't play it cool, I guess I'll play it dumb.* “Maxwell… I don't even understand what you're talking about. Care to enlighten me?”

Maxwell eyed me suspiciously for a moment, before sighing. “When we were riding on the mountain trail, Milla told me she was falling for someone else here in court.”

*Oh… shit. That's why she'd looked so upset!* I remembered her face as Maxwell started freaking out.

*She told him…* I couldn't believe she told him. A part of me couldn't believe she'd be so stupid! But another part wanted to jump into somersaults at the words she'd used.

I shook my head slightly, turning back to Maxwell. “Did she say who it was?”

“No…”

“Then why in the world would you think it's me? It could be anyone.” I made a show of snapping my fingers, my eyes widening with realization. “It could be Hana! Or… it could be you. Have you even thought about that?”

Maxwell gave me a small grin and shook his head. “Nice try, Drake. I know I look and act stupid most of the time, but that doesn't mean I am.”

*Crap.*

He continued. “When she told me, I was between you and Hana. You two are the only people who she's gotten close with here at court. But the way she looked at you just now said it all.”

“Why are you telling me this? Yeah, we've gotten close, but that doesn't mean we're anything more than friends.” I asked defensively.

“I didn't say you were! And maybe you don't even feel the same way, but she's fallen for you!”

I cringed at his words.

“You don't feel the same… right?”

I looked away. God, I just couldn't deal with this right now!

“Drake!”

“What?!” I snapped. “What do you want me to say?! That I don't feel anything for her? That she's just a friend? That I haven't tried telling myself a million times that she's here for Liam? That I haven't cursed my best friend a million times simply for being the goddamned Crown Prince of Cordonia? For getting to marry her when this shit show of a competition is over?” My chest rose and fell as Maxwell stared at me wide eyed.

“Drake, I-I-I…”

I turned, storming to the door. “Don't worry about it. I won't let her do anything that gets in the way of winning this thing. Camilla will marry Liam, and your house will have all its glory and honor and riches restored.”

I walked out, slamming the door and leaving him gaping in the kitchen.
“Drake, wait!”

Goddamnit! Couldn't he see I just wanted to be alone?

“Drake!”

“What?!” I whirled on him.

“I'm sorry! I'm really, really sorry. I… I didn't know how you felt.”

Some of my anger dissipated when I saw how sincere he was. I sighed. “It's fine. It's not your fault.”

He nodded, regarding me with a sad expression. “Let's just not… mention this again, okay?”

“But--”

“I don't want to talk about it anymore.” I said through gritted teeth.

Maxwell sighed, but relented.

We stood there for a couple minutes, just… staring at each other without saying anything. I tried to clamp down on my feelings, remembering we still had a lot of work to do. “Come on, let's go finish up the kitchen.” We turned back, and got back to work.

After we were done, Maxwell went in search of Myers and I went to go help Bertrand out in the ballroom.

“Ah, Drake! There you are.” Bertrand handed me a large box filled up to the rim with flowers. “I need you to arrange these into proper centerpieces. You'll find vases on the tables.”

Seriously? Not even a please? I gave him a pointed look.

“Uh… Please.”

“Sure.” I grumbled, and got to work. I looked up some simple arrangements on my phone, and copied that with the flowers. Then I took a step back to admire my work. Not bad…

I went to the next few tables, recreating the arrangement. I looked at Bertrand, who was muttering under his breath while frantically checking his phone. I heard snippets of 'where could it be' and 'someone withdrew money from the account'.

Okay… something's definitely going on here.

Myers voice nearly made me jump and drop the vase. “Why, Drake, I never knew you had such a flare for peonies.”

I looked at her from the corner of my eye. “The things I do for you people…” I grumbled.

She gave me a small smile and got to work next to me. My eyes couldn't help but linger at the curve of her neck, as she lifted all her hair up into a bun. Focus! I quickly averted my eyes, and saw Maxwell and Bertrand arguing in the back of the room.

“Myers.”

“Yeah?”

“Anything about any of this seem off to you?”
“Huh?”

I jerked my head towards Maxwell and Bertrand.

“What I don't get is that this money was in our account yesterday!”

“I… I don’t know anything about our finances, Bertrand. You know that.”

“You might not know anything, but you're still causing me problems! You're the only other person with access to that account!”

“I…”

“This better not be to pay off one of your idiotic credit card purchases. Last month you said you spent three thousand on a jet ski. What is it this time?”

“I told you, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You're lucky I don't have time to deal with you right now.”

Myers stared back at me with raised eyebrows. “Well? Doesn't it seem like something weird is going on?”

“Yeah… it seemed like something suspicious is going on with House Beaumont…”

“Exactly.”

“I wonder what's actually going on with their money issues…”

“I'm going to find out what it is. Besides, it sounds like Maxwell's really in over his head this time. I think he really needs my help… But knowing him, he'd never ask.

“I didn't realize you and Maxwell were that close.”

I smirked. “After all the time I've spent with him there past few weeks, I'm starting to find him less annoying.”

She smirked right back. “High praise.”

“Besides, we scrubbed the kitchen cabinets together. I think I'm invested now.”

“Sure…” She considered me thoughtfully for a second. “Actually, Drake… there's something else we should talk about. About last night…”

“Last night?” Please… don't.

“What you said… about how you feel…”

Please stop… “Camilla… I don't think we should talk about this here…”

“Then somewhere private? Please?”

“I'm not sure that's a good idea.”

“Why not?” She looked at me with sad eyes, the corners of her mouth pulling downwards.

“The way you look at me, sometimes, Myers…” I took a deep breath, “If we're alone again together,
I'm not sure I'll be able to stop myself from doing something stupid.”

“Drake…” she reached her hand out to me.

“Drake! Camilla!” Bertrand's voice boomed from the other side of the room, making Myers jump.

“Eep! Er, I mean, yes?”

“Why are you two standing around chatting like ladies at an afternoon tea? You both said you'd help, so help!”

_Are you kidding me? “Right away, Duke Ramsford.”_ I glowered at him.

_Who the fuck does he think he is? Yeah, he may be a fucking Duke, but that doesn't give him the right to treat people like crap, or to take out his frustrations on other people! I mean, he's not even paying me, or Myers! He should be grateful we're even here, helping out! Fuck this. I'm going to find out what's really going on._

I left my vase on the table and walked to the study.

I began rifling through some paper on the desk, when I heard the door close with a click.

“Drake? What are you doing here?”

“Myers. So you followed me, huh?” This is the Beaumont study.”

“How'd you even know this was here?” She asked as she took in the intimidating room.

I shrugged. “I used to come to this house a lot, back in the day. We ran in the same circles, being friends with Liam and all that… My sister Savannah used to think the Beaumont brothers were the epitome of courtly life. She practically worshiped them.”

“And you didn't.”

“I found them to be more of an acquired taste.”

“You mean they both annoyed the hell out of you.”

I snorted. “Yup. Pretty much.” I couldn't help but smile. “Whenever I got tired of their antics, I'd sneak off and come here to their study.”

She chuckled. “So… your sister was the fun one?”

I knew she meant it as a joke, but… damn if it didn't hurt to be reminded she wasn't here anymore. “Yes, she was…”

Some of the hurt must've shown on my face, because she immediately reached out to me, an apologetic look in her face. “Drake, I'm sorry…”

I stepped back, raising my hands in front of me. “That's okay, Myers… it's just… I don't even know where she is now.”

“And you don't have any way of finding her?”

“She stopped answering my calls and deleted all of her social media. Wherever she is, all I know is that she doesn't want to be found. Even by me. And you know what? I don't blame her. I failed her. I don't even know how, but I failed her. I didn't protect her from… from whatever it was that made her leave.”
"Drake, I'm sure you did everything you could…"

“I've spent hours trying to figure out if I could've done something different… if I could've done more.”

“Hey… it's not your fault. Maybe it's one of those things she just needs to deal with on her own…”

I sighed. “Maybe. But she's my little sister… I helped her learn how to tie her shoes.” I glimpsed at Myers and saw the corners of her mouth quirked upwards, her eyes softening. “It kills me to think there's something she didn't think she could trust me with.”

“Do you have any idea what it was about?”

“She was so happy… and then one day, after one of these Beaumont parties, she wasn't. She locked herself in her room, and I could hear her crying. A couple of days later, all of her things were packed, and she was just… gone.” I looked away, not able to handle her staring at me like… like she wanted to hug me or something. It wasn't pity, but… “But… that's enough about that…”

An awkward silence fell on the room, and I headed to the other side of it, looking around the bookcase.

“So,” her voice broke the silence, “this is the Beaumont study… Are we allowed back here?”

She walked around the room, stopping at the shelf that held all the trophies and family ribbons. Their victory wall.

“They never lock the door, so I guess they don't care that much about who comes in. Besides, the point of this room is to show off.” I gestured to the shelf she was looking at. “As you can see, the Beaumont family has a lot to brag about.”

“I guess Bertrand and Maxwell had a habit of winning…” She said pensively, no doubt thinking about herself, and the pressure they were putting on her to win Liam's hand.

“A family tradition.”

“I can see why Bertrand is always so worried about upholding the Beaumont name.”

“Their house goes back a long way. I could never pity a rich kid like Bertrand, but I come very close to it sometimes.” It must've been hard, growing up and never really being allowed to be a kid. To have been constantly sermoned about family, and duty, and honor. To just be born and already have to fulfill all these expectations. “He’s got a lot of pressure on him. I think his parents gave him a lot of talks about his heritage and Cordonia… And it's not like Maxwell's much help with anything.”

She smiled indulgently, as if talking about a rambunctious toddler and not a 27 year old man. “Maxwell tries. Sometimes.”

“Heh. Maxwell's always been more interested in having fun. He couldn't care less about prestige and honor. That's one of the things I actually like about him.”

She turned back to the victory wall, her eyes twinkling as she looked at a picture of Bertrand and Maxwell on horseback. Her eyes were so expressive… they weren't like the other ladies here at court, whose eyes were unreadable. She was so sincere, so easy to read, like an open book. She turned back to me and caught me staring. I looked away quickly.

“Drake…” she stepped closer tentatively, “we need to talk about us.”
“There is no us.” I said sharply.

She grimaced. “Drake… I don't think you mean that.”

“Myers… the truth is that my best friend is head over heels for you. So it really doesn't matter how I feel, because that's where it has to end. Liam is the only one who's ever looked out for me. The only one who gave a damn about me after my dad… After he was gone. The rest of the court was ready to cast us out, nevermind that he died protecting the Royal family.”

“Drake… I'm so sorry. That's terrible.”

Just so you know what kind of place you've come to. These people… they're heartless, they don't care about us; about the “commoners” that work for them, serve them and give their life for them. To them, it's just… what we're supposed to do.

“I didn't care much, but my mom and Savannah… it would've devastated them. Liam made sure we had a place at the palace as long as we wanted one. I could never betray him by falling for his girl.” There. I said it. “So that's what it all comes down to, Myers. Whatever I feel… it doesn't matter.”

“Drake… it does matter. You matter. Your feelings are just as important as Liam's, and everyone else's in this goddamned place!” I took a step back, startled by her outburst. She pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to compose herself. “Besides, what about how I feel?”

My heart began beating a mile a minute. “How you feel… of course I care how you feel. I just didn't think--”

“No, you didn't, and I don't know if it's because you're oblivious or in denial.”

“What are you saying, Myers?” I asked wearily.

She squared her shoulders, raising her chin and looking me straight in the eye. “I'm saying I want you.”

There was thunderous crack on the planet. Or it may have been just me; all of my resolve to stay away from her crumbling. I gulped. “Oh, Myers. You shouldn't have said that.”

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, trying to regain any semblance of resolve to stay away from her, to run.

She took the opportunity to step closer. “Drake… I want you.” Please stop. “And I'll keep saying it, as long as it takes for you to believe it.”

My feet walked towards her of their own volition. We came together, and I ran my fingers through her hair as she rose on her tiptoes. Our lips met in a desperate kiss, as she wrapped her arms around my neck pulling me closer. My tongue begged entrance to her mouth, and she greedily conceded. I ran my hands up and down her waist, pulling her closer to me, pressing her tiny frame against mine. Until finally, we pulled away, both of us breathless. She pressed her forehead against mine, her hand on my chest, over my heart. I was sure she could feel it thumping madly. “Myers…”

“Yes?” She gave me the warmest, most beautiful smile I'd ever seen.

“I've wanted this for so long…” I confessed, my voice husky.

“So have I…”
Those words undid me, and I pulled her closer to me. She bunched her fists on the collar on my shirt, her mouth hungry and demanding, as I ran my hands down her back, down her waist, and settling on her hips, pulling her closer to me. My mouth left hers to taste her skin, her neck, her jaw. She sighed, lifting her head to give me easier access. “Drake.” She whispered my name, the sound of her voice and the scent of her hair making me crazy.

I dipped down to brush her ear with my lips, kissing her skin slowly. “I didn't think this would ever be more than a fantasy…”

Her finger slowly crawled up my neck, bunching into my hair and pulling my head back. She showered me with kisses up my neck and my jaw. I groaned. “Are you saying you've thought about this before?”

I chuckled. “More than I'd like to admit.”

I cupped her neck, lifting her face and bringing her mouth back to me again. The taste of her was heady and intoxicating, and oh so addictive. I couldn't get enough of her. I just wanted to stay here, in this room, doing exactly this for the rest of my life.

Which is exactly what Liam wants to do… be with her for the rest of his life.

I broke the kiss.

Are you kidding me?! I screamed at that horrible voice in my head.

Well, somebody has to remind you of your best friend…

“Drake? What's wrong?” Myers looked at me with eyes filled with concern.

My bloody conscience, that's what's wrong… “Someone could come in here…” And now you're lying! I stuttered, “One of them might come looking for us… We shouldn't just…”

“Lucky for us, this door has a lock. A lock I might've used in case something like this were to happen…” Myers quipped, grinning mischievously at me. I couldn't help the corner of my mouth quirking up in a crooked smile. Of course you did.

“In case something like this were to happen?”

“What can I say? You're not the only one who's thought about it.” She fiddled with the button on my collar.

She rose once again on her tiptoes, but I shook my head. With my hands still on her hips, I pushed her away ever so slightly, so I could look her in the eye. “Even without a drop of whiskey, why do I feel drunk when I'm around you, Myers?”

That beautiful, dimpled grin once again made its appearance, warming me up from head to toe.

“Drake…”

Dude, stop! Think of Liam! You've already fucked up once, you can still get out of this without hurting her or your best friend further!

Shut up! She said she wants me! She kissed me! When has that ever happened? Don't I deserve a chance at some happiness too?

Not when it's at the cost of your best friend's happiness!
Her touch on my cheek brought me out of the war in my mind and back to the moment. She ran her thumb over my cheekbone ever so gently, almost reverently, looking at me like... like I was the most beautiful thing on the face of this earth.

I felt terrible.

“Don't smile at me like that. I don't deserve it. We shouldn't be doing this. I don't know what I was thinking.”

“Hey...” she shushed comfortingly.

“Myers, don't.” I pulled away. There was no way I would be able to leave if she kept looking at me like that.

Myers looked stricken, but quickly composed herself. “Should we leave?”

We both knew the real question she was asking was if she should leave. And the truth is I never wanted her leave... I met her eyes, and looked away, sighing.

“Soon... but we came in here with a mission, didn't we?”

“Something about searching for clues to the Beaumont mystery, I think?”

“Right.” I looked away from her, and began searching the desk. I opened the first drawer, and right on top was a huge envelope, brimming with money. “Whoa!”

“What is it?” Myers stepped towards the desk.

“If I'm not mistaken, this is a fat envelope full of cash.”

Myers’ eyes widened as she took in all the money inside the envelope. “That's... that's what that is, all right. But, why is it here in the study.”

I turned the envelope.

201 Rue de Trois Freres
75108 Paris
FRANCE

“There's an address on the back... a French address! It looks like someone was going to mail this out today.”

“Drake... that has to be the missing money that Bertrand was talking about. We've got to take it to Maxwell.”

“Really? You want to trust Maxwell Beaumont with an envelope of cash?”

“Let's just say I trust him more than I trust Bertrand right now...” She pursed her lips. “Besides... did you see the way he was yelling at Maxwell? He's always looking down on him, berating him. He's got Maxwell so stressed out, it's...” she clenched her fists. “Sorry... I just hate it when people get stressed and take it out on others.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, me too.”

She took out her phone. “I'll text him to meet us here.” After typing quickly, she regarded me with a thoughtful expression. “I don't have your number.”
“What?”

“I don't have your number.” She repeated, shaking her phone in her palm. “I just realized… I have everyone's number but yours.”

“And…”

“. . . can you give it to me?” She said slowly.

“Is this your way of asking me out, Myers?” I teased.

“Well, how could I do that if I don't have your number?” She grinned.

I shook my head. “Fine.” She took out her phone and typed as I dictated. Then she called me, so her number was registered in my phone.

“There. Now you have mine too. Aren't you lucky?”

I really am. “I think it's the other way around, but whatever.”

She shoved me playfully. “Oh, I'll add you to the group chat!” Her eyes lit up as she took out her phone again.

“You guys have a group chat?”

“Yeah.”

“How come nobody added me?”

“I'm the group administrator. I was going to make Liam administrator, so he could add you, but then I forgot.”

My phone beeped with a new notification: Myers had added you to the group “❤️ Cordonia Rules!❤️”. “Seriously? Cordonia Rules heart, heart heart?”

She laughed, shrugging her shoulders. “It was all I thought of at the time!”

The door knob jiggled, followed by knocking. “Hey, you guys?! Open up!” Maxwell's voice carried into the room.

“Oh!” Myers rushed to open the door.

“Hey, what are you guys doing here? And why was the door locked?” His eyes narrowing as they flitted from Myers to me.

“We were looking for clues for the Beaumont Mystery!” Myers informed him cheerily, her hands on her waist. “I locked the door so that Bertrand wouldn't come in and yell at us for being in here.”

“Uh huh…” He shot me this look that screamed do you think I was born yesterday?, but I put forth my best poker face and met his gaze coolly. After a tense moment, he shook his head, muttering under his breath, “what is it about this damn study…”

“Huh?” Myers tilted her head, confused.
“Nothing. So, what's up? Your text sounded serious.”

“This is serious. Drake and I were in here, and we found this envelope full of cash.” She took the envelope from my hand and gave it to Maxwell.

“Oh, uh, wow! That… that must be the money that Bertrand was looking for. Thank you! You guys saved my life. Bertrand was ready to kill me over this.”

“No problem.”

Maxwell's face fell. “I think it's too late to get the staff back, but at least we found it.”

“But… how do you think the money ended up here?”

“Oh, you know, it's been so crazy lately. Bertrand probably put it here to give to the staff and then forgot about it or something.”

That… didn't make any sense. I mean, I know the guy's stressed, but now more than ever, he would not forget where he stashed this amount of cash.

“I don't think that Bertrand would forget something like that…”

Maxwell looked uneasy for a split second, before breaking out into a smile. “Yeah, I'll have to talk to him about it.”

I don't buy it.

I had this nagging feeling that Maxwell was lying through his teeth right now. Something's not right.

“You know, you can always tell us if you're in some kind of trouble.”

“Oh, no more than usual.” He pocketed the envelope. “Anyway, thanks for finding it! I owe you guys!” He moved quickly to the door. “But now we better get back to work before Bertrand realizes we've stopped cleaning!”

Myers and I shared a look as he stepped out.

“Something is off. You getting that feeling too?”

“Yeah… It seems like Maxwell might be hiding something.”

“And I want to know what it is.”

“Maybe we'll find more clues while prepping the house?”

“We'll see. Keep an eye out, but try not to be obvious about it.”

“Right.” She nodded sternly.

We both moved towards the door, our hands touching the door knob at the same time. She quickly pulled hers back, as I opened the door, and gestured for her. “Ladies first.”

“So chivalrous.”

I grinned. “Only for you, Myers. Only for you.”

She laughed and we made our way back to the ballroom.
Later that night, I was finally finished with the bloody bedrooms, and went down to the foyer to let Bertrand know; except when I got there, Bertrand was nowhere to be seen, and Liam was here with Myers.

I quickly hid behind the wall, blatantly eavesdropping.

“— shouldn’t be here at all. The party isn’t until tomorrow.”

I sneaked a peek. While Myers was smiling widely - her waitress smile - I knew her well enough by now to detect the irritated undertones in her voice. *It’s probably cause she’s tired. Bertrand worked her pretty hard today.*

“Something about you consistently compels me to do things I shouldn’t.” He took a step closer to her, taking her hand. “I arrived early because I knew you’d be here, and I wanted to see you before the festivities began.”

“Aww…”

I couldn't help my fists clenching as a wave of jealousy hit me.

“I know all of this must seem strange to you… jet setting around Cordonia, attending grand, formal events… I imagine it’s much different from dating as you usually know it in New York.”

“Heh. You could say that, yeah.”

“I appreciate that you’ve thrown yourself into courtly life with such enthusiasm, but I wanted to… meet you halfway, so to speak.”

My stomach tightened. Why was I even listening to this?

“Oh?”

“I also have this idea… it’s maybe a little silly, but… will you go on a date with me?”

“A… date?”

“My first true date. I want it to be with you.”

“We’re on an estate, surrounded by acres of vineyards. Where would we go? What would we do?”

“Leave that to me. I promise you, it’ll be a proper first date. Tonight, I just want to be Liam and Camilla, two normal people going on a normal date. What do you say? I know it’s a bit last minute…”

I felt crushed. Realistically speaking, there is no girl in the world who would say no to such an earnest propo--

“Liam, I’m sorry… it’s just… I’m a little tired after today.” What?! My jaw dropped to the floor in disbelief. She was… turning him down. “Maxwell and I have been preparing for the party since this morning… We made so many appetizers…”

As she rambled on, apologizing to Liam and making excuses, I had to fight the giddiness that coursed through my body, making me want to jump up and down with joy. And then, of course, I felt like the terrible piece of shit friend I am.
It's just… she'd turned down Liam… for me… That has never happened before.

You know, you don't have to be so happy about it.

I'm sorry! It's just… I couldn't believe it. Everything she'd said this morning was true…

“... I'd hate to keep you up then. Good night, Lady Camilla.” He took her hand and kissed it, failing to hide his disappointment… at least from me.

“Good night, Liam…” she rose on her tiptoes, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek, before turning up the stairs to her room.

I, very carefully and quietly, stepped back from the wall and headed back to my room.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone who's taken the time to review this story, or hit that kudos button. All of your kind words motivate me to keep writing.

Also, I added the bit with Maxwell, because:

1. I'm convinced he's smarter than he lets on, and if your MC told him she's falling for someone else, he wouldn't rest until he found out who.

2. I don't like it how, when your MC declares her love for someone other than Liam, nobody really comments on it, so I figured it was because they all suspected something was going on between your MC and their chosen love interest as well.
“Now that the dessert course has been served, the grand hall is now open. Please join us there for the after-dinner festivities!” Bertrand announced, and I rolled my eyes.

*Here we go…*

He began leading the nobles out to the Grand Hall, with Myers on his arm, the dutiful hostess. “Citizens, nobles, friends, we’re gathered here today to celebrate the end of the social season. So, if you’ll hear me out, I’d like to share a few words…”

I watched as Myers and Maxwell snuck off to the back of the staircase… They did the “let’s open the champagne with ancient weapons” trick *every single year.*

“…and so, with all of House Beaumont with me, let us propose a toast!”

Maxwell and Myers climbed up the stairs, Myers with an elegant dagger in her hand and Maxwell with a flail.

“To our gracious Royal Family…”

“To all those here tonight!”

“And to the PARTY! Let’s rock this place to the ground!”

"Yeah!" Maxwell swung the flail into the champagne bottle, shattering it into a million tiny pieces. I grimaced as I watched champagne drip down the floors Myers had scrubbed on her hands and knees yesterday.

“We never let a lost bottle stop us before! Bring out another!”

“WOOO!”

She didn’t seem to mind though, because in one swift move, she sliced open the champagne bottle with the dagger. “Whoo!”

Maxwell stared in awe at her, while Bertrand smiled indulgently. “From all of us at House Beaumont, thank you!”

As the King and Queen approached Bertrand and Myers, I watched Myers, smiling and nodding politely. She looked… like a princess. Her hair was tied up in a beautiful, and elaborate, braided bun, with wavy tendrils framing her face. Her dress was light blue, with a tight bodice and a full skirt. And yet… she looked uncomfortable as hell… not because of the King and Queen, but probably because of the dress. She kept fidgeting, adjusting her skirts, smoothing them over… She caught me staring, eyeing her dress, than rolling them. Yup, definitely the dress. I shrugged, and she shrugged, before turning her attention back to the King and Queen. Soon, their Majesties left, and Bertrand called for Maxwell.

“What?”

“Let the revelry begin!”
“AWWWW YEAH!” Maxwell gestured to the dj up on the balcony, and immediately, the lights dimmed and music blasted out from the speakers.

*Baby, this is what you came for*
*Lightning strikes every time she moves*
*And everybody's watching her*
*But she's looking at you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh, you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh, you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh*
*Oh, oh*
*Lightning, this is what you came for*
*Lightning strikes every time she moves*
*And everybody’s watching her*
*But she's looking at you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh, you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh, you, oh, oh*
*You, oh, oh*

People immediately began to dance, as Maxwell slid down the banister and began moonwalking. Acrobats and dancers made their appearance as well. I looked around for Myers, but couldn’t find her in the crowd.

“It’s been less than two minutes, and my ears hurt.”

“Come on, Drake, you usually give it at least five minutes before tapping out.” Liam clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“There’s so much happening!” Hana jumped excitedly.

“That’s the problem.”

“Bring out the horses!” Bertrand shouted, and the mob cheered, some raising bottles of champagne in the air.

I rolled my eyes. *Poor animals…* I thought, shaking my head.

“The horses!” Maxwell cheered.

“Horses?” Myers walked down the stairs, and my jaw dropped to the floor. I shut it quickly, before anyone could see. She’d changed into a form fitting electric blue dress, a black belt accentuating her tiny waist, and her long hair loose and falling in waves down her back. “You’re bringing horses in here?” She asked, stunned.

I nudged Liam, who was wearing a similar expression on his face. “Stop drooling, man.”

“I-”

“Who’s ready for a little horse riding?” Bertrand did a double take when he noticed Myers. “Why did you change out of your gown?!”

“It was uncomfortable as hell! Besides, the King and Queen already left.” She shrugged and walked right past him before he could continue.
“I am!” Maxwell shouted, oblivious to Myers and Bertrand’s exchange. He climbed on top of a horse and began leading it in circles.

“Great…”

“Who will be my partner?”

“How about our king-to-be?” Bertrand suggested.

Liam shook his head. “I nominate Drake as my proxy.”

“Oh, no. You’re not forcing me in the saddle tonight.”

“I vote for Milla!” Hana lifted her hand.

“Milla!”

“Come on then, Lady Camilla! Your saddle awaits!”

Myers gulped, looking severely uncomfortable. Liam immediately jumped to her rescue. “I’ll ride with you. And you’ll be pleased to know Midnight Rose made the trip with me from the palace.” He offered his hand, and she took it, giving me a quick look.

She smiled as a member of the staff led out Midnight Rose, who whinied as she saw Myers.

"Hey, beautiful girl. I missed you." Myers patted her nose gently.

The horse snorted, and Myers flinched a bit, but calmed as the horse pressed her nose to her shoulder.

"Shall we?" Liam asked.

I balled my fists as I saw my best friend mount the horse, then help her up in front of him, placing his arms around her. They rode together around the room with Maxwell, waving to the crowd.

“Drake?” Hana placed a small, delicate hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I…” I unclenched my fists, and she gave me a knowing look. “Fine.”

She nodded once, a sad smile on her face, and let go.

Damn it… this was getting out of hand. First Maxwell, now Hana… was it that obvious? My feeling for Myers?

Okay, relax… Get a hold of yourself.

“My fellow Cordonians, today, I ride for Cordonia!” Myers yelled, thrusting the dagger up to the sky.

“For Cordonia!” Liam echoed… one arm tightly around her waist.

“For Cordonia.”

“Woo. Riding a horse… yay.”

Up with it, girl
Rock with it, girl
Show them it, girl
Bada bam bam

“Wooooo! This is my song!” Myers jumped from the horse and up the stairs. She grabbed a microphone from the dj. “Don’t you dare change it!” He nodded, smiling, as Myers turned to Maxwell. “Maxwell, come sing back up!”

“Hell yeah!” He raced up the stairs, grabbing a mic,

“Bounce with it, girl
Dance with it girl
Get with it girl
Bada bam bam”

“Come on, come on, turn the radio on
It’s Friday night and I won’t be long”

The crowd cheered as Myers began singing.

“Woo, go Milla!” Hana shouted.

“Gotta do my hair, I put my make up on
It's Friday night and I won't be long
Til I hit the dance floor
Hit the dance floor
I got all I need
No I ain't got cash
I ain't got cash
But I got you baby

Baby I don't need dollar bills to have fun tonight!”

“I love cheap thrills!” Hana and a couple other ladies in the audience shouted. I snorted, seriously doubting they had experienced any cheap thrills.

“Baby I don't need dollar bills to have fun tonight!”

“I love cheap thrills!”

“I don't need no money
As long as I can feel the beat
I don't need no money
As long as I keep dancing”

Myers voice rang out clear and strong. She certainly wasn’t the greatest singer I’d ever heard, but she
was definitely talented, her voice smooth and velvety, hitting the perfect notes with ease.

Maxwell on the other hand… “You’re worth more than diamonds, more than gold!” Yikes…

Soon, the song ended and another came on. Myers and Maxwell handed the mics back to the dj, but they’d started a chain reaction, and all through the night, nobles climbed up the stairs to sing along with whatever song they knew.

As the night wore on, our little group - save Liam, who had to entertain the other suitors - drank and danced. And suddenly, I found myself just a little bit drunk, and face to face with Myers. She danced on up to me, pressing her body to mine and interlacing her fingers behind my neck.

“Myers…” I tried not to slur. “Someone might see.”

“Don’t care.” She closed her eyes, smiling widely. “Besides, they’re all too drunk to remember this in the morning.”

I placed my hands around her waist, and slowly, we moved to the beat.

“Baby, I think of you
When I'm all alone and it's half past two”

Myers sang along with the song, whispering in my ear. Her breath on my skin, and the lyrics of the song, sent shivers down my spine, my arms tightening around her. Someone might see! The voice in my head reminded me.

“Myers…” I growled warningly.

“Bet you think about it too
Ain't nobody love you like I do”

The smile she gave me was downright sinful, nearly making me groan as she kept singing to me, her body moving slowly against mine.

Someone might see!

I growled and tore myself away from her, heading out of the main hall. What in hell was she doing? Did she want everyone to see us? For Liam to see us? Did she know just what she did to me?

Of course she does, dumbass.

I stomped down a deserted hallway, ready to call it a night.

“Drake, wait!” I barely heard her yell with the thumping of the music.

“For what?! I whirl on her. “Myers, are you insane?! What were you thinking? Anyone could’ve seen—”

“Seen what?!” She yelled right back at me. “Us dancing?"

“You know very well what!” My chest heaved as I yelled. “That song…”

She smirked, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Did it… speak to you, too? Do you also lay awake at night, thinking of me?”
“Myers…”

She stepped closer ever so slowly, her hips swaying hypnotically. “Drake…”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I stepped closer to her and crashed my lips to her. She responded immediately, tugging on the collar of my shirt, as my hands roamed up and down her waist, her back, up to her neck and into her hair. I pressed her back to the wall, moaning as her lips left mine, kissing down my jaw and neck.

When we finally came up for air, I looked frantically around, but there was no one in the hallway but us.

“Such a worrywart…” Myers brought her hand to my cheek, making my eyes meet hers.

“Such a worrywart…” I felt dizzy, and I didn’t know if it was from the kiss, the alcohol, or the stress that we could get caught.

“Ssh.” She pressed her lips to mine quickly, before taking my hand and dragging me down the corridor, opening the first door she found. She pushed me inside what turned out to be a guest bathroom. “Better?”

“Not the most romantic setting, but…”

“Oh, shut up.” She pounced on me, wrapping her legs around my waist, kissing me deeply. I let my hands rest on her beautifully round, toned, perfect ass, holding her up. “Drake…” she moaned as I kissed down her neck and collarbone.

I walked to the counter, setting her down, her legs still wound tightly around me. She pulled me back in for a kiss, as her hands roamed down my chest, abs, and lower… Just before reaching my pants, she turned her hands back upwards, frantically trying to pull my shirt off.

I broke the kiss. “Myers. Myers, stop.”

“What’s wrong?” She looked at me with dreamy eyes, her cheeks rosy and her lips pink and swollen.

God… this woman was going to be the death of me.

“I just… we shouldn’t be doing this. I'm drunk, you're drunk--”

“I'm not drunk. I've barely had anything to drink.”

Okay… Well, I'm drunk and I really don't want our first time to be like this…

“Oh, really? And how do you want our first time to be like?” She grinned, and it took me a second to realize…

“Did I… say that out loud?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, shit… Myers…” I began to pull away, extremely embarrassed.

“Oh, come on!” She pulled me back to her. “How do you picture our first time?”

“Definitely sober. And not in a bathroom.”
And preferably after telling Liam about… whatever this is.

Myers laughed heartily. “Okay, stud. I won't take advantage of your drunken state tonight.” She hopped down from the counter, and pressed one last kiss on my lips. “Come on, let's get back to the party.”

She led me down the hall, the music getting excessively louder as we neared the main hall. As we got there, I let go of her hand and looked around.

“See? No one even noticed we left.”

“Millaaaa!” Hana ran towards us.

“Hanaaaa!” Myers met her halfway and took her hand, leading her to the dance floor. Hana turned back and noticed I wasn't following, so she whispered something to Myers, and they both ran back and began dragging me to the center of the dance floor.

“No! Let me go!”

“Come on, Drake! Dance with us!” Hana squealed. Wow… she was stronger than she looked, I thought as she pulled me with her.

They picked a spot and we began dancing, and soon were joined by Maxwell and Liam. Liam wordlessly offered his hand to Myers, who took it and danced towards him. I was relieved to see that she kept her distance, though.

Party girls don't get hurt
Can't feel anything, when will I learn
I push it down, push it down

“Wooo!” Myers screamed, “This is my jam!”

I groaned. “Another one?”

“Yeeeeeess!” She grabbed Hana’s hand. “Come on! I know you know it, too!” Myers began pulling her up the stairs.

“I-I-I--”

“Come on, Hana! Live a little! Cut loose!”

Hana got a determined look in her eye, and nodded. “Okay! Let's do this!”

They raced up the stairs, grabbing mics once more.

“One, two, three, one, two, three, drink!
One, two, three, one, two, three, drink!
One, two, three, one, two, three, drink!”

They both sang, Hana a little timidly at first, but soon she warmed up after an encouraging nod from Myers.

“I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier
I'm gonna live like tomorrow doesn't exist
Like it doesn't exist
I'm gonna fly like a bird through the night, feel my tears as they dry
I'm gonna swing from the chandelier, from the chandelier”

Lady Penelope and Lady Kiara stumbled up the stairs, obviously drunk, and joined them, the four of them belting out the lyrics together.

“And I'm holding on for dear life, won't look down won't open my eyes
Keep my glass full until morning light, 'cause I'm just holding on for tonight
Help me, I'm holding on for dear life, won't look down won't open my eyes
Keep my glass full until morning light, 'cause I'm just holding on for tonight
On for tonight”

“Yeeeeees!” Maxwell yelled.

“Get them a bloody chandelier!” I heard Bertrand yell, “Maxwell! Do we have any spare chandeliers?!”

“No!” Maxwell looked heartbroken. “We don’t!”

“No matter! Next time!” Bertrand raised a bottle of champagne into the air, before downing it quickly and tossing it on the floor.

The ladies finished their song, and Hana and Myers came down the stairs, both wearing grins from ear to ear.

“I can’t believe I just did that!” Hana squealed.

“I can! I told you you had it in you! And your voice is beautiful!”

“Thank you, Milla. Your voice is lovely as well.”

They hugged it out, and Lady Kiara and Penelope joined them once more.

“We were great!”

“Oui. Magnifique.” Kiara gave me a once over and sauntered over. “Bonjour, Drake.”

“Good evening, Lady Kiara.”

She placed a delicate hand on my chest. “Did you enjoy the performance?”

“It was definitely something.”

She smirked. “Won’t you ask me to dance?”

“Oh!” I looked over at Myers, who was watching our exchange intently, her eyes unreadable. *That’s a first …* Kiara took my hand, stepping closer, demanding my attention. “Sure.”

“Génial! Allons-y!” Her grip tightened on my hand and she led me out on the dance floor. I tried to keep my distance, but she pressed herself against me, turning and pressing her back to my chest. In the distance, I saw Maxwell bring out his bow and quiver, while a frightened looking servant behind him carried a small basket with apples.

“Over there! Right on top of Great Grandpa Ernest’s head!” He instructed, and the girl placed an apple on top of the bust, quickly stepping back. “For Cordonia!” Maxwell shot the arrow right past the bust, and it pierced the wall. “Another!”
He gave it several shots, missing all of them, when Myers went up to him and took the bow from him. *Finally*, I thought, relieved someone had taken a weapon away from Maxwell. But before I knew it, she knocked in an arrow and aimed for Great Grandpa Ernest. Before I could see if she’d hit her mark, Lady Kiara placed a hand on my jaw, making me meet her eyes.

*Well, this was awkward…* I tried disentangling myself from her grasp, when Hana came to get me. “Drake! Liam needs you!” She gave Kiara an apologetic look. “Pardon, Lady Kiara, the Prince told me it was an urgent matter.”

“Oui, aucun problème. Monsieur Drake, save me a dance for later.” She winked, and went on her way, as Hana pulled me towards where Myers and Maxwell were shooting.

“Hey, Hana…”

“Hmm?”

“Thanks.”

She grinned at me. “You're welcome.”

We reached Myers and Maxwell, who were taking turns shooting. They cheered when we joined them, and we spent the rest of the night trying to shoot the apple off Great Grandpa Ernest's head, as the party raged on around us.

After what felt like forever, things started winding down. I looked around and everything was in complete and utter chaos. The DJ had turned the music down a notch, Lady Kiara was lying on the floor in a corner somewhere, Lady Penelope was talking to a horse, and Bertrand was leaning drunkenly on a pillar, tightly clutching a bottle of champagne.

“It's over! I'm finally free!”

“What do you mean 'it's over'? The party's just getting started!”

“Lady Penelope is literally talking to a horse. The party has done its job.”

Of course, leave it to Myers to liven things up. “Back home, this was always about the time we'd break out a game of Truth or Dare, but I bet you guys are too classy for that.”

“You'd be betting wrong! I love Truth or Dare!”

“Truth or Dare? That sound dangerous!” Hana placed her hand over her chest.

“Well… only if you have something to hide… or a fear of embarrassing stunts…”

“It sounds… Fun!”

“I can't believe you've never played! Now we have to do it!”

“Oh no. I'm not playing Truth or Dare.” I shook my head.

“Come on, Drake!” Myers shoved me playfully. “We should do it for Hana.”

Hana opened her mouth, aghast. “I wouldn't want to pressure you guys into doing something on my behalf.”

“But I would!” Maxwell put his hands on my shoulders, shaking me. “Do it! Do it!”
“I see where this is going…” Maxwell kept shaking me.

“Drake! Drake! Drake!”

“Al right, all right!” I shook him off. “Okay… fine, I'll play! Just stop chanting my name.”

“Whoohoo! Someone's going streaking tonight!”

“We can play in my room!”

“Yay!” Myers cheered and took Hana's hand, both of them running up the stairs. Maxwell and I shared a look, before he bolted after them, while I followed along, resigned to my fate. Once inside Hana's room, she and Maxwell made the drinks, and the game began.

“Myers should start. This was her idea.” She shot me a mock glare, and I smirked.

“Okay, Milla. Truth or Dare?”

“Dare.” She said without hesitation.

“I dare you to prank call Madeleine, and pretend to be a reporter.”

“You're on!” She took out her phone. “Text me her number.”

Maxwell sent her Madeleine's contact info, and Myers dialed her, putting her on speakerphone.

“Here goes…” she grinned excitedly.

After a few rings, Madeleine picked up. “Hello?” She sounded incredibly irritated, and as any high born aristocrat, she let it be known. “This had better be important. You're interrupting my nightly white paper reading.”

“Hello, Countess Madeleine? My name is Jennifer Brown, from Trend, and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions, anonymously of course.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes.” She answered confidently. “As you know, a good reporter is always well informed, and I knew you would be attending the Annual Beaumont Bash, so I simply figured you would still be up at this late hour. And the news never sleeps.”

“You are correct, of course. I suppose I don't mind answering a few questions.”

Maxwell snickered, as Hana looked on with glee.

“We appreciate your cooperation, Countess. Now, is there any dirt you can give me on Lady Kiara?”

“She claims to speak over ten languages, but have you ever heard her utter even a single phrase in something other than English or French? I think she may have a tendency to... exaggerate... her accomplishments.” Myers looked at me and rolled her eyes, as I shook my head. Any opportunity to talk down the competition. Nobles. “Though she's a sweet girl, and I honestly wish her all the best.” Of course you do.

“Uh huh, uh huh. That's very interesting. Thank you for your time, Countess Madeleine.”

“You're most welcome. I look forward to seeing it in print!”
Myers hung up and instantly we all burst into laughter.

“Well, now we know what Madeleine really thinks.”

“Well done, Milla!”

“Thanks, but now it's your turn! Maxwell, truth or dare!”

“Dealer's choice! I'm not afraid of anything!”

Myers regarded him thoughtfully. “Okay, then… tell us a secret that no one knows about you.”

“Aw, I'm an open book! Everyone knows everything about me!”

Uh uh, not getting away that easily. “Nope.”

“Not true at all.” Myers backed me up.

“We almost know nothing about you!” Hana chimed in.

“Well, all anyone ever had to do was ask…”

That's… kind of sad. I almost got the impression nobody ever really got to know him as more than the “party friend”.

“Okay, let's see…” he continued, “I hate carousels.”


“When I was little, the court took all the kids to a theme park for the Prince's birthday. But when we were on the carousel, some reporters got in and mobbed us. The security team did their best to get us all out of there, but I was the last one they got to. So I was stuck on this dumb carousel for what seemed like forever with people taking pictures and shouting questions at me. I was only three… I had no idea what was really going on. And our parents had spent so much time trying to warn us about dangers, I thought I was about to get murdered.”

“Aww… Maxwell…” Myers reached out to him and hugged him.

He returned her embrace with a one armed hug, patting her back. “I'm fine. It was a long time ago.”

“Still…” Hana took his hand, squeezing lightly.

“Aw, geez, this is why I don't like to talk about serious stuff. I'm fine, you guys, just forget it! Next up… Hana, truth or dare?”

“Oh… um… truth!”

“Tell us about your first kiss.”

“My first kiss?”

“You have been kissed, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“You were engaged, after all!” Myers smiled broadly and winked.
“Well…” a blush crept up Hana's face and neck, and she looked away. “It was actually a very chaste courtship. Our first kiss was in front of a professional photographer for our engagement photo shoot. My parents were very insistent we publish a very public announcement in all of the papers. It was… somewhat awkward.”

“He wasn't a great kisser?” Myers frowned, while Maxwell and I looked at each other uncomfortably. It seemed we were about to enter serious girl talk territory.

“He missed.”

“Missed?” My jaw dropped. How was it possible to miss a girl's lips? You'd have to be a real idiot to… I stopped that train of thought when I caught Myers smirking at me, her eyes fixed on my mouth, before meeting my eyes. I shot her a - somewhat cocky - grin, before turning back to Hana. “How?”

“He kissed my ear. Well, he punctured his lip on my earing, actually. He started bleeding. I felt terrible. My parents were furious that he'd ruined my dress. It was a complete disaster.”

Wow…

“Aw… Hana, you deserved a better first kiss than that.”

“Thank you, Milla.” Hana beamed at Myers, “But it wasn't so bad. Looking back, it was actually pretty funny. I mean, who can miss that badly on a kiss?”

“Hah! I know! I mean, what a loser!” Maxwell joked.

I rolled my eyes. “Maxwell…”

“Okay, maybe I accidentally kissed someone's chin but that's, like, a totally understandable mistake, right? I mean, it's right below the mouth…”

Hana snickered. “Hee hee. Yes, that's completely normal.”

“Okay, my turn again! Milla, I dare you to go streak through the ballroom in your underwear!”

My eyes widened as I felt myself blushing. I seriously couldn't stand seeing her in the underwear tonight…

“That's not fair! It's not her turn.” Hana piped up.

Thank God for Hana.

“Yeah, and she didn't even choose dare.”

“Well someone should streak tonight or this game is a bust. Come now, Milla, it's your game. Who will it be?”

“Drake!”

I groaned. “Seriously, Myers?”

She shrugged. “You're the only one of us who hasn't gotten a turn yet.” She circled her wrist, motioning with her index finger to the rest of them. “We've all gone already.”

“That's true.” Hana said.
“Fine.” I grumbled as they cheered.

We made their way down to the empty ballroom, and I began unbuttoning my shirt.

“Wait! Wait!” Myers took out her phone and a sexy beat came on. She grinned at me. “Okay, now you can strip.”

“Wooo! Now it's a party!” Hana cheered.

*Here we are,*
*All alone in this room (ooh)*
*And girl I know,*
*Where to start and what we're gonna dooo*
*I'll take my time*
*We'll be all night girl*
*So get ready babe,*
*I got plans for me and you*

“Drake! Drake! Drake!” Maxwell cheered.

I turned around, blushing furiously, and took off my denim shirt.

“Wait, Drake!” Myers whined. “Don't just strip! *Strip!* Dance for us!” She elbowed Hana, who covered her face and giggled like a schoolgirl.

*Let me take you down*
*I really wanna take you down*
*And show you what I'm about*
*Can I take you now,*
*Ya body body ooh*
*Your body body up and down*
*So don't stop*
*Girl get it*
*Quit playin' wit it*
*Can't wait no more*
*I wanna take you down*
*I really wanna take you down,*
*Take you down*

I shook my head, ignoring her. “The things I do for you people.” I took off my shirt, and the girls cheered.

“Wooo! Go Drake!”

“Sexy!”

“Show off those abs!”

“Okay, I think you're enjoying this too much.” Maxwell chimed in.

“I agree!” I shouted, refusing to turn around.

“Oh come on! It's just some… friendly female appreciation, right Hana?”

“Well, Drake is very fit.”
“He's hot, Hana. You can say it.”

“He is very handsome.”

I turned my head and saw Hana blushing, while Myers looked very pleased with herself.

“Besides, you guys would do the same of it were us streaking.” Myers countered. “We're just teasing. No need to get so serious.”

She winked at me, and I shook my head, smiling. Here goes nothing… I pulled down my pants, kicking them off, and began sprinting through the room. The girls cheered loudly, and soon I turned the room and made my way back to them.

“Satisfied?”

“Yep! Now what?” Maxwell grinned. He turned to Myers and his eyes widened as he saw the girls pulling their dresses over their heads. He blushed furiously, as his jaw dropped slightly. Hah!

Myers wiggled out of her blue dress, revealing a lacy, black bra and panties. My mouth went dry as I took her in.

“Let's go, Hana!” She took Hana's hand and together they raced across the room, laughing wildly.

They made their way back to us, sharing a look, before ganging up on Maxwell.

“Come on, Maxwell!”

“It's your turn!”

“I'll be the photographer.”

“Maxwell!” Myers glared at him.

“I mean, I'll stand guard!”

“No! Come with us!” Hana took his hand, and Maxwell gulped as he eyed her up and down.

“I-I- Really, I'm fine here.”

“Okay…” she let go of his hand and stepped back.

“One more time?” Myers bumped me with her shoulder.

I slowly ran my eyes down her body, as she smirked, completely confident. “You're on.”

“Hana! One more time!”

“Wooo!” Hana took of without even answering.

Myers raced after her, laughing gleefully, and I followed suit.

“Freedom!” I extended my arms as I ran.

“Wooo!” Myers squealed.

“Truth or Dare!” Hana joined in.
We all ran around the room, back to Maxwell, and picked up our clothes, making our way back to Hana's room, running half naked.

Once inside, Myers and Hana collapsed on the bed, their chests heaving as they laughed.

“I can't believe we just did that!” Hana sat up, her eyes wide with excitement and adrenaline.

“Ah, the magic of Truth or Dare.” I said, as I pulled on my clothes.

“This was so much fun tonight! Thank you!” Hana pulled Myers in for a hug.

“Anytime!” Myers hugged her back, before they separated and began dressing.

“Yeah, you know me. I don't need much of an excuse to party.”

“Yeah, but for a guy who loves to party, you sure got shy down there.” Myers teased. “We all streaked, except you.”

“I prefer to watch.” He quipped, and she playfully slapped his arm, shaking her head indulgently.

“I'm… still not sure why I came this time, but I guess I'd do it again.”

“Drake!” Hana took my arm, jumping. “I think we're graduating from friends to best friends!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Let's not get ahead of ourselves!”

“I don't know, man. We all drink together, goof off together, spend most of our time together…”

“No…”

Hana hugged my arm. “It's too late, Drake! We are best friends!”

“I guess I'm just going to have to accept this, huh?”

“It's probably for the best.” Myers grinned. “You could do much worse than the three of us.”

“That's true, isn't it?” I sighed. “Okay, you got me.”

“Yay!”

“Yay!”

“Please tell me this isn't a thing we do now.”

“Yay!” Myers squealed.

“I'm surrounded.”

“Group hug!” She called.

“Oh no…”

“Group hug!” Hana called, hugging me tighter.

“Group hug!” Maxwell put his arms around both of us, as Myers rounded us out.

We broke the hug as Hana tried and failed to stifle a yawn. Maxwell put his arm around her, staring
at her tenderly. “Okay, we should probably call it a night before we break Hana.”

We said our goodbyes, and left Hana's room. Maxwell excused himself to go check on Bertrand, leaving me and Myers alone.

She took my hand, giving me a small kiss on my knuckles. “Hey, there.”

“Hey, yourself.” I looked around the hall, but it was empty.

“We should talk. Come to my room for a drink?”

“We… we shouldn't.”

“Just for a quick drink. I'll behave, I promise.” She grinned in a way that made me think she absolutely would not behave. “And I… really need to talk.”

I knew I shouldn't, and yet… “Fine.”

She led me back to her room, never letting go of my hand. I interlaced our fingers together, all while looking around to make sure no one saw us.

It felt so wrong … having to sneak around with her, but I wanted to… just spend some time alone with her… it wasn't even about… whatever we had going on between us. It was about the fact that I genuinely enjoyed her company. I enjoyed our conversations, our jokes, drinking with her and getting to know her.

She opened her door and led me in, making her way to the bar. I sat in her couch as she brought back two glasses of whiskey and sat next to me.

“Thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

We both sipped our drinks, the whiskey warming me up as it made its way down my throat.

“We need to talk.” Myers set her glass down on the carpet, tucking her legs underneath her as she turned to me. “About tonight, and yesterday, and the night before that.”

“Myers…”

“Just hear me out, will you?”

I nodded, as her eyes shone with an intensity and vulnerability I was growing accustomed to seeing. God, those eyes...

“I…” she closed her eyes and looked away. “I think…”

“Hey…” I pulled her chin, making her meet my eyes. We looked at each other for a split second, before she ran a hand through my hair, pulling me in for a kiss.

She kissed me sweetly, tenderly, before slowly demanding more. I cupped her neck, as she moved to straddle me, her hands tangled in my hair. The kiss grew more urgent, as we desperately tried to convey our feelings through it. Her hands ran down from my hair, to my neck, to my chest, as mine settled on her waist. Soon, we broke apart, our foreheads pressed together as we recovered our breaths.
“So much for talking.” I quipped.

“Way to ruin the moment, stud.” Myers laughed, giving me a quick peck on the nose. “Drake…”

“Myers…?”

“I… I need to know what this is…”

It was like a car screeched to a stop inside my head. “Myers…”

“Wait… just… let me say this.” She breathed deeply. “I want to talk about us. I want there to be an us. I want to be with you. I want to… officially withdraw from the competition.” She whispered.

“Oh, Myers…”

My heart began thumping in my chest, as blood rushed my ears. I felt dizzy, giddy, and just filled with… happiness, all at the same time. I thought of everything that happened this summer… from meeting her in New York, to those first few days together - when I was an absolute ass - to Lythikos, to here.

But… I also felt so guilty. I had completely betrayed my best friend. After I promised myself I wouldn’t do it, I’d gone behind his back and… I’d stolen the woman he loved. This beautiful woman who was literally willing to throw everything away for me.

And the worst part is that I didn’t even deserve her, whereas Liam… It wasn’t even about his position or title. It was about the fact that from day one he saw how special she is. He saw through the waitress uniform, and saw her; saw this smart, beautiful, driven, independent, kind woman, a woman who has everything it takes to be a great partner in life - a great Queen. Whereas I… I was a jerk to her for pretty much that first month she was here. It wasn’t really until she personally did something for me - standing up to the Ice Queen for a guy who was never even nice to her - that I stopped seeing her as the wannabe princess or baby deer; that I began seeing her as Camilla.

“Drake… Please say something.” Myers looked at me, her eyes filled with open concern.

I don’t deserve you, Camilla Myers.

It’s time, my conscience whispered, it’s time to put an end to… whatever this is. You can’t let her do this.

“Camilla… there is no us.” I felt a pang of pain in my chest as I saw her flinch.

“So you said yesterday… and then you kissed me.”

“Yeah, but… I just got caught up in the moment, Camilla.”

“Bullshit.” She called me on it. “You’re lying to me, Drake.”

I sighed. “Fine. But I did tell you yesterday. My best friend loves you. And I owe him everything. I can’t do that to him.” And to you… You don’t want to be with me, Myers.

“Are we really going to have this conversation again?” She pressed her palm to my chest, over my heart, smiling sweetly. “You’re not the only one who gets a say in this.” She ran her fingers through my hair. “I want you, Drake. And I know you want me, too…”

“Even so… you should be with Liam. He’s a better man than me, in every possible sense.”
“You can’t be serious right now…”

“I am. Myers… I can’t let you give all this up… You’re…” The words eluded me. “You’re amazing, okay? You’re smart, and funny, and kind, and sexy as hell. You deserve a guy like Liam. You deserve a Prince, who can give you everything you’ve ever wanted, everything you’ve ever dreamed of having. I won’t let you give all this up.”

“Drake…” she looked at me with wide eyes.

“Listen to me.” I took in a deep breath, fighting through the pain in my chest. I cupped her face, gulping as I looked her straight in the eye. A part of myself was begging me not to say these next words, but… “You’re here for Liam.”

“Drake, please… Please don’t ask me to do this…” She stared at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. “It’s not fair to me, it’s not fair to you, it’s not fair to Liam—”

“Myers… you’re going to marry Liam. He loves you, and in time, you’ll learn to love him. I’ll leave court, and—”

“No, Drake, I won’t.” Myers frowned, almost glaring at me, while her eyes glistened with tears she refused to let fall.

You need to be strong. It’s for the best.

“I’ll leave court,” I continued, “maybe go back to school, get a job, something. And you… you will be Queen.”

“No!” she shook her head ardently.

“Yes.” I took her head and pressed her forehead to mine. “Promise me, Camilla. Promise me you’ll do this for me.”

“You can’t be asking me to do this. You can’t be serious right now.”

I clenched my jaw as a lump settled in my throat. “Promise me, Camilla. You will do this, for me, for yourself, for Liam, and for Maxwell and Bertrand. They’re counting on you. You know it’s for the best.”

I watched as Myers fought to regain her composure. Her jaw was clenched tightly, her nostrils wide as she tried to control her breathing, and her eyes were glued to an aspit on the wall, refusing to meet mine.

“Promise me… please.” I pressed, practically begging.

Myers squeezed her eyes tight, and nodded once. I felt like I’d been punched in the gut, my heart breaking, but I gave her one last kiss on the forehead, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair one last time, before gently pushing her off my lap and back onto the couch.

She brought her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees, while laying her head on them. The sight hurt me more than I could’ve ever imagined, and I walked towards the door, unable to take it anymore.

“Goodbye, Myers.”

She didn’t respond, and I let myself out. I walked briskly to my room, locking the door and going
straight to the bar. With shaky hands, I poured myself a glass, quickly throwing it back as my chin began to quiver. I poured myself a second glass as my eyes teared up, and I desperately tried holding them back. As I downed the second glass, one single tear made its way down my cheek.

My breaths began to come in shorter and shorter as I'd realized what I'd done. My chest began to ache, and I got so worked up I threw the glass at the wall before collapsing on the floor. I stared at it in some kind of shock, while my conscience tried to convince me it was for the best. And deep down, I knew it was right. Liam and Camilla were perfect for each other, and in time, she would see that. She deserved the world, and he could give it to her.

*You did the right thing.*

But… if I did the right thing, why did it hurt so much?

Chapter End Notes

Once again I want to thank all of you for taking time to read, hit that kudos and review. All your kind words humble me and keep me going.

Now, I added this last bit because another that bothers me is that in book 1, even if you decided to romance another character other than Liam, everyone (your MC included) still don't even question that you'll marry Liam nonetheless. As someone who decided very early on that I'd be romancing Drake, this bothered the hell out of me. Like, not even a conversation of "hey I really like you and I wanna see where this goes, and I don't want to marry Liam and be queen"? So I'm adding that here. My MC Milla was definitely not comfortable leading Liam on, and she just wanted to be honest and be with Drake, so that's the approach I'm going with over here. Now Drake, in all his noble, selfless Drakiness, wouldn't want to hurt his best friend and rather sacrifice himself for the greater good *sighs*, one of the many, many, many reasons I love him.

Oh, and also, the songs mentioned here obviously aren't mine. In order of appearance:
This is what you came for - Calvin Harris ft. Rihanna
Cheap Thrills - Sia ft. Sean Paul
Like I Do - David Guetta, Martin Garrix and Brooks
Chandelier - Sia
Take You Down - Chris Brown
After a night of fitful sleep, I woke up to someone shoving my shoulder.

“Go away.” I mumbled sleepily, hugging my pillow.

“I am. I just thought I'd see if you will be returning with me or if you'll fly back to the palace with Milla and the Beaumont Brothers.”

I shot up from the bed to find my best friend smirking at me. “Definitely with you.” I groaned as my eyes failed to adjust to the bright lights, and my head began to pound.

“You look rough… Have too much fun last night?”

*I did… until the end of the night.*

I forced a smile, knowing it didn't reach my eyes. “Yeah… you got me.”

“Okay, well, let's see if we can get you some coffee and some Advil before boarding.”

“Yeah, thanks man.”

“Are you packed?”

I shrugged and grinned. “I never bothered to unpack.”

Liam smirked at me and shook his head slightly. “Very well. I'll wait for you to shower and we will go.”

I got up, searching for my phone. The screen lit up, flashing the time: 8 AM. I stifled a groan. *Doesn't matter, I'll sleep during the flight.* I showered as quick as I could, got dressed, got my bag and made my way downstairs, to find Bertrand and Maxwell seeing Liam off.

"We hope you enjoyed the festivities, Your Highness."

"I did. It was a splendid event, as always." He turned and saw me coming down the stairs. "Ah, Drake. Ready to go?"

"Yeah, all set."

"Drake, you're going? I thought you'd ride back with us…” Maxwell said, a bit disappointed.
You mean you thought I'd stay to help clean up. I rolled my eyes, but couldn't help a small grin. "Well, since Liam woke me up so early, I figured the least he could do was give me a ride back."

Liam grinned. "Of course. And on that note, we really should get going now. We've kept the plane waiting long enough."

"Of course, Your Highness. Have a safe and pleasant flight." Bertrand nodded.

"Thank you, Duke Ramsford. I will see you at the Coronation next week. And, uh… give my regards to Lady Camilla."

Bertrand grinned. "Of course, Your Highness."

Liam nodded in thanks, and walked out of the estate. I began to follow when Bertrand stopped me, pulling my arm. "Drake… Thank you… for all of your assistance yesterday, and… for your discretion."

Uh… I didn't really know what to say; I mean, I didn't really do it for him, it was for… Myers. So, I just nodded once, and he let me go. I walked out, put my bags in the trunk and climbed into the limo. Soon, the Beaumont Estate disappeared behind us as we made our way to the airport.

I stared out the window at the lush green vineyards, my mind reliving the events of last night; Myers pressing herself against me as we danced, kissing her in a guest bath, Myers running in the ballroom in black lingerie… Myers clenching her jaw, eyes looking everywhere but me, refusing to let tears fall as I told her we couldn’t be together… Myers hugging herself as I left the room.

Myers, Myers, Myers… I shook my head. What's done is done, I told myself, and it's all for the best.

"Drake," Liam's voice pulled me from my thoughts, "are you okay?"

"Fine." I shook my head. "Just a rough night."

Liam looked like he wanted to say something, and I knew he didn't buy it, but he nodded once and let it go nonetheless. We sat in companionable silence for a moment, before I spoke up.

"Liam… I, uh… I have to tell you something."

"What is it?" He asked, his eyes filled with concern.

"I'm, uh… I'm thinking of leaving court for a while, after the Coronation. I'm thinking of going back to Texas, visit my mom…"

"Drake…"

"I just figured you'll be really busy… with the Engagement Tour, and then the wedding… you won't really need me…"

Liam closed his eyes and sighed. "Drake… I know how hard it's been these last few months, what with Savannah and all… And I know I haven't been a very good friend lately; I’ve been preoccupied with the suitors and the Coronation…"

"What? No! That's not what I meant!"

"I know, but still. I know I’ve been busy, and that we haven't had much time together, and for that I apologize. And I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but… Drake, you're my best friend. I need you here. I am… afraid of what will happen the next few months, and… I need my best friend.
If you could delay your visit for just a few months... just until everything's settled..."

I can't watch you marry her...

But I can't leave you alone either.

I stifled a groan. "Fine."

He clapped my shoulder, looking relieved. "Thank you, Drake. You're truly the greatest friend in the world."

No... I'm really not. Once again, I didn't know how to respond to that, so I just nodded my thanks.

"Besides... I need my best man beside me at the cathedral."

It felt like I'd been kicked in the gut, but I forced myself to smile through the pain. "Right... Don't do it... "So, you've decided, then? Who...?" You did it. I mentally facepalmed myself.

He nodded, grinning like a lovesick teenager.

"I'm happy for you, man." I clapped his back.

"Thank you."

I nodded. You deserve her.

We pulled into the airport and boarded the jet. Once we were all buckled up, and the plane had taken off, I shut my eyes and slept.

During the course of the week, I avoided Myers like the plague. We were all back at the palace, and I was jumping through hoops to avoid bumping into her. I steered clear of the kitchen after hours, and just the west wing in general.

I bumped into Hana in the hall one day, and she offered me to go riding with them:

"Hey, Drake! She walked cheerfully towards me. "Milla and I are about to go riding. I want to help her get better acquainted with Midnight Rose. Would you like to join us?"

"Uh... no, thanks, I can't, actually... I have to go... meet Bastien, to talk about... something."

"Oh, is it classified? I won't keep you, then. I'll see you later!" She smiled and gave me a brief hug before going on her way.

Then, I ran into Maxwell, who tried to convince me to go out from cronuts again.

"Come on, Drake! We haven't all hung out since the Beaumont Bash!"

"What about Liam? I frowned.

"Well, if we count Liam, then we haven't all hung out together since the fox hunt! Come on, you have to come!"

"I can't." I said curtly. "I have to go help Liam with something."

He gave me this look, like he didn't believe me, but shook his head and let it go. "Okay... I'll bring you back a cronut."
I snorted. "I won't hold my breath."

He grinned. "Well, it's the thought that counts."

Later that week, I was walking along the hall, when something outside the window caught my attention. I looked out into a small, unremarkable garden - one of the many gardens in the palace - where Myers was sitting crossed legged under a tree, her laptop on her lap, and headphones over her head. Her fingers tapping swiftly and furiously over the keys, and I watched her from the window as she continued to write whatever it was she was writing.

I felt the corner of my mouth quirked up involuntarily as I remembered that first flight on the way back to Cordonia. The way her brow furrowed in concentration, the weird music she listened to while writing, the way her nimble fingers flew over the keyboard… I remember thinking she wouldn't last a week. And yet… here she was. And that flight felt like a lifetime ago; so much had happened since then.

I heard footsteps coming towards me, and turned to find Bastien approaching.

He nodded. "Drake."

"Hey, Bastien."

He looked out the window, his eyes narrowing as he saw Myers. "Still on bodyguard duty?"

I shook my head. "I was just passing through."

"Really? And you just so happened to stop to admire the view?"

"What are you trying to say, Bastien?"

"I'm saying that I've been watching you stand there, pining for her, for the last 10 minutes." He checked his watch. "Eleven now."

"I-I'm not pining for her. I was just—"

Bastien sighed. "I knew this would happen." He shook his head. "Oh, my boy. Of all the girls in the world, you had to fall for the one you couldn't have…"

"I did not fall for her!"

"Drake… don't lie to me."

I clenched my jaw and looked pointedly out the window, refusing to meet his eyes

"Have you told her?" He pressed.

I thought about lying… but he was one of the few people who could see right through it. The others were Savannah and my mom, and sometimes, Liam - though I'd gotten pretty good at hiding my emotions around him this past season. And so… I gave Bastien a small, almost imperceptible nod.

"Ah. And does she… return your feelings?"

Yes.

"It doesn't matter." I told him, finally daring to look him in the eye. "She's going to marry Liam."
I saw as Bastien's jaw tightened just a bit, and he looked down at the floor for a split second, before answering quietly. "You don't know that."

"Oh, but I do."

"It's not over until it's over. Until there's a ring on her finger, nothing's really set in stone."

That's strange… The last time we talked about Myers, he didn't seem to approve. Something's changed here. I narrowed my eyes, but he met my gaze with an impenetrable one of his own.

I sighed. "Listen, Bastien, don't worry about it. It's… barely a small crush, it'll go away on its own."

"That night, in the kitchen, it seemed like it was more than that. As did at the day of the Regatta, during the beach party, and--"

"It's not." I cut him off, through gritted teeth. "It's nothing, really. I should go. I have to… go do something."

Bastien sighed and clapped my shoulder. "Very well. And Drake… I'm sorry."

Sorry of how pathetic I am? I nodded curtly and walked away, sparing a final glance at Myers.

And just like that, the night of the Coronation Ball finally arrived. The palace was buzzing with nervous energy and anticipation. I steered clear of the boutique, the main hall and the ballroom; all three places full of rushing servants making last minute preparations or frantic suitors getting their hair and make-up done.

I showered and pulled my old grey tux out of the closet. I never really felt the need to dress up for these events, but tonight… tonight was different. I donned the suit, making quick work with the tie, and headed to the ballroom.

I snuck in through one of the back entrances, once Liam and all the rest of the court had already made their entrance. I couldn't help myself as my eyes searched the crowd for Myers. After a week of not seeing her…

I spotted her on the dance floor, already in Liam's arms, smiling. She looked… it wasn't fair how gorgeous she looked. She really looked like a princess, like a noble, like a bride. She'd chosen a beautiful white gown with gold detailing, had let her hair loose, falling in soft waves down her back, with a braided bit at the front.

God, she reminded me so much of Savannah. She looked the exact same way that final Beaumont Bash. So hopeful, so happy, like she belonged there. And looking at Myers now, you could never tell she wasn't actually born into this life. She'd changed… she… was one of them now. And after tonight, she would officially be a princess.

I watched as Olivia asked to cut in, and Myers began making her way off the dance floor. Our eyes met across the room, my heart racing in my chest as I saw her eyes widen, shock and sadness and longing flashing through them, before she took a deep breath and walked towards me.

I cleared my throat. "Camilla."

"Drake. I didn't know you'd be here tonight."

"Liam insisted. I guess I should congratulate you."
"Drake…" Don't, her eyes pleaded. 

"You look exactly like one of them. I guess you are one of them, now." Hurt flashed through her eyes, but she managed to hide it quickly. "This time tomorrow, you might even be the Queen. And then our lives are going to go in very different directions."

"Drake… even if I'm chosen to be the Prince's bride," I rolled my eyes. At this point, it was obvious she would be chosen, even if she didn't want to admit it. "I'll still be me."

I gave her a once over. "Looking at you now… It's hard to believe that. This place has a way of changing people… and some of us liked the girl you used to be. You know that, right?"

"I promise, I'm still the same Camilla. And if I get too cocky, just remind me that the first time we met, I was taking out the garbage and waiting tables."

"Feels like so long ago, now. Can't believe it's only been a few months."

"Yeah… but after everything that's happened, it feels more like once upon a time…"

"Spare me, Myers. Fairy tales are for kids."

"I suppose you're right. Life here isn't all sparkles and fairy godmothers. And true love's kiss doesn't always conquer all…" The corners of her mouth quirked downwards as she gave me a pointed look.

I simply shook my head, deciding to ignore her last comment. "I'm glad you're seeing it for what it is." This place isn't a fairytale, and there's no such thing as happily ever after.

She shook her head, failing to suppress a small smile. "Still… It's nice to get a chance to talk to you tonight… I… missed you this week."

Oh, Myers… I missed her, too. She gave me this knowing look, like she knew I'd been avoiding her. But it was really for the best… the last time we talked… I couldn't face her after that. And yet, here she was. She could've walked away, not given me the time of day, but here she was. And here I was, throwing everything back in her face, calling her one of them, when she knew that I, of all people, did not mean it as a compliment. She knew how I felt about the nobility.

I really am such an ass.

"Camilla, I…" I had no words.

"What is it?"

"I…"

"There you guys are!" Hana shouted, running excitedly towards us.

Myers jumped, before plastering her waitress smile on her face.

"Whoa, Drake dressed up!"

Music swelled around us as a new waltz began, couples forming quickly on the dance floor.

"Drake…" Myers lightly grazed my arm, "may I have this dance?"

"Me? I thought I told you, I don't know how to waltz."
She smirked slightly. "Then you can follow my lead." Myers took my hand and led me out onto the dance floor. From the corner of my eye, I saw Maxwell offering his arm to Hana, who graciously accepted.

I looked around at the other couples in the ballroom, and tried to mimic their postures. I stood up straight, taking Myers' right hand with my left, and placing my right hand on her waist. She smiled as she placed her left hand on my shoulder. "Is this right?"

"It's perfect. You're doing great. Just relax." She said sweetly, giving me a tender smile that made my heart swell.

I took a deep breath, relaxing as I held her, and let my feet move to the beat, following her lead. "You're... you're really good at this, Myers."

"Thank you."

"You're most welcome." I said, using a stuffy, nobly tone of voice. She laughed, and I grinned. "See? I can be a gentleman from time to time."

"Only when it suits you, I see."

"Pretty much."

"You should twirl me now."

"Huh?!"

"Twirl me! Just lift your arm, and I'll do the rest."

I gulped. "Okay..." I lifted my arm, and she effortlessly spun underneath, the picture of grace. Her eyes never left mine. "That was..."

"Why Drake, you look impressed."

"You always seem to impress me, Myers."

She blushed. "We make a good team, Drake... They say you can tell a lot about a couple by the way they dance together..."

**Myers... I know what you're doing.** I narrowed my eyes at her, and she gave me an innocent, doe eyed look. "Yeah, well... just because we've managed not to step on each other's toes yet, doesn't mean we're not going to at some point of the evening."

She shook her head and sighed.

The music soon reached its climax, and soon the waltz ended. "Well, Myers, I guess I should thank you for the dance."

"We'll make a gentleman of you yet."

"Heh." I took her hand, bowed and kissed it. "Thank you for the dance, Lady Camilla."

She smiled, as Hana and Maxwell approached us. "Mmm!" Maxwell was practically drooling, as he sniffed the air. "Ready to hit the hors d'oeuvres table?"

"I'd love to!" Hana smiled.
"Great, more fancy finger food." I rolled my eyes.

"It'll be fun. Come on!" Hana took my hand and dragged me towards the table.

"Man, these look fancy! Think these'll stack up to the appetizers we made?" Maxwell asked.

Myers shrugged. "Only one way to find out!" She picked up something on a plate, biting into the small piece of bread with gusto.

"Oh, the bruschetta. Excellent choice." Hana complimented, picking out something on a spoon for herself.

Myers moaned. "Okay, it's delicious…"

"But nothing compared to our caviar and paprika creation!" Maxwell yelled, and I rolled my eyes. *God, will you give it a rest with those things?*

"You guys still haven't really explained why you were the ones making the appetizers that day."

Myers, Maxwell and I all looked awkwardly at each other. Myers cleared her throat. "Hana… House Beaumont personally ensures quality."

"Oh, a very hands on approach to everything? They say that all the best restaurants are run that way."

Maxwell bowed his head at Myers, shooting her a grateful look. She returned it with a nod of her own.

"That's us… practically a Michelin star restaurant…" I played along.

"Well, one can't argue with the results."

"Yeah, and there's no one I trust more than Milla and Drake when it comes to… basically everything." Maxwell added.

"Heh, thanks Maxwell."

"Yeah, thanks, buddy."

Hana sighed. "I'm going to miss you guys…" Hana looked at us all, "Lady Camilla already knows this, but… tonight's my last night at court. My parents have officially called me home. I must depart tomorrow morning."

"Aww, Hana…" Maxwell placed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her into a quick hug. "That sucks!"

I placed a hand on her shoulder. "I'm really sorry to see you go, Hana."

"Thanks, Drake."

Maxwell’s eyes suddenly widened. "But, hey… if this is your last night here, then you've got nothing left to lose!"

"Except my dignity."

Maxwell clicked his tongue. "Dignity is overrated."
"Maxwell!"

"I'm just saying... you know how people are always saying 'party like there's no tomorrow'? Well, for you, there really is no tomorrow. So we should really partaaay!"

"I don't know..." Hana still looked unconvinced.

"Come on. There must be a few things that you've been dying to do since you came here." Maxwell pressed.

"Well... There are a few things I never checked off my list... but I don't know..."

"Come on, Hana!" Myers cheered, "It'll be fun for all of us!"

And that was all it took to convince Hana. She wanted to have a final moment with each of us, to say goodbye in different ways. And I was up first.

"Drake, my last moment with you should definitely involve whiskey."

I grinned. "Now I like where this is going. What did you have in mind?"

"I want to have a shot of whiskey with you."

"I'm sold."

"But not the bar's whiskey. Your whiskey."

Myers flashed me a wicked grin as I groaned. "You heard her."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. You want me to share my 'break in case of emergency' whiskey? I'm not sure Hana can handle it."

"Come on, she's tougher than she looks." Myers bumped Hana with her shoulder.

"Why do I have a bad feeling about this..."

"Drake..." Hana batted her eyelashes at me.

"Who's to say I even have whiskey on me? This is a formal event!" I looked to Maxwell for help, but he was holding his hand against his mouth, snickering.

"Drake..." Myers glared at me, a warning in her tone.

"Okay, okay!" I raised my hands in front of me. Down, girl. I reached into an inner pocket in my jacket and pulled out my flask. I flagged a servant, who retrieved four shot glasses from the bar and set them down in front of us. I only filled two.

"None for the rest of us?" Maxwell asked.

I sighed in defeat. "This is why I never wanted friends." I filled the other two glasses. Shot in hand, I raised mine. "Here. To you, Hana."

"Hana!" Maxwell and Myers repeated, and we all downed our shots.

"That's strong!" Hana said, suppressing a cough.

"Of course. It's my personal stash. You think I'd get the weak stuff?"
From the corner of my eyes, I saw Myers shaking her head, a cocky grin on her face.

Hana finally coughed, unable to suppress it anymore. "You know, Drake, you're a lot nicer than you let on. I'm going to miss you."

_Aw, Hana._ I tried not to blush. "Hell, I'll miss you, too. You're nothing like the other nobles."

"Thanks, Drake. That means a lot." She reached out and gave me a hug, which I returned somewhat awkwardly.

When we pulled apart, I cleared my throat. "Okay, that's about all the sentimentality I can handle for one night. Good luck, Hana."

"You too, Drake."

I nodded and waved at the rest of them, heading out. I spotted Bastien in the corner of the room, watching everything intently.

"Drake." He greeted me, never taking his eyes off Liam. "It seemed like you were having fun." He smirked. "I'm happy to see you have more friends, other than Liam."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Lady Camilla looks beautiful tonight. What a wonderful dancer, don't you think?"

"Bastien…" I practically growled warningly.

"Drake." He said simply, undeterred. "She did not seem as happy dancing with the Prince as she did with you."

"Bastien…" My anger faded, and I basically pleaded for him to stop. "I told you, it doesn't matter. She's here for Liam."

Bastien merely nodded, and I began to walk away. I pulled on my collar, desperately needing some air.

"Drake… whatever happens tonight…" I turned back to him. "I just want you to know… I truly am sorry."

"So you've said."

I wanted to tell him not to worry about it, that I'll be fine, but honestly… I don't really know for sure if I will be. With a final nod, I headed outside.

I wandered to a small bar on one of the gardens, and just sat there, on one of the stools. I honestly didn't know if I'd be able to do this. I mean, really… how could I watch Liam propose to Myers? How could I watch her say yes?

_You have to… for Liam's sake, and hers…_

_I… can't._ I knew it was selfish of me, I knew it. But--

"Hey… can we talk?"

I sighed. _Of course she'd find a moment alone before the night was over._
"Go ahead. You know I'm always willing to talk to you." I gestured to the bar, shaking my head. "What's a guy gotta do to get a drink around here?"

Myers smirked, her eyes lighting up. "Well, lucky for you, in addition to being a waitress, I took a turn or two at the bar whenever the occasion called for it." She slid confidently behind the bar, picking up a cocktail shaker.

"You're gonna make me a drink?"

"The best you've ever had." She winked at me. "Now, let's get started. First, we need something sweet..." She knelt down behind the bar, perusing the bottle. "Ah ha!" She came back up, holding a bottle of Peach Liqueur. "You could use something to sweeten you up."

"Hah. Funny." I should my head, my lips quirking up in a small smirk. "Well... at least this will be interesting."

"Next..." Myers looked at me, her eyes intent. "Something down to earth." She dipped below the bar again, coming back up with a bottle of orange juice. She twisted the cap and the bottle opened with a pop.

"Alright..."

"And then we top it off with..." once again a trip below the bar, and she shimmied up, shaking a bottle of whiskey in her hand. "A double shot of whiskey."

I couldn't help my grin. "You know, you could've just poured me a whiskey on the rocks and I would've been a happy man."

"And where would the fun begin that?" She began mixing the drink vigorously. "Now, are you ready for the final result?"

"Never been more ready." She poured the drink into two glasses, sliding one towards me. I took a tentative sip, letting the sweet and citrusy flavors drift onto my tongue, all underlined with the subtle taste of whiskey. Wow... It was actually pretty good.

"Well?"

"I could get used to this."

She beamed at me, and took a seat next to me.

"Done playing bartender?"

"For now." She sipped her drink, humming appreciatively. "Besides, the last customer didn't even leave a tip!" She gave a teasing grin.

"Sorry. Must've left my wallet in my other fancy jacket."

"Speaking of which..." her eyes roamed from my face down my body. "You look handsome."

I looked away, trying not to blush. At least it was kind of dark out here, so I don't think she noticed. "I mean, I know I'm no Prince Liam..."

Myers rolled her eyes, shaking her head slightly. "You clean up good, Drake."

"Thanks."
"And here I thought you said you'd only dress up if there was someone you wanted to impress."

"Yeah, well… I guess maybe I found someone worth impressing."

"Drake…" She reached for my hand… I reached for my drink, and she slowly withdrew her hand.

"If only for tonight." I took another sip of my drink. "Anyway, I'm glad we got to have a few minutes out here together. Thanks for the drink, Myers."

"Hey… you're always calling me by my last name… and I don't even know yours."

"And you consider us to be friends."

She regarded me for a second, her eyes guarded, before looking away and taking a sip of her drink. "I do. So tell me."

"What is it with you and prying into my life? Can't you let a man keep a few walls up?"

"I think we're a little bit beyond these games by now. Come on, tell me."

I sighed. "If you must know… it's Walker."

I watched as Myers tried, and failed, to suppress a smile, letting it spread slowly over her face, her dimples gradually growing deeper on her cheeks. "Walker, huh?"

I nodded.

"I guess I better start calling you Walker."

"Oh, no…"

"What's wrong, Walker? Turnabout's fair play."

"Calling you by your last name is my thing."

"Too bad, Walker."

"Fine, I guess I can start calling you Camilla."

She gave me a quizzical look. "It just feels weird to hear you say that now!"

"See?"

"Okay, okay, Drake it is." We laughed, and I found myself marveling at the fact that despite everything… this was easy. It was easy to talk to her, to joke with her, to be with her… She caught me staring, and I quickly looked away and took a long sip of my drink.

"Drake…" she beckoned me.

I turned to face her, and saw how she'd turned serious. "What did you want to say earlier, when Hana and Maxwell… when we were interrupted."

"I was going to say that I was wrong. No matter what happens tonight… Crown or no, engaged or… not." She gulped. "You're still you."

Her eyes softened, shining with tears she quickly blinked away. "Weren't you just telling me how I'm one of them now?"
Oh, Myers… I realized then how much I’d hurt her. And I didn’t mean to hurt her, I was just upset about Savannah and about us. I was more angry with myself, not with her… and yet, I hurt her.

"I was being an idiot. I shouldn't have said that. I knew it as soon as the words were out of my mouth. You didn't deserve that."

Myers looked away, discreetly wiping a tear that had managed to escape as it rolled down her cheek. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I was out of line." I dared to take her hand and squeezed. She looked at me once more. "It's just… in that moment, when I saw you at the ball… You reminded me of Savannah. How she was the last night we went out with the nobles, at that party. She was so happy in her fancy gown, with her hair all done up. So hopeful. She lit up the entire room. She really believed she'd made it. That she was one of them. And I still don't know what happened to her, what made her leave. But it was bad. It was something that broke her. I'll never forget how devastated she looked the day before she disappeared. She looked hopeless, like she'd given up."

I remembered Savannah's eyes the most. They were red rimmed and puffy, but if you took a deeper look, like I should have, they were… haunted, and scared, and just… hopeless. And just as quickly, Savannah's eyes were replaced in my mind with Myers'. And it killed me… to see those beautiful, dark chocolate eyes filled with that much despair.

"And when I looked at you tonight…" I took a deep breath, "I couldn't stop myself from imagining the same thing happening to you. This place seems shiny and wonderful, but the truth is, it breaks people, Myers. And I… I don't ever want to see you broken."

"Drake… I'm sorry about Savannah." She squeezed my hand, and interlaced her fingers with mine.

"Thanks. I know she would've liked you." I looked down at our hands. "Hell, Myers. My life would've been so much easier if I could've just hated you. I--"

I looked away. My life really would've been easier, but it would've been empty too. I looked at her, and was almost overwhelmed by how much I wanted her. How much I needed her. She was like no one I'd ever met, and I… I owed it to her, to myself, to us a final farewell.

"What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking…" my heart began pounding in my chest, as the blood rushed to my ears, intensifying the pounding. "If this is the last time I'm going to be alone with you before you're an engaged woman," she looked at the floor, "I'd be a damned fool not to kiss you."

She gasped, her eyes meeting mine head on. She stood. "Drake," she whispered my name, "kiss me now."

I took her face in my hands, and crushed my lips to hers. Myers responded in kind, running her hands through my hair. She tasted of peach, and orange, and whiskey; her taste and smell driving me wild. It was as if I was drowning and she was my first breath of fresh air, as if I was parched and she was my first sip of pure water. I never wanted to stop kissing her, never wanted to stop running my hands down her body, I never wanted to stop this moment, this feeling.

Finally we came up for air, both of us breathless. Myers pressed her forehead against mine, her eyes shut tightly.

"Myers, I want to remember this. Right here. I don't want to know what happens next. I just want to stay here in this moment with you."
"Drake… we can… There's still time for me to get out of this…"

"Myers… we can't… you can't…"

She nearly growled in frustration, but pulled me by the lapels of my jacket and crushed her lips to mine. We heard the doors to the palace open and the raucous yelling of partygoers, and we broke apart.

I sighed. "Looks like the party found us."

"It's not really a night where you can get any privacy, is it?"

"You'd better head back inside."

"What about you?"

"I'll be out here until… it's time."

She gave me this look… a look I'd never seen on her face before: a look of desperation, pleading, begging. "Drake… I don't know if I can do this… how can I agree to marry someone I don't love?"

"I…" I took a deep breath, gathering my courage. "You can. You must. And, trust me, you… Liam is easy to love."

The look in her eyes changed, to utter disappointment. "So you're sticking with that? That 'I'll learn to love him'?" She laughed, but there was no joy in it, shaking her head slightly. "I know we talked about this last week, but… for some reason, I still hoped… " She tsked her tongue. "I guess it doesn't matter now. Drake… are you sure this is what you want?" Myers looked me dead in the eye. "If I go back inside…" she whispered, "I'm not coming back…"

This is it. Once I do this, there was really no going back. But it's for the best… for everyone.

"I am." I said hoarsely, trying to maintain my poker face, while I could practically feel my heart breaking.

Myers closed her eyes, clenching her jaw. She took a deep breath, slowly opened her eyes, and nodded once. "Goodbye, Drake."

"Goodbye, Myers."

Time passed in a blur, as I just sat there, staring at the doors to the palace, the image of Myers' back, walking away, forever engraved in my memory.

It's for the best. She's here for Liam. You did the right thing.

All these thoughts whirling inside my head over and over again, on constant repeat.

It's for the best. She's here for Liam. You did the right thing.

It's for the best. She's here for Liam. You did the right thing

It's for the best. She's here for Liam. You did th--

"Drake?" Hana's voice was a blessed, and unwanted, interruption. "What are you doing out here all by yourself?"
I tried to smile, but it felt so horribly forced. "Hey, Hana. I was just…" I opened my mouth and closed it, not really knowing what to say.

"What's wrong?"

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak just yet, and Hana just gave me a sad look and sat in the stool next to mine. She gently placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

We sat there in companionable silence, which was honestly just what I needed. If it had been Maxwell who'd come out looking for me, he'd probably have talked my ear off, begging me to tell him what was wrong. But Hana was content to simply sit next to me, without pressing or prying. She brought her arms around me in an awkward hug, a hug I leaned into before quickly pulling away.

"What was that for?"

She shrugged, giving me a knowing look. "You just looked like you needed it."

I smiled. "Well… thanks."

She nodded. "Are you okay?"

"No… but I will be."

"Okay…" she pursed her lips sadly, "we should probably head back inside." She took her phone out of her bag. "It's almost time."

I sighed.

"I'm here for you, Drake."

"Thanks. You're a good friend, Hana."

Hana beamed a smile at me. "Thank you! You are one as well. Now, shall we?" She jumped down from the stool.

"Yeah, let's go."

We walked back inside, with Hana leading me to where Maxwell, Bertrand and Myers were.

"It's finally happening!" She sang excitedly, and Myers looked at her, giving her a small nervous smile. Her eyes met mine, before looking away quickly.

"Here we go…"

The crowd quieted as Constantine's voice boomed across the ballroom. "The moment we've been waiting for all season has arrived. It has been my great honor to serve Cordonia these last few decades. We've had turmoil, but Cordonia has pulled together even during our toughest times. I couldn't be more proud to have been Cordonia's king. And I now pass the Crown to Prince Liam because I know he'll carry on exactly as I have. I couldn't ask for a better successor."

Liam nodded his thanks. "Father…"

While this was all very touching and all, you could feel the anticipation in the room. While we were all listening intently to Constantine's speech, the whole court really only wanted to know who would be our queen.
"It's true." Constantine continued. "I love your brother, but you will be the King that Cordonia needs. Reliable, steady, wise, just. Though you weren't born to be my successor, it feels as though this outcome was inevitable. Liam, you are every bit the King I always hoped you'd be. Today, I pass the Royal signet ring to you." Like stepped forward, bowing before Constantine as he ceremoniously took of his ring. Liam stood up straight and his father gave him the ring. Liam slid it up his finger. "Cordonia is yours, my son."

The court cheered for their new king, who smiled and waved from the dais. I saw as he caught Myers’ eye, who was clapping and cheering, and winked at her. She rewarded him with a beaming smile.

"Thank you all for being here tonight. This is an incredible honor and responsibility I don't take lightly. I can only hope I can serve Cordonia with the distinction that my father did." Liam bowed to the now King Father and Queen Mother, who trapped him between them and embraced him.

"And now, the time has come." Regina announced. "Your Prince will choose his bride."

"First, let us thank you all for spending the social season with us."

"And particularly for all of the young ladies, thank you for your time. I could imagine any one of you would be a fitting Queen for my son."

Out of nowhere, a royal advisor walked up to the dais, speaking in harsh whispers to the former King and Queen. The King waved to Liam, and three of them continued to confer with the advisor.

And then… one by one, all of the phones in the rooms began buzzing. Whispers and murmurs rose in the crowd, gasps of shock and indignation. A few nobles turned their noses up at Myers, others glared, as she looked around the room in confusion.

I took out my phone, and right there, in big bold letters: PRINCE HUMILIATED BY UNFAITHFUL SUITOR!

"Those bastards!"

"Drake…” Myers looked at me with a dreadful, knowing look, "I have a feeling I know exactly what this is…That night Tariq thought I walked into his room… Someone got photos of it, didn't they? And they're using them to set me up."

Oh, Myers… I nodded, reaching for her hand.

"It's all over the news!" Hana exclaimed, taking Myers' other hand, and turning her phone to show Myers.

"But…” Myers' chin began to quiver, but there was a fire in her eyes, and she frowned. Out of nowhere, Bastien and other royal guards zoomed in on Myers and the Beaumonts.

"I'm sorry, Lady Camilla, but I've been ordered to escort you out… immediately. Along with the representatives of House Beaumont."

Chaos broke immediately upon the room. Up on the dais, Liam tried desperately to get to Myers, being held back by Regina and his father. The guards began pushing the Beaumonts out, ignoring their furious protests. The other members of the court were pushed to the side as more guards descended on the room. One of them grabbed Myers forcefully, and began pulling her towards the exit.
"Hey!"

"Don't touch her!" I swooped down on him, landing a solid punch to his jaw. "Get your hands off her!"

"Drake!" Myers screamed, and tried to reach me, but before I could get to her, she was being dragged by two other guards, while another two grabbed me from behind. "Drake!"

"Myers! Let go of me!" I tried to shake those two fuckers loose, managing to kick one in the stomach, before the other one put me in a lock. I heard Liam yelling for Camilla from the dais, with Regina forcing him to choose.

"Camilla!"

"Liam!" Myers' eyes searched the crowd desperately, before she was pushed out just as Liam announced his choice.

"I choose… Lady Madeleine."

As Madeline jumped up the dais, Myers eyes landed on mine, as I still tried to free myself from these goons. "Drake!" I heard her scream, though her voice was drowned by the sound of the court cheering for the new royal couple.

"Myers!" I yelled, just in time to watch as they slammed the door in her face.
And... I'm back again! With the first chapter of Book Two from Drake's POV! I want to thank anyone who's still reading, and apologize for the wait! I'm still adjusting to my new place and a bit swamped with work but I'll try to get back to updating once a week. A big thanks to everyone that's still following this, as well as to everyone that comments or kudos this story! Your kind words make my day. Without further ado, enjoy the latest chapter!

"Let… me… go!" I strained against the guard, who had my arms pinned behind me.

"Get off him! You're hurting him!" I heard Hana yell, while half the court clapped unenthusiastically as Madeleine looped her arm around Liam and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"That's enough!" Bastien pushed his way through the rest of the guards. "Drake, you're making a scene." He scolded me, eyes darting around the room, at the confused, shocked faces of the rest of the court. Several nobles tried to look away to the dais, trying to pretend a major scandal hadn't actually just happened, but other still looked on in shock to where Hana and I were standing, surrounded by guards.

"A scene? A scene?!" I raised my voice. “I'm making a scene?!”

He shushed me harshly. "This is King Liam's Coronation. If you cannot behave, I will have to escort you out as well."

"That's not fair!" Hana yelled, indignation and anger bright in her eyes.

"Hana, don't." I shook my head. "Stay here. Liam might need you." I turned back to Bastien. "And you, call off your hounds. I'll see myself out." I glared at him, feeling angry, hurt and betrayed, and bumped him hard as I walked away.

"Escort him to his room. Make sure he stays there until after Lady Camilla has left the premises."

I bristled at that, while two goons followed me up to my room. I slammed the door in their faces, and began pacing the room.

Okay… okay…

Bastien said they would escort Myers off the premises, which meant they planned to have her pack her stuff and get on a plane back to New York. Which meant she must be in her room right now.

I have to get up there, I thought, looking up to the ceiling. I have to see her, stop her from leaving. I walked towards my window. I thought seriously about scaling it down and just going back in through a service entrance… but as I looked all the way down… I mean, I was three stories up.

Do it for Myers.

No… I opened my door just a tad, and noticed Bastien’s two agents were still outside my door. One
of them was a friend of Bastien’s and my dad, Jerry, and the other one was a guy that was just a few years older than me… What was his name? Tom, Tommy, Tony?

“Quit playing with your phone, Tanner.” Jerry told him.

Tanner! That was it. I could talk to Jerry, he was fond of me after all… and Tanner always came to watch me and Liam train, and I knew he respected me at least just a little bit.

Because the other option would simply be to knock them both out… I’m pretty sure I could take Jerry -- he was getting old, heh -- but I’m not sure I could take Tanner. The guy didn’t get to be a king’s guard this young without being good.

Or… I turned my gaze back to the window… Nope, rather take my chances with the guards. I sighed and squared my shoulders. Taking a deep breath, I opened the door.

“Go back inside, Drake.” Jerry told me immediately, his tone stern and commanding.

“I have to see her, Jerry.”

He sighed and looked to Tanner. “We know you’ve gotten close to her--”

“Jerry, please.” I pleaded. I turned to Tanner. “I can’t let them do this to her. She’s one of the few friends I have beside Liam.”

Jerry’s eyes softened, while Tanner raised an eyebrow, giving me a knowing look.

“Drake, we’re only doing our jobs. We can’t disobey a direct order from the commander of the King’s Guard and you know it.” Tanner told me.

I sighed. “I know.” I fisted my hands and cracked my neck.

“Drake…”

“I’m sorry, Jerry.” With one swift motion, twisting my hips and putting the full force of my whole body into it, my fist landed squarely on the side of his jaw, knocking him back a couple steps.

“Damn it, Drake.” Tanner cried, coming at me from behind, trying to get a hold on me. Now I knew who it was that had that choke hold on me at the Coronation, I thought distractedly as I crouched down, his body stumbling against mine, and sent him crashing to the ground, not this time though. He got up quickly though, coming at me with locked fists. I dodged a punch to my jaw, and it gave me the opening to land a solid uppercut on his chin. He fell back, and I took the opportunity to kick him square in the stomach, his breath leaving him with a whoosh as he landed on the floor.

I looked up to see Jerry was standing a few feet away, rubbing his jaw with a grin on his face. “You punch just like your old man.”

“Well, he did teach me a thing or two.”

He smirked, and with a quick bob of his head, motioned to the hall.

I sighed in relief. “Thank you, Jerry!” God, I could hug the man right now! I took off, running down the hall, and shouted, “Just tell Bastien I hit you!”

As I turned a corner, I heard a loud guffaw. Grinning, I ran towards the west wing. I looked at every door before finally spotting hers, at the end of the hall. Camilla Myers, her name was written in an elegant script.
"Myers!" I yelled, pulling the door open, only to find it empty. Dread settled in the pit of my gut, and I ran back towards the entrance of the palace. Just as I reached the door, I saw her getting into a car. "Myers!" A King's Guard quickly slammed her door shut, before getting into the driver's seat and revving up the car.

I ran towards the car as it began to drive away, but it quickly sped out of my reach. "Myers!" I followed the car, pushing myself to run faster but the car was too fast, and soon it turned a corner and it was just… gone. Myers was gone.

"No…" I whispered to myself. I felt a sharp ache in my chest, and my legs felt like they would give out under me at any second. I walked back to the palace in a daze, but when I reached the entrance, I couldn't bear to go inside. I sat on the floor and took out my phone, pulling up her contact info.

Camilla Myers > New Message.

Myers, I wrote, I'm sor--

I deleted it.

Myers, how are yo--

How are you? Really? I rolled my eyes, angry at myself, and deleted it again.

Myers, I'm sorry for what they did to you. I should have seen it coming. I'm sorry for not protecting you.

I stopped at that, realizing what I wrote. What it meant. It was the second time I failed to protect someone from this place. First Savannah, now Camilla. Tears pricked at my eyes as disappointment and anger threatened to consume me. I pinched the bridge of my nose as I took deep breaths, trying to compose myself. I took out my phone and kept writing.

Myers, please don't get on that plane. Please. Wait for me. I'll--

I'll what? I stopped writing again. What could I possibly do to fix this? Nothing, that's what! I shut my phone down and shoved it angrily into my pocket. I rested my head on the solid brick wall behind me, before finally going inside.

I made my way to Myers' room without even realizing, and opened the door to find Liam and Hana.

"I thought I'd find you two in here."

"Drake!" Hana saw the look on my face and immediately walked up to hug me. I hugged her back, taking every little bit of comfort she could offer, before turning to Liam.

"Have you heard anything? Please tell me you have some good news."

"The security team forced her to pack her stuff and took her to the airport."

Yeah, that part I knew.

"I know. None of it is. They took her away and there was nothing I could do to stop her. Dammit." Liam slammed his fist on Myers' desk. You knew it was bad when Liam actually cursed. He never cursed.

"We've got to think clearly right now." I told Liam.
"How can you be so calm about all this?" Hana looked at me, shocked.

_Because I already freaked out, almost cried and almost hurled my phone into the rose bushes. Now we've got to start working to actually fix this. "Because we've got to. For her."

Hana sighed, steadying herself. "You're right."

"Yes. Now more than ever we've got to come up with a plan."

"Exactly. What matters now is how we react. Everyone will be watching Liam to see what he does."

"So… what _are_ you going to do, Liam?"

"We've got to play this carefully. There's too much at risk here. We don't know who was plotting against Lady Camilla, or how far this treachery runs. Lady Olivia also left under duress earlier tonight. It's possible someone was working to eliminate both of them so I'd choose Madeleine."

"So you played exactly into their plan."

"I thought it'd be best to give them the illusion of a win."

"That's smart."

"I feel so helpless." Hana ran her fingers through her hair and sat down on the bed. "I can't even be here. My parents have sent for me to leave in a matter of hours."

"Is there no way around it?"

"They're my parents. I don't know how I could convince them to let me stay. They'd have to believe that there's some sort of advancement of my social station… Or a potential marriage."

"Leave that to me."

"What can you do?"

"I am the King of Cordonia. I'm sure Lady Madeleine knows that if she wants to keep our engagement, she'll have to give me something. Perhaps I can convince her to make you a part of her court."

"You'd do that for me?" Hana's jaw dropped. "Really?"

"Of course… if it's what you want?"

"My parents would be thrilled!" Hana squealed with excitement. "They'd have to let me return! Not only could I promise them I'd be advancing my station, but as a member of Madeleine's court, I'd be well positioned for a match."

"Then it's decided."

"Are you sure you want to go through all that trouble for me?"

"Lady Hana, you've proven yourself to be a true and loyal friend to us and Lady Camilla. And you'll be able to see her when I cannot. I trust you'll look out for her."

Hana nodded, steely determination in her eyes. "Of course. As much as I can."
“And I hope I’m not being too presumptuous, but I’ve come to consider you my own friend, as well.”

“I’m very pleased to hear that. I feel the same way!” Hana moved to hug him.

After they pulled away, Liam turned to me. “And Drake, I know I can count on you to help Camilla.”

“I’ll be on the next flight to New York.” I blurted, thinking only of Myers. I had to see her, to comfort her, to be there for her.

Liam raised his eyebrows in surprise, while Hana simply smirked, giving me a knowing look. Had Myers… said anything to her? I wondered.

“That’s… not exactly what I had in mind.” Liam said.

“Don’t you think one of us should go, to make sure she’s okay? Hana’s going back to China in a couple of hours, the Beaumonts are detained downstairs, and you can’t go for obvious reasons.”

“I’d like nothing more than for you to go. I’m sure she must really need a friend. But you must be careful, too. You are known to be my best friend. If you’re seen with her too soon, it’ll only stir rumours that I’m reaching out to her through you. And that would put Camilla in danger - it would put both of you in danger.”

Shit, he’s… right. I bristled at that, because right now the only thing I wanted was to go to her, to hold her, to comfort her. I sighed. Her safety must come first. “So… stay away. Got it.”

“At least until she returns to court.” Liam clapped my shoulder and squeezed. “Besides, she’ll have the Beaumonts with her. They’ll protect her.”

I struggled not to roll my eyes. Great… Myers’ fate was in the hands of Bossy Bartie and Dance pants Mcgee. That made me feel so much better…

“And hopefully, she’ll be beyond the reach of this conspiracy.” Liam nodded grimly.

“Have you spoken to Maxwell or Bertrand?”

“No, it’d be best if we went on radio silence until the next courtly event.”

“Then how will we know if they made it in time?” Hana asked, worry oozing from her tone. “What if Milla already got on the plane, and they couldn’t stop her?”

“Then they’ll follow her to New York and bring her back. I’d rather not take any chances. Remember, cell phone signals can be traced, as well as your personal emails. To protect Camilla, and ourselves, we should only talk face to face.”

“And so we wait.” I said, and Liam nodded.

“And so we wait.”

That wait lasted for weeks. Weeks of not knowing where Myers was, if she was here or in New York, if she was safe… And to top it off, it was like our whole group had scattered and gone their separate ways. I didn’t actually realize how much I missed my friends, until they weren’t here anymore. Liam was busier than ever, so we only really saw each other in the mornings for our daily training sessions, Hana was in China, and Maxwell was at the Beaumont Estate.
And so… I tried to take shelter in my routine. I got up every morning, made breakfast for me and Liam, and then we trained for a couple hours. Sometimes, I'd stay there for a couple more hours, trying to work off the frustration of everything. I began working at the stables again, paying special attention to Midnight Rose. Poor girl seemed to sense something was wrong, and everytime I'd come in, her ears would perk up, and then down once she realized I wasn't with Myers. So I took care to feed her well, rode her twice a day for exercise, and groomed her daily. I would hum to her while I brushed her beautiful black coat until it shone, then feed her apples and sugar cubes. She would be in her best shape when Myers returned.

After two weeks of this mind numbing routine, Liam announced it was time to go to Madeleine's estate for the announcement of the Engagement Tour. I went to my room and was in the middle of packing my stuff, when there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find Liam.

"Hey! I'm just finishing packing."

Liam merely smirked indulgently at me. "While I'm very glad for that, I wanted to tell you something. I know you don't care much for courtly events, but I just heard from Madeleine that Lady Hana is flying in tomorrow night. She'll be arriving quite late, late enough to miss the ball..." He shot me a pointed look.

I grinned, realizing what he was saying. And you know me, any chance I get to pass up these stuffy balls... "I can go pick her up from the airport."

"You really don't mind?"

"Not at all. It'll be nice to see Hana, and catch up with her before we're all caught up in the pomp and circumstance of the engagement tour."

"Great. Thank you, Drake."

"No problem. Have you… have you heard from the Beaumonts at all?"

Liam grimaced. "Just that they confirmed their invitation to the ball tomorrow night."

"Just them?"

His lips quirked in a crooked smile. "No. Not just them. Beaumonts + 1."

I nearly sighed in relief, before my heart began pounding. I was so worried Myers might've decided to just throw everything away and go back to New York, and judging by Liam's face, I knew he was too. "That's good. You'll have to catch me up on how everything goes."

"I will. Now, finish packing. We leave in an hour."

I raised my hand to my forehead in a military salute. "Sir, yes, sir!"

He shook his head and left my room. I began packing my things with renewed vigor, excited to finally get this investigation underway. Enough sitting around moping, it was finally time to take action.

The next day, the ball was in full swing, and I was on my way to pick up Hana. I was a bit bummed that I wasn't able to get a glimpse of Myers, but I figured it was probably for the best. She should have her head in the game, worry only for her entrance back at court, not… us.
Was there an 'us' anymore?

I didn't even dare to think about that. I still remember those last words she said to me, before walking away. If I go back inside, I'm not coming back.

I shook my head. No use in dwelling on that now. I pulled up to the airport and made my way to the gate. I looked at my phone. Hana's plane should be getting here at any moment now. I sat down and began playing with my phone, trying to distract myself from thinking about Myers. Soon, a flood of people began coming out, and I stood and searched the crowd for Hana.

I spotted her just as she spotted me, and her face broke out in a grin. "Drake!" She squealed, rushing towards me and wrapping me in a big hug.

"Oof! Hey, Hana." I hugged her back.

"What are you doing here? I expected a palace driver would come to pick me up."

"I thought it'd be good for both of us to see a friendly face."

I took her bags, wondering how I could fit them all in the trunk, and we made our way out of the airport. After loading them all in the car, we made our way back to Madeleine's estate.

"So, how have you been? You look good." I asked her.

"Thank you. So do you. And I've been… well. I'm very glad to be back, though." She said, as she rummaged through her purse. Finally, she pulled out a small bag of gourmet cookies, opened it and offered it to me. "Cookie?"

I reached into the bag, grabbing a small handful, careful not to take my eyes off the road. "Thanks." I mumbled, popping one in my mouth. "And may I just say, yikes. You know it was bad if you're glad to be back here."

"I teased.

She slapped my arm playfully. "It wasn't that bad."

"How were your parents?"

Hana sighed. "They were a little upset with me, and more demanding than usual, but other than that they were okay."

"You know, you don't have to listen to them right? After all, you're great, and if they can't see that…"

"Thanks, Drake. And they only want what's best for me."

"Then they should let you figure that out."

"Yes, you're right. But we can focus on that later. We have other problems that need our attention now… Have you seen her yet?"

Now it was my turn to sigh. "Not yet."

She nodded. "I know she must really miss you."

I raised an eyebrow wearily. "Sure… just as much as she's missed you and Liam."

Hana shook her head. "Drake… I know how important you are to her. And how important she is to
you."

I took my eyes off the road for one second to look at her. "Do you… I mean, did she ever…"

"She didn't have to. I saw how she looked at you, and how you looked at her. You guys really are not as subtle as you think you are."

I nodded my head, trying to let that sink in.

"Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. At least until everything's settled down, and you guys can really be together."

Oh, boy. This was… uncomfortable. I rubbed the back of my neck. "I, uh… I don't know… I mean, we don't really… it's not like anything's happened, and--"

"Drake, relax!" Hana laughed delicately. "I only meant you can trust me to be discreet."

"Well… thanks."

"You're welcome. So, what have you been up to these past few weeks?"

I groaned. "Absolutely nothing."

"Oh, come on, Drake. I'm sure you must've done something fun."

"Nothing other than working in the stables."

"Ooh! Have you been taking care of Midnight Rose?"

"Yeah, well… I want her to be in top condition when Myers comes back."

"Aw, Drake, that's sweet."

I shrugged, as I felt the blush crawl up my ears. "I just feel like I need to do something to help. It's been two weeks, and nothing's been done." I felt myself getting angry. "Liam's been busy, and he keeps saying we have to wait for Myers to make her reintroduction to court, but I think we should be doing something! Take action, start an official investigation, go back to Applewood…"

"Hey… you know Liam is right."

I sighed. "I know, it's just I feel so useless. I knew… I knew all along how this place truly is, I tried to warn her, I tried to protect her, and I couldn't. I couldn't stop them from taking those pictures, I couldn't stop them from basically dragging her out of the palace."

"Drake, you tried. That's what matters. None of us could've seen this coming, but now, all we can do is help her solve the problem."

"I know…"

We rode in companionable silence the rest of the way, until finally we reached the estate. Servants rushed out to take Hana's bags, and lead us to our rooms. I gave her a quick hug.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Drake!"
And with that, I went to my room and turned in for the night.

The next morning, I was going to the kitchen to get some breakfast when I felt someone clap me on the back. I turned and saw Maxwell, who pulled me in for a tight hug. I smiled as I clapped my hand on his back.

"Hey, buddy."

"Hey, Drake."

We pulled apart. "How are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good." He nodded enthusiastically. "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I was going to go get breakfast right now. Wanna come?"

"Sure! I could get some seconds."

I rolled my eyes. "Let's go."

"Why don't you just order room service?"

"I--"

"Come, let's eat in my room." He gave me an over exaggerated wink, before practically pulling me to his room. He pushed me inside and closed the door. "I'll just call in our orders, and we can talk."

I nodded and sat down over by the minibar.

"What do you want, pancakes or French toast? Or eggs? Or avocado toast? Or some other kind of toast?"

"Uh… pancakes are fine."

He nodded and picked up the phone. "Hello, this is Maxwell Beaumont. I'd like two plates of chocolate chip pancakes brought to my room, please. Yes, with extra butter and syrup. Thank you." He hung up the phone and walked to sit on the stool next to mine. "It'll be right up."

"Good. So…"

"How have you been?"

"Bored. Restless. You?"

"Pretty much the same." He shrugged.

"How is she?"

"Milla…" he sighed. "She's better. Milla had a hard time in the beginning, but she's handling everything like a pro."

I sighed. I wish I could've been with you, to comfort her. "That's good to hear."

"Have you seen her?"

I shook my head. "Not yet."
"You should. She asked me about you, you know."

"Why?"

Maxwell shrugged. "I guess she misses you. She wanted to know why she hadn't heard from you. I told her you weren't usually the type to keep in touch, especially now with the whole scandal."

I raised my eyebrows in horror, and he laughed and shook his head. "I didn't say it like that! Bertrand and I reassured her that the reason she hadn't heard from you or anyone else was because it's dangerous. You know 'texts could be intercepted' and what none."

I blew out a sigh of relief. "Good. So you said she had a hard time…?"

"Yeah… well when we went to get her from the airport, she was determined to get on that plane. She kept saying there was nothing for her here, that she never should've come here in the first place… she was really upset."

"That sucks."

"Tell me about it. Bertrand tried to convince her to stay for Liam and she straight out told him she didn't love him."

"She what?!!"

"She told him. Don't worry, she didn't mention you, but… she did tell Bertrand she had no interest in marrying Liam and being queen."

I sighed. "She was probably just hurt. She didn't mean it."

Maxwell gave me this exasperated look. "Oh, I think she meant it. Drake--"

I was saved by a gentle knock on the door. Maxwell rushed to open it as a server came in with a tray of pancakes. "I'll take those!" Maxwell said cheerfully, as he sneaked the server a tip. The server bowed his head, and closed the door, while Maxwell walked back to the minibar with our pancakes. For a while, we ate in companionable silence, before Maxwell finally turned to me.

"Drake… what's going to happen with you two? I mean…"

I sighed. "I don't know, man."

"But you do have feelings for her, don't you?"

"Maxwell…" I growled, a warning in my tone.

"Don't 'Maxwell' me! Last time, you got upset and didn't want to talk about it, and I respected that. But now things are different, and for Milla's sake, I need to know. You didn't see her that night, Drake. It was like she was hopeless. I know something happened between you two that night, on top of the whole Coronation thing. Something made her feel bad enough to want to run away."

"Yeah, maybe getting completely humiliated had something to do with that…"

"It wasn't just that. Milla's like my little sister. I don't want to see her get hurt again, Drake."

I sighed. "I know… neither do I. Fine. That night…" I told Maxwell everything. Everything from the night the pictures with Tariq were taken, to the night of the Coronation. Maxwell nodded attentively, his eyes filled with concern and regret. "And that was that. She went back inside, and… you know
Maxwell nodded, pursing his lips. "I'm sorry, Drake."

I shrugged.

"Really. I know we pushed Camilla to stay in the race, but I would've stopped if I knew how you felt for each other."

"It's fine. Doesn't matter much now."

"It matters more now! You guys can be together now! With no competition hanging over your heads."

"It's not that simple."

"No, it's not, but at least you guys have a chance now."

I shrugged. "I don't know…"

He clapped me on the shoulder. "I do. And I know Liam will understand."

I didn't really know what to say, so I just nodded. I finished eating before asking one final question. "So how'd you get her to stay?"

"We convinced her that even if she went back to New York, this scandal would still follow her. The best way for this to be over soon would be to find Tariq and clear her name."

"Good. So that's our mission."

"That's our mission."

It was later that night that I finally saw Myers. I'd gone outside to get some air, and ended up building a fire at the fire pit. I was about to go inside to get some ingredients to make myself some s'mores, when I ran head on into Myers herself.

"Whoa!" She stumbled and I caught her by her shoulders. "I'm so sor--" The words died on her tongue as she looked at me. For a second, we just stared at each other.

"Myers..."

"Drake?" She asked, as if she couldn't really believe it was me. I realized my hands were still on her shoulders, so I brought them down to my sides.

And yet, without even realizing it, she wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me in for a hug. Myers buried her face in my neck, holding me tightly, and after a second of hesitation, I brought my arms around her waist, pressing her closer to me.

I heard her sniffle before she spoke. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Heh. Easy there."

She pulled back, and laughed as she wiped a single tear that was running down her cheek. "Are you honestly going to tell me you didn't miss me?"
"I didn't say that. I missed you more these last two weeks than I've ever missed anyone in my whole life.

"So what are you saying?"

I rolled my eyes. "You're a sight for sore eyes, okay? Happy now?"

She grinned. "Very."

"It's good to see you smile." I reached out to cup her face, but then realized we were still in public and thought better of it. "After everything that happened… I know it must've been terrible for you. If there's anything I can do to help… I want to do it."

Myers looked away and caught her lower lip between her teeth. I couldn't help my eyes as they lingered on her mouth. "Thank you, Drake… but what about us? I mean, you'll help, but… is that all?"

I sighed, and ran my hand through my hair. "Myers… you know how I feel about you."

"And you know how I feel about you… and I'm not competing for Liam's hand anymore, so… why don't you just take me away from all this nonsense?"

I couldn't help the chuckle that escaped me. I always liked how forward she was. "Believe me, Myers, some part of me wants that… desperately." I looked her straight in the eyes. "I want you, Myers." A surge of manly pride burst through me when I saw how quickly the blush spread to her cheeks, and how she looked away and then back with a shy smile on her face. "I want you bad. But not like this."

Myers frowned. "What do you mean?"

"This conspiracy… people plotting against you and Liam… it's not right to ask you to decide right now."

Myers rolled her eyes. "Drake, there's nothing to decide." She shrugged. "It's always been you."

I shook my head. While there was this part of me that felt like it would burst at her words, there was still this small, but insistent part of me that refused to believe that.

"If you wanted me over Liam… I'm… I'm not sure I could believe that, even if there wasn't anything over your head."

She stepped closer to me, and took my hand. "Is it so hard to believe?"

I sighed. Yeah, it is. It's the product of a whole life of being number two. Or actually, not really even being considered for a number at all. "My whole life, I've grown up in Prince Liam's shadow. As a kid, he was the one everyone served and adored. When we were older, he was the one the nobles girls chased after. Some part of me truly can't believe that anyone would be interested in me at all when Liam is around. And definitely not someone like you, Myers. I'm not blind. Liam is literally offering you an entire kingdom. I can't compete with that. And if by some miracle you find that you want me and not him… I don't want you to ever regret it. If you do choose me at the end of all this, I want to know it's because you wanted me, and not because of this damned… thing keeping you from Liam."

Myers ran her fingers through her hair, looking everywhere but me. Her eyes seemed so sad, and I didn't know if it was pity she felt or something else.
"Besides, if we were together publicly right now, it'd just cause an even bigger mess. We can't hurt Liam like that. Not on top of everything else. And we both know you'd be a hell of a better queen than Madeleine. Cordonia deserves you. Liam deserves you. Me? I'm nobody. I'm never going to be good enough for someone like you."

Myers frowned at that, hurt and sadness clear in her eyes. She shook her head and threw her arms around my neck, pressing her face against my chest. "Drake, don't say that. Please, don't say that ever again. It's the farthest thing from the truth."

"Is it really? Really? No, it's not. I'm sorry Myers, but I'm not going to lie to you. "Hell. I'm sorry, Myers. I'm always disappointing you, aren't I?"

"That's not what I meant." She sighed. "This whole thing is a mess, isn't it?"

"It is. But not because of you… because of this conspiracy against you."

Myers frowned, her eyes filling with fire. "When I catch whoever's responsible for this…"

"Believe me, they'll have a lot to answer to."

"I don't even know how many people are involved."

"Hey. Don't get discouraged. You've got me, Maxwell, Bertrand and Hana helping out, not to mention Liam. I know it might've not seem like it after the ball…"

"Well… would it have killed you to text me?"

"No, but according to Liam, it might've killed you. He takes your safety very seriously. We all do. You should've been with us that night, after the Coronation. Then you wouldn't have any doubts."

"You'll have to tell me about it sometime."

"Anytime. You look like you could use some cheering up." I looked back at the fire pit. "You know, I was going to make some s'mores. I was actually going to raid the kitchen when I bumped into you… would you… I mean, I know you probably ate during the party, but if you want some dessert… you can't beat homemade s'mores. I'll make you the best s'mores of all your life and tell you all about everything you've missed."

Myers laughed. "You're lucky I love s'mores."

"Glad to hear it, Myers. Wait over by the fire pit. I'll be right back."

I ducked into the estate, making my way to the kitchen. The whole place was still bustling, trying to clean up after the party, so I got in and got out as quickly as I could manage, without bothering anyone. When I got back to the fire pit, Myers was sitting in one of the chairs, staring contemplatively at the flames. Her face seemed even more beautiful by the firelight, her eyes a deeper and darker brown, her skin with a beautiful glow. She took my breath away. I shook my head and sat down next to her.

"I see you're warming up by the fire."

She jumped, clutching her chest, before breaking into an embarrassed grin. "Of course. Now, where are the goods?"

I began pulling out the materials, laying them on a small table next to the fire pit. "Everything we
need for a perfect night by the fire… and a perfectly innocent reason for us to be out here together."

"And not discussing courtly intrigue."

"Exactly. Ready?"

I passed her a stick and the bag of marshmallows. She stuck a marshmallow on her stick and held it up to the fire. I saw her marshmallow was getting too close to the flames, and could catch fire at any moment.

"You're going to burn it if you tilt it like that."

She raised a single eyebrow, a challenging look in her eyes. "Are you the s'mores expert?"

"Damn right. I've made hundreds of these… My family and I used to go camping when I was a kid. I practically lived off s'mores."

"Aww… tell me more about when you were little."

I sighed.

"Please?"

"Fine. You know how I like to get away from all the pomp of the palace? Well, one of those outlets was when I'd go camping with my dad. We'd disappear into the wilderness for days… Thought the first time we went camping was a disaster. After trekking for hours, neither of us could set up a tent correctly, and we had forgotten to pack our dinners. So we spent the night huddled under the stars by a small fire with nothing to eat but s'mores. But despite all of that, we loved it. It was the one time he could time he could really relax… when he didn't have to worry about the King and his family, and he could just enjoy some time with us."

"That sounds wonderful, and simple…"

"The best things in life usually are, Myers. What about your dad? Have you talked to him?"

She sighed. "Yeah… he doesn't understand what I'm still doing here. He wants me to come home."

"I bet. It can't be easy, knowing your daughter is having trouble and she's all alone in a foreign country."

Myers eyed me pointedly. "I'm not 'all alone'. I have you, and Maxwell and Bertrand, and Hana, and Liam. And I have to do this. I can't leave until I clear my name."

"And once you do? Are you still going to leave?" My heart thumped nervously in my chest.

"I don't know…" Myers stared at her marshmallow. "I've come to love Cordonia as much as I love New York. I don't want to leave, but I do have to think about what's best for me. I've put my career on hold long enough. And… I don't know if there's a future for me here after all this is over." Her eyes met mine, searching them, and I looked away.

"Fair enough." I nodded. I guess after everything she's been through, she deserves to be a little selfish, to think of herself and only herself. "But… for what it's worth, I really think you could make a future for yourself here… I mean, you talked about getting your Masters degree in creative writing… You could… do that here. Cordonia has some great universities; there's Lythikos University, and the University of Portavira, Ramsford Tech, and the Valtoria University of Fine Arts."
That last one would be perfect for you, actually, and its creative writing program is world renowned." I side eyed her, and saw she was looking at me tenderly, her eyes shining with emotion.

"Drake… have you been researching colleges for me?" Myers asked with her aww voice.

I rubbed the back of my neck, embarrassed. "Yeah, well… I guess I don't want you to leave."

"Drake…" Myers reached out and took my hand. I interlaced our fingers together and she brought my hand to her lips, pressing a quick kiss to the back of my hand. I blushed and looked away, back to the marshmallows.

"Looks like it's time."

We took our marshmallows out of the fire, and she handed me hers, and I began assembling the s'mores. I made quick work of it, then presented her with her dessert. "M'lady."

She brought it to her lips, taking a big bite. She moaned in delight, closing her eyes. "Mmmm! Delicious! You really are the s'mores expert!"

I laughed. "I'm glad I didn't disappoint." We sat in silence for a moment, both of us enjoying our chocolatey treats.

"You know… I must look like shit." Myers said suddenly, promoting a laugh out of me. "I'm serious!" She continued, "I mean, you're here making me s'mores, Hana made me her special hot chocolate recipe earlier, and… let's just say there was never a shortage of brownies and ice cream at the Beaumonts. You're all spoiling me, and I'm starting to think the reason is because I must look like crap and you all think I need something to cheer me up."

I chuckled. "Well, for one can guarantee you do not look like crap, but I think we do want to take care of you. You're going through a tough time, and even though you're handling everything like a pro, we still want to show you we're there for you."

"Well, when you put it like that…"

"Myers… how are you doing?"

She sighed deeply, looking at the fire while gathering her thoughts. "I'm… Honestly? I'm so mad, so, so mad… I hate how the press blew this whole thing up, how they're completely smearing my name in order to sell magazines. And I'm embarrassed." She laughed bitterly, shaking her head. "Not for me, I know nothing happened with Tariq, and I've never really cared what people thought of me… But my dad… How must he feel when there's half naked pictures of his daughter in the tabloids, and shows like TMZ calling her a royal slut?" Her hands fist, and her body shook with barely controlled rage.

I unfisted one of her hands, linking my fingers with hers. Hearing all this… God, I swear I wanted to go beat up every single reporter or editor who dared so much as look at her. But… I couldn't do that. We had to be smart about this. We had to play the game by their rules.

"That's why I have to clear my name. I have to find Tariq, and get him to set the record straight."

"We will. I know we will."

Myers gave me a small half smile, her anger subsiding. She took a deep breath and squeezed my hand before letting go. "So… you were going to tell me what happened when I was dragged out of the Coronation?" She wiped a bit of chocolate from her lip.
"Yeah. Let's see... by the time I escaped security, your car was driving away. I ran after it... but I couldn't get any closer than that."

"Aw, Drake... I didn't know you did that."

"Yeah, for all the good it did anyway. And then, I headed back to the palace to learn what the others saw... I found Liam and Hana in your room." I told her everything that happened that night, everything we talked about, how we agreed not to reach out to her, for her safety. "... And that's pretty much how it all went down."

"I never knew that you wanted to come after me..."

"Oh... well, yeah. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah, but it isn't like driving from Brooklyn to Manhattan to check on a friend... it's a whole plane ride across the Atlantic. You'd really do that for me?"

"Yes."

She blushed, but kept her eyes firmly on mine. "You were worried about me."

"Honestly? I still am. Nobles have been assassinated in Cordonia, even those with a full security detail. I don't know what I'd do if something like that happened to you."

Once again, Myers took my hand, brushing it against her lips. "Hey... I'm here, and I'm safe." I couldn't help but squeeze her hand. "Thank you for telling me, and... for caring so much."

I cleared my throat. "Of course. You deserve to know, and... I know none of your friends would want you thinking we'd all just forgotten about you. I... I know this must've been bad for you. I'm sorry."

She let out a deep sigh, shaking her head. "It wasn't your fault. But, you know... a kiss would make me feel better." She grinned impishly.

"Myers..." I looked around frantically. If anybody heard that... "We can't."

She reached to cup my face, her thumb tracing my cheekbone. "Drake... I need you. I want you right now."

I groaned. This woman really will be the death of me. "Dammit, Myers." I reached to cup her neck and brought her closer. Our lips met in a desperate kiss, conveying everything we'd been feeling these last two weeks. God, how I'd missed her. These last few weeks had been torture, but this just now made it all seem like it was worth it. She raked her fingers through my hair, and I moaned against her mouth, bringing my hands to her waist to pull her closer to me.

When we finally came up for air, I pressed my forehead to hers.

"Drake..." she sighed.

"Damn it, Myers." I cupped her face, pressing one last chaste kiss to her lips, before pulling away slowly. She gave a dazzling, beaming smile, as her eyes twinkled with happiness. "I want you, Myers. More than anything. But I want this the right way. For everyone involved. You most of all."

Myers sighed, but nodded. From the corner of my eye, I saw Maxwell near the door of the estate, so I quickly let go of her hands. Myers raised an eyebrow, and looked back to see Maxwell walking
towards us, so she quickly pulled back as well, her hands fidgeting with her hair.

"Milla!" He waved to her from across the courtyard. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you!"

"Is it time to go?"

"Yeah, we're all packed and ready, and you know how Bertrand gets when we're running late."

"No sense in letting me keep you."

"We can give you a ride, Drake! The limo has plenty of space."

"No thanks. I might die if I spend several hours in a car with you."

"See you around?" Myers turned to me with a crooked grin.

"Sure thing, Myers."

"It's road trip time!"

Maxwell began leading her to her to the limo, and I sat back down next to the fire pit. I watched her walk away, enjoying the view, when she flipped her hair and gave me flirtatious wink, grinning mischievously. I shook my head, but returned her grin with one of my own, before she turned back around and into the estate.

I sighed, feeling lighter than I'd felt in days. My hands shook a bit, and I couldn't stop grinning like an idiot, but after weeks of not hearing from her, tonight was exactly what I needed.

*I'm going to fight for you, Myers. If it's the last thing I do.*
I woke up the next morning with a smile on my face. With Myers here, and with all of us headed to Applewood, we would finally get this investigation underway. I got up, got breakfast and went to get Liam. We burned through our training session quickly, both of us with renewed energy. It was amazing how the presence of one single person could do wonders for a person's mood. Liam matched me hit by hit, and I had a hard time knocking him down. Finally, we both finished on the ground, sweating and breathing hard, and decided to call it a tie.

After a quick shower, I went to the stables for my morning ride with Midnight Rose. She whinied and her ears perked when she saw me come in.

"Hey, beautiful girl. Hey." I offered her an apple. "Guess what?" The horse bumped her nose against my face, her eyes eager and curious. "Myers is home. That's right." I petted her mane. "You'll get to see her today. She's missed you, you know." Midnight Rose huffed and bounced her head excitedly. "Come, let's go for a quick ride, before we get ready to go see her."

I saddled her up and took her for a quick ride across the grounds. Then brought her back for her brushing, cleaned her hooves, and began applying her shipping boots. Finally, I went to check out her trailer, and left her in the capable hands of the stable master.

I was on my way up, when Liam caught up with me. "Hey, everything okay with Midnight Rose?"

"Yep. She's fed, groomed and ready for the trip. She should be well rested for the barn raising tomorrow."

"Good."

I clapped him on the shoulder. "She'll love the surprise."

"Have you spoken to her at all?"

I tried really, really hard not to blush. "Uh, yeah. Yesterday. She looked good."

"Good. I'm glad you're looking out for her." He clapped my shoulder and a small torrent of guilt wove its way through me.

"No problem. Let's get going?"

"Yes, let us go."

We grabbed our bags and got in the car on our way to Applewood. The ride was a couple hours long, but Liam and I joked and talked, and before long we were already at Applewood. The staff greeted us and showed us each to our rooms. Usually, my room is always next to or near to Liam’s, so you can imagine my surprise when a ginger haired maid led me to the room right next to Myers.

“I asked her to place you in the room next to Lady Camilla. After what happened during our last stay, I’d feel much better knowing you’ll be here looking out for her.” Liam told me, while the maid carried my duffel bag inside.

I nodded. “I'll keep an eye out.”

“Thank you, Drake.”
The maid soon exited my room, and I helped her with Liam's bags to his suite. Liam gave her a generous tip, before flopping down on his couch. He groaned, rubbing his forehead. I made myself useful and headed to the mini bar, grabbing us both a couple waters. I tossed him a bottle. "You okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay. I guess I'm just… worried." He gave me this look. "You never fully told me what happened that night the pictures were taken."

_You mean the night I practically told Myers I liked her after she'd been sexually harassed? Yeah, not my proudest moment._ A flood of guilt overcame me, and I couldn't look my best friend in the eye anymore. I promised myself that nothing would happen with Myers until after telling Liam, but whenever I'm with her… it's like I can't control myself. I sighed.

"Well, it was after dinner. I was walking to my room, when I heard a scream. It took me a second to realize it'd come from Myers' room, so I ran and slammed the door open. _I remember seeing red…_ I took a deep breath as I felt myself getting worked up again. "I saw Tariq holding her face in place as he kissed her, while she tried to push him off." Liam frowned, clenching his fists, and looked up to the ceiling. I kept going, "So I walked up to him and pulled him off her. We started fighting until Myers broke us up. She told him off, and Tariq apologized and left."

"He apologized?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Yeah. Myers thinks he was set up as well. He said he thought it was his room, and that Myers was coming onto _him._"

"Camilla would never do that."

"I know. And anyway, that's pretty much how it all went down. When I left the room, I saw that Myers' door didn't have a lock. I should've known then, that it was all a setup."

"There's no way any of us could have predicted this, Drake. But, for what it's worth, I'm very relieved you were there for her that night." He shook his head. "I don't even want to think about what could've happened--"

"Oh, I know. I thought the same thing."

Liam hummed, staring pensively at the ground. "I'm… I don't know how to thank you… for being there for her when I wasn't."

I rubbed the back of my neck. Dread filled my gut, mixing with guilt in a nauseating cocktail. _I'm such an awful friend…_

I shook my head. "Anyone else who've done the same thing. It just so happened that it was _me_ walking by when she screamed."

"Coincidence or not, you still deserve my gratitude. You've always been such a loyal friend, and even when you didn't like Camilla, you were there for her, watching her, protecting her when I couldn't."

_Please stop… If you knew everything I've done… you wouldn't be saying this._

"Yeah, well… I know how much she means to you."

He blushed. "She is truly something, isn't she?"
Yeah… she's everything.

"Sure…"

"Sure?" He raised an eyebrow. "Come on, Drake. I know you consider her a friend, too."

Um… God, how do I get out of here? I really don't want to be having this conversation right now…

You know, this could be your opportunity to tell him… I rolled my eyes. It's been awhile since I heard from that teeny tiny, oh-so-rational voice in my head.

Hello, conscience. While it was great to hear from you, I'd appreciate it if you would just be on your way!

Fine, fine. But you're still going to have to tell him at some point…

Yeah, bye!

"Drake?" Liam's voice brought me out of my thoughts.

"Yeah?" He looked at me with raised eyebrows, and I realized he was waiting for me to answer. "Right, Myers, friends. Yeah, you could say we've become friends."

He smiled at me. "I'm glad. It would've put me in a difficult position if my best friend did not like my…" He searched for a word.

"Girlfriend?"

"Given how we're not officially dating, and I am engaged to another woman…"

"I'm sorry, buddy."

He sighed. "It's okay. I'm hoping this… arrangement with Madeleine won't be permanent."

"It won't." I clapped him on the shoulder. My stomach rumbled and I looked at the time. It was almost 6. "Come on, let's get some dinner. I know the wicked witch of the west doesn't have anything planned for you tonight."

"Hah!" Liam laughed, clapping his hands on his knees as he stood. "Try not to call her that in front of the rest of the court. I'd hate to have to judge my best friend for treason if Madeleine ever heard it."

"Don't worry, it won't come to that."

With that, we headed to the dining room to check out the dinner buffet.

Next morning, Liam and I were barely able to finish our morning workout before we were ushered to the field for the barn raising.

“Liam, darling.” Madeleine’s delicate, yet commanding voice stopped us in our tracks. She walked towards us, her heels clacking on the marbled halls, and roped her arm through Liam’s. “There are reporters already outside the manor. I think we should give them a glimpse of the new royal couple, don’t you think?”

Liam nodded. “Of course, Madeleine.”
I rolled my eyes. I could already picture him becoming one of those husbands who’s always like “Yes, dear. Of course, dear.”

“Excellent.” She turned to me, regarding me coolly. “Liam will ride with me, Drake. It is important for the press and the Cordonian people to see their King and future Queen arrive together to the barn raising.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but she simply walked away, dragging Liam with her. He shot me an apologetic look, and walked away. I sighed dejectedly as I tried to push that rejected, almost embarrassed feeling which had crept up on me. All of my worries and insecurities for my friend rushed back to me, and I could feel Liam drifting farther away. I remembered my conversation with Myers that day in the ruins.

*Liam will make time for you,* she’d said. And if he was marrying *her,* she’d be right. Myers would *never* try to purposely keep Liam away from me. Now, of course, if he *was* marrying her, we’d have a whole different set of problems, but right now… Let’s just say I knew if Liam married Madeleine, she’d keep him busy enough that he won’t even have time for himself, let alone for me.

“Oh, Drake!” I nearly jumped at the sound of Hana’s voice.

“Hey, Hana.” I turned and my eyebrows shot up as I saw what she was wearing. “Hana… I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear jeans before. Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you wear pants before.” She actually looked quite pretty in loose jeans and flannel. It was a perfect outfit for a barn raising. She blushed and looked down at her outfit.

“Is this appropriate?”

“Yeah, you look great. I’m loving the boots.”

“Thank you!” She beamed at me. “Do you need a ride?”

“Yes, please. I was supposed to ride with Liam, but he was kidnapped by the wicked witch of the west.” Hana gave me a quizzical look. “Madeleine.” I clarified.

“Ah!” She giggled. “Well, you’re free to ride with me and the rest of her ladies in waiting.”

I almost groaned. Twenty minutes in car with Poodlelope and Lady Kiara? Well, actually, Lady Kiara wasn’t that bad. She was actually pretty nice when she deigned to speak English. “Sure.”

“Great. Let’s go.” Hana led me outside and we met up with the other two ladies. I led them outside to the car, shielding them from the mob of reporters.

“Step back!” I glared at them. *Jeez, they were like vultures.* I held the door open for the girls, pushing back any idiot with a camera that tried to get too close. Finally, the girls were all inside the car and I slammed the door in the reporters’ faces. *That was for Myers, you sick sons of bitches.*

“I thought the press would be waiting at the barn raising, not outside the manor!” Penelope complained, looking frightened and anxious.

“It’s okay, Penelope.” Hana reached out and hugged her. “You’re safe now.”

“Oui, tout va bien.” Kiara took Penelope’s hand and squeezed, before turning to me. She gave me a slow grin and batted her eyelashes. “It was lucky you were here, Drake. Merci.”

I shook my head. “It was nothing, don’t worry about it.” I rubbed my shoulder, turning to stare at the
window, as the fields and orchards whooshed by. Finally, we arrived at the barn raising. Already there were nobles and other laborers working on the structure, so I jumped out as soon as the car stopped, and held the door open for the ladies. As they exited the car, I realized Hana was the only one who was actually dressed for a barn raising. Penelope and Kiara were wearing dresses and high heels. Oh, boy... that's an accident waiting to happen. If Myers were here, I’d bet her anything that one of them would end up on the floor before the day was over.

“What are we supposed to do?” Penelope asked.

“Just... stay away from any power tools.” I told her, looking around, trying to find *something* for them to do. “You could help with... ah...” I spotted the foreman barking orders at some of his crew. “Why don’t we just go ask the foreman to see what needs to be done. He’ll tell you where to go.” I smiled at her, and she nodded.

We all made our way to the short, husky man, who took one look at the girls and sighed. I walked up to him confidently, offering my hand. “Drake Walker. You in charge?”

“Yeah. Foreman Langdon.”

“What do you need?”

He eyed me up and down wearily. “We need help lifting beams, getting them into place and whatnot. There's also plank cutting, but..."

"Power tools?"

"Yep."

I nodded. “Lady Hana and I can help with beam lifting..”

“Which one’s Lady Hana?”

“The one in the plaid shirt. She’s stronger than she looks.”

The man huffed, but nodded. “What about the other two?”

“That’s what I was about to ask. What jobs could you give them?”

“Fetching food and water?” I raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, son, but quite frankly, they don’t look like they can do much else in those clothes.”

“You know it’s tradition. They have to do *something*.”

He sighed. “Fine. They can carry the smaller beams to the barn between the two of them. But I’m warnin’ you, they’re here under their own responsibility. I’m not responsible if one of them twists an ankle in those shoes or something.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’ll look out for them.”

He nodded once. “Okay. Send them to me and I’ll tell them where to go.”

“Thanks.” I walked back to the girls. “Hana, you’re with me. We’re lifting beams. Penelope and Kiara, the foreman will give you instructions.”

Penelope and Kiara looked at each other worriedly, before nodding and walking away. Hana and I made our way to the barn, and got to work. Soon, we had lifted a couple of beams with a pulley, as
the sun rose in the sky. I began to sweat, the heat unbearable, so after getting a beam up to the second floor, I took off my shirt. I wiped my brow as Hana handed me a bottle of water, and we looked out to the field.

“It’s already starting to come together.” Hana commented.

A couple cars parked away and reporters and camera men began to get out of the cars. “Looks like the press has arrived.” I rolled my eyes. “Hey, have you heard from Myers?”

“I’m guessing she’ll be here soon. Maybe she was waiting for the press to leave the manor to come.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I took another sip of ice cold water, before dumping the rest over my head. *Now that should keep me cool for... the next half hour.* We got back to work on lifting the next beam.

“Pull!”

“Hrrfff!” I heard Hana grunting with effort.

“Pull! Pull! Pull!” I nearly jumped and dropped the rope when I heard Maxwell.

“Hey, guys.” I heard Myers, before I saw her.

Hana, on the other hand… “Maxwell? Milla?”...got distracted and let go of the rope.

I let out an *oof* as the beam came crashing down, pulling the rope and causing it to burn my palms a little. “Oops! Sorry, Drake! I was just excited to see our friends. And it looks like Milla came dressed and ready to work.”

I sighed as I turned, and my jaw nearly dropped when I saw Myers. She, like Hana, was also wearing a loose plaid shirt, but unlike Hana, hers was open and tied around her waist, revealing a skin tight white undershirt underneath. To top it off she was wearing shorts that showed off her legs and, err, other curves.

“You know it.” Myers grinned at Hana. “And apparently, so did you! You look terrific!”

“Aww, thanks.”

I sighed. “I don’t think we were going to get it all the way up there anyway.”

When Myers finally looked at me, her jaw dropped, but she caught herself and shut it quickly. I smirked as her eyes ran over down my torso and back up to my face. “Drake… you’re not wearing a shirt…”

“Oh... right.”

“He started off with a shirt…” Hana commented, eyes flicking from Myers to me, watching us curiously, almost giddy.

“Hey, it’s hot out! A guy’s gotta cool off somehow.” I turned to Maxwell. “Maxwell, you’re going to be sweating buckets in that black shirt.”

“There’s a spot over there where many of the nobles are hanging up their dress shirts. Or, alternatively, I think Drake chose a spot on the ground for his.”

“Drake, you sure you’re not trying to show off for the press?”
“I’m happiest out of frame.”

“Well, Milla should be giving the press something to shoot. Come on! Let’s lift things and build barns.” Maxwell hooped excitedly.

“I think that’s missing a few steps.” Hana stared at him.

Maxwell just rolled his eyes. “Details, details.”

“Everyone ready?” I grabbed the rope, with Myers behind me, and Maxwell and Hana behind her.

“Ready.” Myers said.

“We’re supposed to hold it like this, right?”

I turned my head to check Hana’s grip. It was firm this time. “Yeah, you got it. Now, on three, pull together. One… two… three…”

“Heave!” Maxwell yelled, and between the four of us, we were able to get the beam to the second floor.

“Yes!” Myers high fived me as the press snapped their pictures.

“We did it!” Hana squealed.

“We showed that beam!” Myers moved to high five her next.

“That was mostly me, but the help is appreciated.”

I rolled my eyes at Maxwell. “Yeah, sure it was.”

“Milla, I’ll look for something that’ll put you on the front page.”

“Making planks for the walls looks like fun. You could help me with that.” Hana suggested.

“You’re welcome to stay here.” I told her.

Myers gave Hana and Maxwell a smile. “Thanks, guys, but I’ll stay here with Drake.”

I did not miss the knowing look that passed between Hana and Maxwell, and they both rushed off quickly, leaving me alone with her.

“Well, it looks like you’ve chosen to stick with me, Myers.”

She eyed me up and down, grinning cheekily. “I stand by my decision.”

“Heh, alright.”

“So, what does big, strong Drake need my help with?”

“Beam lifting, of course. But I’m bringing in some help.” I motioned to the truck that just pulled up, hauling Midnight Rose’s trailer. Myers raised her eyebrows quizzically before following me to the truck, away from the prying eyes of the press. I nodded to the stable master, who passed me the keys through the window and I led Myers to the back of the trailer, opening the doors. Midnight Rose whinnied and strained against her harness as she saw Myers.

“Midnight Rose!” Myers squealed, her eyes shimmering with emotion. She climbed up the trailer and
hugged the horse. Midnight Rose pressed her nose against Myers, huffing, and Myers laughed.

“Liam made sure she was taken care of for you.”

“And you took care of her.” She turned back to me, smiling widely. “Am I right?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Well… yeah.”

“Drake…” She stepped down from the trailer, and pulled me into a hug. “Thank you.”

“Myers…” I looked around, and noticed no one could see us behind the doors of the trailer, so I wrapped my arms around her, burying my face in her hair. We stayed like that for a while, until finally falling apart.

I untied Midnight Rose’s harness and handed her reins over to Myers, who began leading the horse to the pulley system. She handed the reins over to a couple workers, who attached Midnight Rose to the pulley system. I steered the beam as Myers gently led Midnight Rose away. Now that would make a hell of a picture for the press.

"Whew, that wasn't so bad. Good work, Camilla"

Her lips quirked up, and raised her eyebrows quizzically at her name on my lips. But then, she simply shook her head, petting Midnight Rose.

"Thanks but Midnight Rose did most of the work."

"Well, thank you, Midnight Rose." I smiled, and petted her. She snickered, bringing her nose to my shoulder.

"She really likes you." I heard Myers say, and saw she was staring at the horse and I tenderly.

I shrugged.

"Thanks for taking such good care of her when I was gone. Really, it… means a lot to me."

And you mean a lot to me. "You're welcome, Myers."

We stared at each other for a moment, both of us with small smiles on our faces, when we noticed Kiara walking by us, carrying a small beam. She wasn't balancing its weight, the beam slowly slipping to one side, when…

"Mom dieu!" Kiara twisted her ankle, and to top it off, the beam fell on top of her.

"Kiara!" Myers ran to her.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. "Oh, jeez." I knew this would happen. I ran to her side and lifted the beam off of her.

"Oh, merci beaucoup."

"You okay?" Myers asked her, and I got to work examining her foot.

"I am now." I looked up and saw Kiara wearing a sultry smile on her face. What the…?

"You shouldn't carry this all by yourself." I pointed to the beam.
"I, uh... you know how it is. Penelope said she was taking a five-minute break thirty minutes ago, and I didn't want to wait around."

I sighed. "If you're going to carry a beam, even if it's a small one, at least find someone like me to help you."

"Right, I'll find someone... like you." She wanted her throat and stood, giving me a beaming smile. "Thank you for looking out for me, Drake."

She nodded to Myers, and walked away. I shook my head and turned to Myers, who was staring at me, her lips curved in an amused grin. "I think you have an admirer."

I rolled my eyes. "I hope not."

"She's totally checking you out."

"Not funny, Myers."

"I'm not laughing!" She laughed.

I groaned. "I don't want to think about this. Let's just finish this barn. That's simple. Just move and build."

"Right. Okay." She shrugged and walked past me and back to Midnight Rose, as I stared after her, completely bewildered.

We kept on working for the rest of the day, and soon the barn began to come together. Finally, just as the sun was going down, the barn was fully raised. All the nobles cheered as they saw it. I wiped the sweat off my brow, while Liam and the others complained about how tired and beat up they were. After writhing on the floor, Maxwell shot up and suggested a trip to a spa nearby. Since all of us could use some relaxation, and taking advantage of the fact that Liam's evening was free, we decided to go.

We got to the spa, and the attendants ushered us into a men's only locker room, giving us keys to our lockers. Liam groaned as he sat down on a bench, rubbing his neck and wearily undressing.

I chuckled. "Was building a barn too much work for you, Your Majesty?" I teased, as I put all my stuff in the locker.

Liam only chuckled and shook his head. "It's not that... well, not only that."

"Well, what is it, then?"

Liam looked thoughtful for a moment. "Am I convincing... with Madeleine?"

Maxwell and I looked at each other. Oh...

"What do you mean?" Maxwell asked, and I noticed he still hadn't taken off his shirt.

Liam sighed. "Regina came to speak with me last night. She said... that I wasn't credible enough in making people believe I loved Madeleine..."

"Well, you don't." I stated simply. Maxwell gaped at me, at my bluntness, but we both knew he wasn't. He was in love with Myers...

And so are yo--
Don't! I shut that pesky voice in my head down. I already knew I was a pretty awful friend, which is why I wanted to be here for Liam now… to make amends.

By listening to him rant about how he loves the girl you're… getting to know? The girl you're… oh I don't know, practically stealing from right out under him?

I nearly growled out loud. I'm not stealing her, she's not an object or Liam's possession, she's a free woman. And we're just getting to know each other...

Liam's voice brought me out of my head. "I know I don't, but it still should be convincing. Regina said that as soon as all the enthusiasm of the royal engagement dies down, the press -- and by extension, the people -- will see through the act. And what Cordonia needs right now is the image of a united King and Queen. A power couple in love…"

I clapped his back and sat next to him. I wasn't really sure what to say, so I looked to Maxwell.

"Well, it's only temporary, right?" He tried. "I mean, we're working to clear Milla's name and once we do that…” He looked at me, before turning back to Liam, "You'll be free to break off the engagement."

Liam scoffed, a glint of frustration in his eyes. "It should not be this way…” He muttered under his breath.

"Well, it is. And what you've got to do right now is try to play the game the best way you can. You have to try to sell the image of a King in love with Countess Madeleine, if only for a little while…” I told him, trying to reassure him without coddling him.

"What if it's not for a little while? What if we never find Tariq? What if we never clear Camilla's name?" He stared at me, fear and worry clear in his eyes.

I sighed…”I don't know." I turned to Maxwell, whose lips were turned downward. He merely shrugged. "If we don't find Tariq or make him come forward… I guess whatever happens next is up to Myers."

"What if she decides to leave? Go back to New York?" Liam asked, worry clear in his eyes.

"She won't! Milla wouldn't do that!" Maxwell exclaimed, but I knew better.

"She might… and we have to respect her decision, if it comes to that." I told him.

"She won't." Maxwell practically glared at me, but I wasn't going to lie to Liam. I might be omitting some things, but I'd never straight out lie to him.

I clicked my tongue. "Maxwell…"

"She won't! Milla loves Cordonia, and House Beaumont, and yo-- I mean, us! She wouldn't leave us!"

My eyes widened at his slip, and I shot a glare in his direction.

"Maxwell…” Liam said quietly, "Drake is right, Milla had a whole life in New York before us. She had family, friends, and other plans for her life, and she has all the right to go back to them. Have you seen her writing lately?"

"What?" Maxwell's eyes widened at the realization.
"In the past weeks that you've been with her, have you seen her writing at all?"

*Oh, shit… He's right. The last time I saw her writing was before the Coronation.*

"N-no… but she's been busy! Between etiquette lessons with Bertrand and trying to get to the bottom of all of this--"

"Exactly." Liam cut him off before he began rambling. "When we met, Camilla may have been just a waitress, but she had plans. Plans to keep studying, to get a literary agent, to take the world by storm. If we hadn't met, I guarantee she would have been a household name for no other reason other than her talent. She's a writer at heart, an incredibly talented one, who can perfectly capture a feeling with the right words, and yet she's been so busy here, trying to fight her way out of this mess, that she hasn't even had time to do what she loves most."

I realized then I hadn't actually ever read something Myers has written. And Liam clearly had, that much was obvious by the way he spoke. 'A talented writer, who knew just the right words to capture a feeling?' I could feel small tendrils of jealousy creeping up my back. I mean, it's clear they had bonded over her writing. Liam loved to read, he was a total nerd. They'd probably talked for hours about "the Classics", and books and history, philosophy and literature.

*You know, you could just ask her if you want to read something of hers…*

*I WILL!* I yelled internally, before shaking my head and getting back to Liam.

"Listen, whatever Myers decides will be entirely up to her. For now, let's just focus on finding Tariq, and you focus on your acting chops. Try to really make the press believe you love Madeleine. Kiss her in public, smile when you see her as if you're actually happy, try to not be so rigid and uptight near her."

Liam nodded attentively. "Right."

"Everything's going to be fine. Now let's go. We have a nice hot tub waiting for us."

"You guys go ahead, I'll… stay here for a bit longer." Maxwell said, rubbing his neck.

Liam and I shared a look. "Ok…"

We went out to the hot tub, and waited for Maxwell. He kept on taking longer and longer, and we started getting worried. Liam and I began calling him, trying to convince him to come out from behind the door, when the girls burst in giggling. My mouth went dry as I took in the sight of Myers covered only in a towel, and I had to force myself to look away.

"Surprise!" Hana squealed.

"Hey, guys." Myers smiled at us, taking a long look at me.

Liam clenched his towel with one hand, securing it. "Oh! Camilla, Hana! Should we… er… cover up more?"

The girls looked at each other and I rolled my eyes. "I think the ladies will be fine." I mean, seriously. There's nothing really that different than this -- the uncovered chests and towels -- from a bathing suit, in our case at least…

*You know she's… naked, under that towel, right?*
Shut up! I told that silly little voice in my head. If I thought about Myers… no, better not go there. While the girls mercilessly teased Maxwell for his tattoo, I had to literally force my eyes not to look at Myers… in that towel… and only that towel. I shook my head. The best thing for this would be a cold, ice cold shower, but we were in a spa, so… the cold plunge it is.

"As fun as discussing Maxwell's hippo tattoo has been, I'm going to take a dip in the cold plunge… Anyone want to join?"

Liam shivered. "No thanks. After today, I'm relaxing in the tub…” Liam stood from the border of the pool and headed to the hot tub on the far end of the room.

I got up as well and headed to the ice cold miniature pool. I stared at the crystalline water for a second, shaking myself off, preparing for the jump, when I heard Myers' voice behind me.

"Trying to summon your courage?"

I turned to look at her, my eyes involuntarily roaming over her body. "This is supposed to be good for you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Like most things in life, the best thing is sometimes the most painful. Want to do it with me?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Why, Drake, so forward…"

I rolled my eyes, forcing myself not to blush. "I meant the cold plunge."

"Oh… what a shame." Her grin was absolutely sinful, but she playfully shrugged before saying. "I'm in."

"Really?" I smiled.

Myers nodded. "Couldn't let you do it alone."

"That's the spirit."

Myers moved to stand next to me and took my hand. She exhaled steeling herself, as she fisted her other hand on her towel, securing it before the jump. "Here goes…"

"One… two…"

"Three!"

We jumped. The ice cold water enveloped me, and it felt as if a million tiny daggers stabbed me all over my body. The air was completely pushed out of my lungs, and we both surfaced, gasping. Myers teeth began chattering, her lips quickly turning blue.

"That was…" she gasped again.

"Intense?"

"That's… one word… for it." She said between chattering teeth. She moved closer, wrapping an arm around my neck, pressing her curved body closer to me under water. She was shivering. I instinctively wrapped my arms around her, holding her closer.

"Having trouble keeping up with me, Myers?" I grinned, stopping my own teeth from chattering.
"Me?" She shook her head. "Never."

I raised an eyebrow, making a point to look at her chattering teeth and blue lips. She narrowed her eyes in a faux dirty look. "Sure. Let's get you out of here."

I carried her to the edge of the pool, and let go. I hefted myself out of there first, before offering her a hand. She took it and I pulled her out.

"Thanks." She wrung the water out of her long, brown hair, and tossed it over her shoulder.

We walked towards a shelf filled with more clean, dry towels, and Myers took two, throwing one at me.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome." Myers turned her back to me, unwrapping her soaking towel, letting it fall just over her lower back, exposing the smooth skin of her shoulders and back. My jaw dropped as I took her in, and she craned her neck, giving me a flirtatious smirk and a wink, before ducking behind a screen to change her towel. I forcibly stopped a groan, and looked around frantically to make sure nobody saw us. Thankfully, everyone was absorbed in their own relaxation.

Myers came out from behind the screen, wearing a fresh towel and a knowing grin. "All yours."

I shook my head. "Thanks." As I moved next to her to go behind the screen, she took my arm and pulled me in for a quick kiss. I couldn't help but grin. "You're full of surprises today."

"Good ones, I hope?"

"You know, you can surprise me like that any day. But right now, we should probably…" I instinctively looked to where Liam and the others were.

"Be sensible and discreet?"

"Unfortunately. And believe me when I say it's very unfortunate."

"I guess we should check out the rest of the spa. Go change your towel, before you get a cold or something."

"Right." I ducked behind the screen, grinning from ear to ear, tossed the wet towel in a bin and secured the new one on my hips. I stepped out from behind the screen and we made our way back to our group. After some drinks and some dangerous water stunts from Maxwell, it was time to get back to the manor. After checking out the dinner buffet, we all said goodnight, and headed to our rooms.

I walked with Myers and Maxwell to her room, where Bertrand was waiting inside.

“Where have you been?” He glared at us when Myers opened her door.

“And… that’s my cue. Night, Myers, Maxwell, Bertrand.” I nodded to each of them, before turning back to Myers. “I’m right next door, if you need anything.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Drake. Good night.”

I nodded and went inside my room. I took off my clothes, throwing them haphazardly on the floor, before jumping on the bed. I got under the covers and was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I woke up a couple hours later, my phone buzzing. I groaned as I fished it out from under my pillow.
My eyebrows shot up in surprise when I realized it was a text from Myers, and I rubbed the sleep from my eyes before opening it.

“Hey. You awake?”

“I am now. You’re not supposed to use your phone, remember?”

“I know…

Sorry

Can’t sleep”

“You ok?”

I waited patiently for her to answer.

Myers is typing…

Myers is typing…

That message disappeared as she apparently deleted whatever it was she was writing. I pushed the covers off, ready to go check on her, when I heard a soft knock on my door. I pushed myself off the bed, when Myers opened the door, stepped into my room, and closed it quietly. I turned on the lamp on my nightstand, and turned to look at her. She was wearing a dark green oversized t-shirt emblazoned with the words LBMS Talented Chorus. The shirt was long enough that it covered her thighs, but the sight still made me blush a bit.

“Myers, what’s up? You okay?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” She pointed to her head, circling her index finger. “Just… couldn’t turn my mind off. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, you did, actually.” I gave her a sheepish grin, and her eyes widened.

“Oh! I’m sorry, I thought you’d be awake for some reason.” She moved to open the door. “I’ll just--”

“Myers, it’s okay. I’m awake now.” She stood awkwardly beside the door. “Wanna talk about it?”

Myers nodded, and moved to sit on my bed.

“Wanna tell me what’s going through your mind?” I nudged her with my shoulder. She laughed.

“I guess I just… I don’t know. I keep thinking about everything that’s happened here. Tariq, what the maid told me…”

“What maid?”

Myers proceeded to explain how a maid here at the manor confessed to having been a pawn in the set up, how some noble lady in a scarf and sunglasses had asked her to deliver a love letter to Tariq, supposedly from Myers.

“And, I don’t know… I don’t really feel safe in the room. Is that stupid? I mean, it’s not like something that bad happened… it was just a misunderstanding, and really, it wasn’t the worst thing that could’ve--”
I cut her off before she could continue to ramble. “Myers, stop. You’re right to be scared. What you went through…Myers, it was bad. It wasn’t only a violation of your privacy, but it was a completely unwanted advance from some douchebag. It was sexual harassment, Myers. And yeah, it could’ve been worse, but that doesn’t mean that what you went through was not a big deal.” She looked down to the floor. “And it wasn’t your fault. And it’s normal if, after what happened, you don’t feel safe here anymore.”

Myers nodded once, a doubtful expression on her face. “You’d think I’d be used to it by now…”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just… being a waitress, being a woman… You’d think we’d be used to this by now.”

I stared at her blankly. A corner of her lips quirked in a sad half smile. She sighed. “There’s always an idiot who catcalls you on the street, or some drunk patron who tries to make a move on the waitress. With so many idiots I’ve encountered, you’d think this wouldn’t bother me the way it does.”

“Answer me this. Did any of the idiots that’ve ever catcalled you, or any drunk patrons who’ve tried to make a move on you ever walk in on you while you were changing?”

“No, but–”

“And did any of them ever force you to kiss them?”

“No.”

“And did any of them try to take pictures of you, half naked and without your consent?”

“No, but–”

“Then why would you be used to this? Why shouldn’t it bother you? Myers… look, I have a younger sister… I know what it’s like for women, and it’s why I spent my whole life trying to protect her the best I could. And it sucks. I get it, it does. It really sucks that in this day and age, these things are still an issue. But what I’m saying is, there’s nothing wrong with you. It’s okay if this bothers you, if it scares you, if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Thanks, Drake.” She side eyed me. “Mind if I stay here for a while?”

I grinned. “Not at all. Hell, we’ll make a party of it. Wanna raid the minibar?”

Myers grinned, shooting up from the bed. “Sure. you get the drinks, I’ll get some food.” She made her way to the small mini fridge, and began pulling out chocolates, gummy bears, and some peanuts. I made my way to the bar, and poured us a couple shots of whiskey. She dumped the food on the bed and I handed her a glass.

“Thanks.” Myers took a sip of whiskey. “So what do you want to do?”

“I don’t know, this is your party.” I shrugged.

“If this is a party we should play a game…”

“Oh, boy…” I rolled my eyes. “If you say truth or dare, I’m gonna…”

“I wasn’t going to suggest truth or dare. How about two truths and a lie?”
“Okay… you’re on.”

“Okay. I’ll go first.” Myers lifted her eyes to the ceiling, an adorably thoughtful expression on her face. “My favorite color is green, I love roller coasters, and… my first puppy had no tail.”

“Easy. The puppy is a lie.”

“Why do you think so?”

I shrugged. “A kids first puppy is usually a friendly dog that’s easy to train, like a labrador or a german shepherd. Those breeds always have tails.”

She grinned at me. “Nope. Wrong.”

“Seriously? Which was the lie, then?”

“The rollercoasters. I hate them. I don’t think I’ve ever been on one. They scare me to death.”

“You’ve faced angry nobles, the King and Queen of Cordonia and the press, and that’s what you’re afraid of? Roller coasters?”

She shrugged. “Yeah.”

I shook my head. “So what breed was your first puppy?”

“Mixed breed. My aunt picked up a stray dog who was pregnant. When she had her puppies, my aunt made it her mission to find them good homes. So she called my mom and dad to offer them one. At first, my mom hated the idea. She’s not an animal person in general, but my dad convinced her it would be good for me. You know, responsibility, reinforce my immune system and whatnot.”

“And did they all not have tails, or…”

“No… actually, Digger was the only one of the puppies who didn’t have a tail. He was the smallest puppy, all black and with a little stub for a tail. I took one look at him and fell in love.”

“Sounds like…”

“Like he was the runt of the litter?” Myers shrugged. “I guess so, but… I guess I picked him because he was different, because he stood out. My dad says I have a tendency to do that. That I’m always drawn to things or people who are different.” A nostalgic smile crossed her face. “I remember the same thing happened with all my pets. Angel, my second dog, was a white german shepherd. Also the smallest one, and the only white one of the litter. My cousin bought him for me. It must’ve cost him a fortune.”

“Your cousin bought you a dog?”

“It was after Digger had to be put down. He was ran over by a car and wasn’t going to make it. To make me feel better, my cousin Abraham bought me another dog.”

“Wow… that’s…”

“Tragic?”

“Depressing.”

“I guess. Angel was the best dog, though.”
“Was?”

“He died when I was seventeen.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. He lived a full and happy life, and was the best friend a girl could hope for. Anyway, it’s your turn.”

“Fine… One: I never had a dog. Two: I hated Liam when I first met him. Three: I can’t sing.”

Myers took a sip of her whiskey, twirling the liquid in her glass while thinking. “Easy, the dog one.”

I grinned. “Nope.”

“Wait, that’s true? You never had a dog?”

“Or any pet, really.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “We’ve lived at the palace since I was seven. And the staff can’t have pets.”

“Aww, Drake… that is so sad.”

“It’s okay.”

“So which one’s the lie?”

“Don’t you have to guess?”

“Fine.” She frowned in concentration, until her eyes widened. “Can you sing?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “A little bit.”

“Oh my god! You have to sing for me!”

I groaned. Out of all the lies I could’ve told, why did I have to pick that one? “No way.”

“Please? Come on, you can’t tell me you can sing, and then not sing for me!”

"I don't even know what to sing!"

"Well, what type of music do you like?"

I shrugged. I mostly listened to classic rock, and old school bands like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, Queen, Metallica, ACDC, The Clash, Pink Floyd, Guns n’ Roses, The Police, Black Sabbath, Van Halen, Journey, U2, Bon Jovi and Nirvana. The only contemporary bands I listened to sometimes was Red Hot Chilli Peppers and Imagine Dragons. "I like a lot of things."

"Like…?"

"I'm not going to sing for you, Myers."

She rolled her eyes. "At least tell me what kind of music you like."

I sighed. "If I had to pick a genre, I guess I’d go with classic rock. You can’t go wrong with a couple"
guitar solos or a good power ballad." I shrugged.

Myers gave me a slow grin that made her dimples come to life, her eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Hey Jude, don't make it bad
Take a sad song and make it better"

I groaned, covering my face with one hand. "What is it with you and breaking out into song?" She ignored me and kept singing.

"Remember to let her into your heart
Then you can start to make it better"

Myers really did have a beautiful voice, though. It was rich and deep, and she carried the tone well. She stopped singing, staring expectantly at me. I sighed. The things I do for you, Myers.

"Hey Jude, don't be afraid
You were made to go out and get her"

Myers squealed, delighted, before joining her voice to mine.

"The minute you let her under your skin
Then you begin to make it better
And anytime you feel the pain
Hey Jude, refrain
Don't carry the world upon your shoulders
For well you know that it's a fool
Who plays it cool
By making his world a little colder
Na-na-na, na, na
Na-na-na, na
Hey Jude, don't let me down
You have found her, now go and get her
Remember to let her into your heart
Then you can start to make it better"

We stopped singing, and Myers clapped. "Drake! That was awesome! You have a beautiful voice!"

I blushed. "Not really. It's okay, I guess."

"Drake… thanks for singing to me."
"I mean, you sang with me, so…"

She pushed herself closer to me, and reached out to cup my neck, pulling me in for a soft, sweet kiss.

"What was that for?"

She shrugged. "I wanted to kiss you. After a performance like that, I figured it was the least I could do to show my appreciation."

I shook my head. "You're trouble."

"You've known that since day one. Shall we get back to the game?"

We talked through most of the night, the game of two truths and a lie acting as a sort of ice breaker as we shared stories from our childhoods or our likes and dislikes.

"Favorite Disney Princess?"

"A tie between Pocahontas and Mulan."

"Savannah always liked Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty."

Myers shrugged. "To each their own, I guess. Coffee or tea?"

"Coffee, definitely. You?"

"Tea."

She told me about the infamous PetCo Incident when she was little:

"And so, my dad didn't know they'd given me a male and a female hamster, so of course they reproduced and by the end of winter we had more hamsters than we could handle. I decided to donate them to a Petco near my house."

"This was on a Saturday?"

"Yeah, and on Monday, we see the news: 'Gas leak in New Jersey Petco caused major explosion. All animals presumed dead. No human casualties.'"

I couldn't help but laughing hard at that. Then, of course, we talked about books and movies:

"Favorite book?"


"Okay! I get it, you like books! Moving on… Favorite movie?"


"Wait… Braveheart? Really?"

She nodded. "I love it. Love the tragedy of it, the romance, the persistence of the Scots, William's
love for Murron… everything."

"Freeeeedom!" I bellowed, and Myers burst out laughing, while jumping on me, trying to cover my mouth.

"Ssh! We're supposed to be sleeping remember?"

We talked all night, about everything and nothing at all.

"Tell me about the first time you got drunk."

"Fine, but you can't tell anyone. It was when Liam, Maxwell and I were about 16. We'd stolen some whiskey from the kitchen and snuck into the garden maze. We proceed to do shots, just slugging down the whiskey until eventually we passed out. I'm told Leo and Bastien found us and they carried us to bed without telling the King or my dad."

"And you didn't get in trouble?"

"Nah. In fact, Leo teased us mercilessly for passing out after a few shots of whiskey."

Towards the end of the night, we started getting deep.

"Do you believe aliens exist?" Myers asked between yawns, laying down on the bed with her head propped up on her hand.

I shrugged. "Honestly, we can't be the only people out there. There's millions of stars in the galaxy, millions of planets who could sustain life…"

I looked down to see Myers had fallen asleep curled on my bed. As I looked at her, I couldn't help as I felt my chest tighten, my heart swelling at the sight. A sense of tenderness and protectiveness washed over me and I knew there wasn't anything I wouldn't do to keep her safe. She looked so peaceful, and content, and safe, and I just wanted to keep her here forever. And so, without another thought in my head, I lay beside her, and she instinctively snuggled closer to me, burying her face in the side of my chest and placing one arm over it. I pulled up the covers, turned off the lamp on the nightstand and pressing a kiss to her forehead, I slept.

It was the best sleep of my life.
I woke up a couple hours later to find Myers trying to sneak off my bed. With one eye barely open, I grabbed her arm and pulled her back to me, holding her closer. She giggled and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Where ya goin'?" I mumbled sleepily.

"Back to my room. I have Maxwell as an alarm clock, remember?"

I groaned, holding her tighter, not wanting to let her go.

I just want to wake up next to you, and it's not even light out.

"No… Stay."

Myers pressed her lips to my forehead tenderly, and I closed my eyes once more. "I want that, too. We’ll get there soon. For now, ssh. Go back to sleep."

I sighed. “Fine.”

She got off me, and a moment later, I heard the door close with barely a click. I turned on the bed, hugging her pillow. It smelled like her, and with that thought in mind, I drifted back to sleep.

I woke up a couple hours later, still hugging the pillow, still with a huge smile on my face. I got up, went through my daily morning routine -- breakfast, workout with Liam, stables to tend to Midnight Rose, and shower -- and was about to head to the farewell picnic when Bastien caught up with me.

And… we hadn’t talked since the Coronation.

“You’re looking awfully cheery this morning.”

I rolled my eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be with Liam at the picnic already?”

“The perimeter is secure and we’ve hired extra security for the day’s event, to prevent a… breach of privacy, like last time.”

I snorted. “Well, good to know you guys are finally doing your job.”

“Drake…” Bastien said, a warning in his tone.

It only made me madder. “No, really, I’m just saying that maybe some guests might find it comforting to know that there’s extra security here, like, oh, I don’t know, Myers, who couldn’t sleep last night because she felt unsafe in her room, given what happened last time she stayed here; or Liam, who set me up in the room next to hers, because apparently he doesn’t trust his own security to be able to do their damn jobs and keep her safe!”
“All right, Drake, that’s enough.”

“No, it’s not. If you’d done your job when you were supposed to, Myers wouldn’t even be in this whole mess.”

“Drake, I know you’re still angry about what happened at the Coronation—”

“Uh, ya think?”

“But you must understand, I was simply doing my job. And so were Tanner and Jerry.” He gave me a stern glare, as if saying you didn’t have to fight them.

I shook my head indignantly. “Again, you should’ve done your job the night those pictures were taken.”

“It’s not that simple, Drake.” I scoffed and he sighed. “I understand why you’re upset, but whenever you feel like coming and talking to me like an adult about it, my door’s open.” And with that, he walked briskly away.

I rolled my eyes as I made my way outside. The picnic was in full swing when I got there, so I hung out around the edges searching for a familiar face. I spotted Maxwell first, talking quietly with Bertrand. I made my way over, and as Bertrand spotted me, he gave me a nod and left to go mingle.

“Hey, buddy.”

“Drake, hey. Glad you’re here!”

“Why? Where’s Myers?”

“I left her with the other ladies. Now listen, here’s the plan. In a couple of minutes, Hana’s going to challenge Madeleine to a dance off—”

“Wait, what?”

“Pay attention! Hana’s going to challenge Madeleine to a dance off, creating a distraction so Milla, Bertrand, you and I can sneak away unnoticed. We’re going to go to the gardens outside Milla’s room and try to search the area we think the pictures were taken.”

I nodded attentively, trying to take it all in. Hana, dance off, Myers, gardens, pictures. “Okay, great. I’ll go find Myers.”

“Go get her, tiger. Me and Bertrand will meet you there. Once you find the ladies, give Hana the signal.” He winked, then clapped my shoulder and sent me on my way. I shook my head, unable to suppress a tiny grin.

I made my way up to Myers, who was talking to Hana and Kiara. “Hey, Myers, Hana. Maxwell, er, caught me up on the plan. Now might be a good time…” I eyed Hana meaningfully.

Her eyes widened as she remembered. “Oh! Right! I’ll… be right back. I just remembered something I really must speak to Madeleine about.” She winked at us not so stealthily and walked off.

As Hana left, Kiara turned to me. “Drake, I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Me, too. But I try to support Liam when I can.”

“You’ve always been such a good friend to him. It’s part of why I’ve always liked you. It’s such a
“shame what happened to your sister.”

I tensed up instantly.

“Wait, what do you know about Savannah?” Myers said, just as tense.

Kiara seemed to sense this, as her eyes widened and she began to fidget with the drink in her hand. “Not much, just that she was very curious about the world… She always wanted to know about the places I’d traveled to.”

Well, that’s no surprise. Savannah always wanted to travel around the world, and she had the wonderful ability to make small talk with just about everyone, so--

“And she was coming along so well in her French lessons, and I was surpri--”


“I was teaching her before--”

Kiara’s words were drowned out by loud pop music that blasted from the speakers. A crowd began to gather around the commotion that Hana was causing, quite literally dancing circles around the Wicked Witch of the West.

“Psst, Drake, that’s our cue!” Myers whispered.

But, Savannah…

“Wait, I need to talk to Kia--”

“There’s no time, we have to go while no one’s looking! Please! I know this is important to you, but--”

“No, you’re right, let’s go.”

We walked away from Kiara and the picnic, making our way to one of the back gardens near Myers’ room. Near one of the hedges away from the main picnic area, I spotted a security officer who looked at us suspiciously; a young kid, probably on one of his first jobs. He frowned and made a move as if to follow us.

If I could just make him believe we’re just a noble couple sneaking off somewhere more private… With that quick thought in my head, I took Myers’ hand in mine, linking our fingers.

“Drake, wha--”

“Ssh, just go with it.” I whispered. I smiled warmly at her, and she smiled at me back. I looked quickly around to make sure no one was looking -- no one but the guard, that is -- and leaned in to give Myers a small kiss, then pretended to whisper something in her ear. I chanced a look at the guard, and saw he was shaking his head, a goofy smile on his face as he made his way back to his post.

“Well, I don’t know what that was about, but I’m not complaining.” Myers laughed, side eyeing me.

"I could say I was looking for an excuse to kiss you, but really it was to make the guard think we were just a couple sneaking off together."

She shrugged good naturedly. "Hey, whatever works, right?"

"Right."
We made our way to the gardens outside Myers room, meeting Maxwell outside.

"Where's Bertrand?" Myers asked.

"I sent him up to your room to stand in. I relayed everything that happened, so he'll know where to go."

"Bertrand is going to stand in for me?"

"Little known fact, before he was Duke Ramsford, Bertrand was an accomplished human statue."

"What?"

"Kidding. But he will do almost anything to clear your name."

I rolled my eyes. Ok, enough fooling around.

"Alright, Myers, where do you think we should start?"

"We should try to line up the shot." She answered, determined.

I took my old camera from my pocket and aimed it for her window, thinking of how it's really disturbing that you could see everything going on in her room from the gardens, and snapped the picture. I compared it to the tabloid photos. It didn't look quite right.

"Looks like Bertrand is ready." Maxwell announced.

"This angle doesn't look right." I looked around, spotting a large tree surrounded by bushes. "I think we'd have to be standing over there to get the right view."

We walked to the tree, Myers grimacing as she tried to position herself to match the pictures. "I can see right into my bedroom from here! Drake, hand me the camera." I did, and she took a picture.

"Hmm… too low. Even someone seven feet tall couldn't have taken this."

Oh, shit. I looked to the tree. "They must've claimed the tree!"

"I guess that means I'm climbing the tree." Before me or Maxwell could even protest, she hung the camera from her neck and began to nimbly climb. She even almost slipped, but managed to hold on tight and keep climbing. That Myers for ya, always fully determined.

Once she got set up, she aimed at the manor, wincing as she snapped the picture. "It's a perfect match! This is really close to the Manor…"

"Whoever did it must have been at the party."

"More than that, who ever did it must've been waiting around for the right shot. I mean… I'm literally up a tree. Whoever took those pictures wasn't just standing around and happened to see… they were waiting."

I could feel myself getting worked up. "They knew Tariq would be in your room, which means it was definitely a setup and the photographer was in on it. And whoever hired the photographer must have known the manor pretty well to know about the view from this spot."

"Maxwell, didn't you say that a reporter snuck into the party that night?"

"Yeah, a bold move, considering it was a private event."

"We need to confirm if the reporter you saw is the same one who climbed the tree and took the
"Right. Now I'll go get Bertrand and meet you back here."

"Can't you just text him?"

"Think, Milla! What if they're monitoring the airways?" He frowned at her, shaking his head, then turned to me, giving me a small wink, and went on his way.

I felt my lips quirk up slightly, then turned to Myers, finding her staring intently at her window. "You coming down, Myers?"

She sighed. "Yeah, just thinking about how you came to my rescue that night."

I grinned. "I think I remember you coming to my rescue."

"Hah! Maybe a little. Drake, I… I just wanted to say thank you."

"It was nothing Myers. Really."

"It wasn't nothing. Not to me."

I blushed, rubbing the back of my neck. On one hand, it was good to know that night meant that much to her… it meant a lot to me, too. But on the other hand, I just did what any other decent person would've done in my place. "Well… uh… get down from there, before you hurt yourself."

"Pffft." She rolled her eyes. "I've been climbing trees since I could walk. Or well, since I was eight or nine." She laughed. "Our apartment complex had this huge tree right in the middle of the gardens, and me and my friends would always climb it, jump from it, everything. We practically lived on that tree."

I was about to respond when I noticed she frowned and began to tussle with something stuck in the branches. She grabbed what looked to be an ID pass, and jumped down, landing on all fours like a cat, just as Maxwell and Bertrand came out.

"I might have found something. Look." She handed the tag to Maxwell, who smeared the dirt from it with sleeves. Bertrand grimaced and began berating him. However, once the dirt was cleaned off from the tag, it revealed the picture of a woman. Her name was too badly smudged out and we couldn't make it out, but at least we finally had a real clue. With that, Bertrand was satisfied for now and began shuffling Marwell and Myers to begin packing for the train tomorrow.

I watched them begin to walk away and sighed. Poor Myers… she's been a target for the tabloids since day one. Wait a second… My eyes widened as I realized what my thoughts meant… that this wasn't the first time someone had tried to set Myers up! I walked quickly to her side and held Myers back. "Wait, do you have a minute? I just thought of something important."

"Yeah, sure, what's up?"

"I was thinking, Myers… this isn't the first set of photos someone has tried to turn against you."

Realization dawned on her and her eyes widened. "You mean the ones from the bachelor party? The ones you and Bastien kept from going to print?"

"Yeah, I don't think it's a coincidence, either." It was pretty suspicious that Tariq was there both nights… what if he had something against Myers? What if he was secretly a psychopath, who
became obsessed with her from day one? What if he-- No, let's not get ahead of ourselves. That night, Tariq looked just as torn up over what had happened, so I'm pretty sure he wasn't in on the set up, but was a victim, just like Myers was.

"Did you ever find out who did it?"

"I have hunches, but nothing conclusive." I remembered what Myers told me last night, about what the maid had told her. "There might be a connection between the noble lady, the bachelor photos and this photographer. Either way, this conspiracy goes deeper than we thought. Just… be careful, Myers."

She took my hand and squeezed. "I will. Thanks for looking out for me, though."

I smiled and looked around. Once we were alone, I brought her hand to my lips. "Always."

That night, I was in my room packing for the train to Italy on the morning, listening to music on my earbuds, when I felt hands coming around my waist and someone pressing themselves against my back. I nearly jumped, but then the smell of coconut and flowers reached me. I smiled and took out my earbuds.

"What are you doing here, Myers?"

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm sneaking into your room for a repeat of last night."

I huffed a laugh as I felt a pleasant tingle run through me. I turned in her arms, and wrapped my own around her waist. "As happy as I am to see you…"

"No…" She groaned.

"Yes…" I said, running my fingers through her hair. "We can't do this every night. Someone could see."

Myers lifted her head to look at me. "Always so cautious." She lifted her toes to give me a light peck on the cheek. "I was careful, I promise. I waited a full half an hour after Liam left." At my puzzled look, she explained. "He came to see me. Just wanted to make sure I was okay." She shrugged. "Guess I'm not the only one who doesn't feel safe here."

A pang of guilt hit me then. "He really cares about you…"

"Drake… come on, I know that face." I tried to look away, but she placed a hand on my cheek. "Hey…" Myers led me to the bed and we sat down. "Let's talk… I know you feel guilty about this--"

"He loves you, Myers. And he's my best friend."

"He's my friend, too. But I don't love him."

She looked at me, and it seemed the very air around us was electrified, charged somehow.

I shook my head. "This is still wrong, Myers. We can't keep doing this. At least not until…" Until you clear your name? Until we tell Liam? Until we define whatever this is?

"Until we find Tariq and clear my name." I looked at her then, and she continued. "And then… we'll tell him. But right now… the fact of the matter is… Liam is engaged to someone else, and even if he wasn't, I don't return his feelings. He…" She bit her lip, as if trying to decide if she should say
whatever it was she was going to say. "He proposed to me the night of the Coronation, before the whole scandal went down."

I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. "And…?"

"I told him I needed to think about it. It was right after we were together at the bar, and I just… I couldn't do it. Not yet. It felt wrong."

"Myers…"

"I've told you how I feel, Drake. And I know how you feel. So… can we just focus on that?"

I took a deep breath, still feeling guilty.

"Hey… you can say no, if you want to. I'll go back to my room."

"Stay." I said without thinking.  

God, what was it about this woman?! I sighed. Myers merely looked at me, patiently waiting for me to go on. "You know I want you to stay… but we have to be smart about this."

"Drake, it's not like we're having an affair or cheating on Liam or something."

Isn't it, though? My conscience piped up.

"Myers… last night was fun, and I… I really like hanging out with you, but you have to admit it was also pretty reckless."

She nodded once.

"And if even one servant saw, o-or another reporter snuck in and got pictures…"

"I know."

"I just… don't want another scandal surrounding you, and I definitely don't want to hurt Liam. If we do this…"

"You want to do it right."

"Yeah."

Myers lips quirked up in a half smile. "Okay… How about this? I'll help you finish packing, and then I'll go back to my room. And if anybody asked, you needed help folding your white tees and your denim."

"Ha! No one would ever believe that." We laughed, and she reached for my hand. I took her other hand, lacing our fingers. "Just packing. And then you'll go."

She pressed her forehead against mine. "Yes, sir."

I raised an eyebrow.

She gave me a chaste kiss. "I'll be good, I promise." With that, she broke away from me and stood up.

I rolled my eyes. "You always say that." I muttered under my breath.
"And I always am!" She laughed, grabbing my clothes and folding them neatly.

"So, are you excited for Italy tomorrow?" Myers asked as we folded and stored clothes into my duffel bag. She was practically buzzing with nervous energy.

"Eh…" I shrugged.

"Eh? Eh?! It's Italy, Drake! Roma, beautiful Roma!"

"So I take it you're excited?"

"Are you kidding? I've wanted to go to Italy since I was in the sixth grade!"

"Ah, right. Your Roman Empire obsession."

"I know we have that State dinner, but do you think we'll have some time for sightseeing? I'd love to visit the Coliseum, the Pantheon, the Roman Forum, Piazza Navona and Trevi Fountain! And--"

Myers looked so cute as she rambled on. I smiled to myself, and then sighed. I should probably tell her this wasn't a vacation. We're going to Rome on Liam and Madeleine's engagement tour, which meant back to back policy meetings with the Royal couple, and almost no time for sightseeing.

"Drake?"

"Yeah?" Myers looked at me expectantly. "Uh… no, not really excited for Italy."

"What, have you been there before?"

I grimaced.

"Oh… of course you have. You've probably been to Italy a dozen times with Liam."

"Just… seven."

"Wow…" She nodded, "Aren't you lucky…"

"If I'm to be honest, the food's the best part. Unlike Paris, which is pretty much the king of pretentious tiny meals under the name of 'gourmet meals', Italy has some of the best food in the world. The pasta, pizzas, the lasagna, the cheese! And don't get me started on their meats."

Myers laughed. "Figures we go to Italy and you're most excited about the food."

"Trust me, Myers, once you get a taste of authentic Italian spaghetti a la carbonara, you will be too."

"I hope so! Okay, quick, subject change! All this talk of pasta and pizza's making me hungry."

We changed the subject, conversation flowing easily between us, and soon, all my clothes were packed away. I closed my duffel bag as Myers sat on the bed.

"And…" I struggled with the zipper, finally managing to close it, "done!" I set the thing down on the foot of the bed and sat next to Myers with a groan.

Myers sighed, stretching her arms over her head. "I guess I should go…"

She looked at me, a hint of mischief in her eyes. I couldn't help the slow smirk that grew on my face. "Thanks for helping me pack."
"Anytime."

I moved to brush an errant strand of hair from her face, and she leaned into my touch, closing her eyes. I unconsciously licked my lips and leaned in.

The kiss was electric. Slow and deep, like we had all the time in the world. And, at the same time, there was a sense of urgency, of longing. I brought my hands to cup her face. She ran her fingers through my hair, fistling them at the nape of my neck. God, I would never get enough of her, of this. It was like time stood still, and everything but her disappeared. She moved to straddle me, and I groaned against her mouth as I felt the heat of her. I ran my hands down her back, to her waist and back again into her hair, as she pulled me closer to her, hard hands moving to push my denim shirt from my shoulders. I broke the kiss, breathless, and I pressed my forehead to hers.

"Myers…"

"I know…"

I opened my eyes, and she looked at me tenderly, pressing one last kiss to my forehead, before standing. "Good night, Drake."

I nodded, trying to suppress a goofy grin, as she made her way out of my room.

The next morning, I helped Myers carry her surprisingly small bag as a maid led us to the car that would take us to the train station. Myers was literally smiling the whole time, chatting excitedly with Hana and Maxwell. Liam would ride in another car with the Royal family and Madeleine's family.

Once we got to the train station and on the train, several ushers took our bags and led us to our sleeping carts. Myers was led to hers first -- a private sleeping cart, while I was apparently bunking with Maxwell and Hana with one of the noble ladies.

"Best friend roommates! Best friend roommates! Best friend roommates!" Maxwell chanted.

I groaned and turned to the usher. "Are there any other private sleeper carts left?" I eyed Maxwell meaningfully.

The usher looked a bit embarrassed, and shook his head. "I'm afraid not, sir. There are only four on this train: one occupied by the King, one by Countess Madeleine, one by the King Father and the Queen Mother and the last by Lady Camilla, as you saw."

I sighed. "Oh, well. Thank you." I tipped the usher, who bowed and left, closing the door.

"Best friend roommates! Best friend roommates!" I turned around to face Maxwell, who was for some reason uncorking a bottle of champagne. I rolled my eyes indulgently. Oh well, I guess there are worse fates than rooming with Maxwell -- like rooming with Neville, for instance. I shivered at the thought.

"What's the champagne for? It's eight am."

Maxwell grinned as he served. "This, my friend, is to celebrate we're alive, in good health, and traveling in luxury to foreign lands!" He announced grandly.

I shrugged. "We always do that, Maxwell. We're best friends with the King of Cordonia."

"Yeah, but now we have Milla and Hana!" He handed me a glass and clinked his with mine.
"I guess…"

"So what's going on between you two, anyway?"

I spat out the champagne, coughing. "What?!"

"Oh… so there is something going on…"

"No!"

"So nothing happened yesterday when I tried to give you guys a moment alone?" He moaned, disappointed.

"No, Maxwell. Nothing happened in the five minutes it took you to get Bertrand."

"But you guys are…"

I sighed. "We're friends, Maxwell. Just friends for now."

"For now?"

"Yes! Nothing's going to happen until Myers clears her name, and who even knows if something will happen once she does."

"Yeah, but…" He looked to the floor.

"But what?"

"Milla really likes you… and not as a friend, she likes you likes you."

"What are we, in seventh grade?" I scoffed.

"I'm serious!" Maxwell sighed. "She doesn't look at Liam the way she looks at you. Hana and I talk about it all the time—"

"Seriously? You and Hana? Why are we even talking about this?" I began growing frustrated. Whatever happens between me and Myers is between me and Myers.

"Because we're friends, and I want to help."

"You want to help?" I frowned. "Do everything you can to find Tariq and get him to come clean."

"Okay."

"And can we just… not talk about me and Myers anymore? Whatever opinions you and Hana have, just… keep them to yourself. The situation is confusing enough already, without you adding to it."

"Okay… I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable. I just… I know you can't talk to Liam about this… not yet, anyway. So I wanted to let you know… I'm here if you need to vent."

I sighed, and clapped him on the shoulder. I knew his intentions were good, deep deep down. "I know. Thanks buddy." A thought lingered, though… "It's just…"

Maxwell's eyes widened eagerly, "Yes…?"

"Nevermind."
“No, come on, you can tell me!”

I sighed. Maybe it would be good to talk to someone about this. “If something were to happen between me and Myers… how would I tell Liam? How would he react to know that…?”

“You guys fell in love?”

“Hey, no one’s fallen for anyone! We’re just… getting to know each other!” I shuddered. I could even think about those words, not yet. Me and Myers, falling in love-- No! No! Not yet!

Maxwell scoffed. “Speak for yourself. Milla’s words, not mine.” He rolled his eyes.

“Maxwell! Not helping!”

I remembered he told me Myers’ used those words. “I think I’m falling for someone else.” God, Myers…

“Okay!” He raised his palms in front of his chest in a placating gesture. “Listen… Liam loves you, you’re practically like a brother to him. Now… I’m not going to lie, it’s going to hurt him. Hurt him deeply; he loves Milla--”

“Maxwell.”

“It’s the truth. He loves her. I think he’s loved her from the moment he saw her.”

“Making me feel worse, Maxwell.” I’m such a god awful friend.

“Anyway, he’ll be hurt, but he’d never turn his back on you for it. He won’t punish you for falling for Milla--”

“Again! Nobody’s fallen for anyone! Can you just… not use that word, please?”

“What other word do you want me to use? Crushing, dating, canoodling?”

I shook my head. “Can we just… get to the point?”

“The point is… Liam will forgive you, and he’ll accept whatever Milla decides. If she decides she wants to be with you -- which, in my opinion, is the most likely outcome -- Liam will try his best to be okay with it, and to get over her. And yeah, maybe it’ll be a bit awkward between the two of you for a while, but it won’t last forever…”

I nodded, taking it all in. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

At that precise moment, there was a knock on the door and I opened it to find Hana and Myers.

"Hello again, Drake! Maxwell! We were wondering if you wanted to get breakfast with us!” Hana said brightly

My stomach rumbled and I looked at Maxwell, who grinned. "Let's go."

We went to the dining cart, where we met up with Liam for breakfast. Afterwards, Liam excused himself to study up on the new tax deal he was supposed to be negotiating during the visit, and Myers invited us all to her suite to hang out. Somehow, our friendly conversation turned into a karaoke session, with all of us having a go at the imaginary mic. Myers gave a very memorable rendition of “Colors of Wind” from Pocahontas and David Guetta and Sia’s “Flames”, while Hana gave a touching cover of Taylor Swift’s “Love Story” and Adele’s “Someone Like You”, and
Maxwell opted for Jason Derulo’s “Want to Want Me”, followed by a duet of Avicii’s “Wake Me Up” with Myers. As for me -- after a lot of badgering, and cheering and chanting -- I got up and sang Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” and Imagine Dragons’ “Hear Me”.

The karaoke eventually died down, and turned into one of our not-so-unusual-anymore sharing circles.

“Okay, so what would you say was your most embarrassing karaoke moment?” Maxwell asked us.

Myers raised her hand, shaking her head. “Ooh, ooh, me.” Maxwell nodded in her direction. “I was twenty, had just broken up with my boyfriend of two years, and was drunk at a small get together with my friends.” Myers laughed.

“Oh, no…” Hana said, looking genuinely terrified of what Myers was going to say next.

“Oh, yes… I jumped on a table and began singing ‘Impossible’ by I Am King. I’m told my best friend Hailey had to literally pull me down from the table and get me to bed.”

“Please tell me someone took a video of that.”

“That video shall remain forever hidden in Hailey’s cloud, where you’ll never see it.”

Maxwell groaned good naturedly.

“I don’t understand… is the song too tragic?” Hana asked, confused.

“You’ve never heard it?!?” Myers asked.

“It’s the ultimate breakup anthem.” Maxwell added, already on his phone.

I shrugged. “I’ve never heard it either.”

Immediately, a somber melody came from Maxwell’s phone, the instrumentals to a strong power ballad.

\textit{I remember years ago}

\textit{Someone told me I should take}

\textit{Caution when it comes to love, I did, I did}

\textit{And you were strong and I was not}

\textit{My illusion, my mistake}

\textit{I was careless, I forgot, I did}

\textit{And now, when all is done, there is nothing to say}

\textit{You have gone and so effortlessly}

\textit{You have won, you can go ahead, tell them}

\textit{Tell them all I know now}

\textit{Shout it from the roof tops}
Write it on the skyline
All we had is gone now
Tell them I was happy
And my heart is broken
All my scars are open
Tell them what I hoped would be
Impossible, impossible
Impossible, impossible

Wow… I stared at Myers incredulously, while she burst out laughing from embarrassment, covering her face with a pillow.

Hana laughed as well, wiping a tear from her eye. “That was… depressing.”

“Yeah…” I said.

“Oh come on, give her a break!” Maxwell took her pillow and placed an arm around Myers.

“Yeah! It was my first break up from a serious relationship!”

“Just… wow.” I said, shaking my head.

We kept on talking and laughing, teasing each other. Hana told us about the first time she traveled to Europe from China, Maxwell relived a somewhat embarrassing childhood memory about his first kiss, and that’s how we got to the current subject.

“What about you, Milla?”

“My first kiss was… kinda perfect.” She smirked. “It was everything I’d read about in books and seen in movies.”

“That good?” I said, doubtful. In my experience, everyone’s first everything sucked. Either you were nervous or obviously inexperienced…

“Yeah. It was in the summer before eighth grade. To give you some context, seventh grade was a tough year for me… my parents split, my mom took off, I was in full on puberty mode, it sucked. And to top it off, the typical nerdy girl had a crush on the baddest skater boy she could find.”

“I thought you said this was a good story, Myers.”

“It is! This is just the beginning. So, I had this huge crush on this bad skater boy, who didn’t give me the time of day, and was always a total dick to me. But… for some reason, I got the attention of his best friend, Matt. Matt was in the wrestling team, and he was kinda lazy with his school work, but he was so cute with his blond curls and blue eyes…”

“He sounds dreamy…” Hana said, giggling.

“He was. Anyway, we got partnered up for an assignment one day, and that was the first time we talked, and he was actually the first boy who was actually nice to me. So, after the assignment, we
sort of kept on talking and about two weeks before school starts he asks me to hang out. We went down to the beach, got some ice cream on the boardwalk and just hung out all afternoon. Now, by this point, I’d forgotten all about his horrible, asshole of a best friend—”

“Good for you!” Hana once again cheered her on. She was obviously the most invested in Myers’ story.

“Right? Anyway, the sun started to go down, and we sat on a bench to enjoy the last few moments of daylight.”

“Did he kiss you while you watched the sunset together?”

“East coast, Hana. But yeah, that’s what basically happened. As the sun was going down, he turned to me, said he really liked me, and asked if he could kiss me. And I said yes, and that was that!”

“Aww! I wish my first kiss could have been as sweet as that.”

“I’m sure your next one will be.”

“Right… I’m sure Neville or Rashad are secretly hopeless romantics.”

The girls burst out laughing, while Maxwell and I just looked at each other, not really sure what they were talking about.

“What about you, Drake? What was your first kiss like?” Myers asked, grinning.

“It was on my family’s ranch back in Texas, one summer we visited. It was okay… I was pretty nervous, though.”

“Come on! Tell, tell, tell!” Maxwell began chanting.

“Okay! I was twelve, and I was once again being dragged to a party by Savannah. She’d been invited to one of our farmhands’ son’s birthday party, and Mom said she could go if I went.”

“Awww was it your first boy/girl party?” Myers asked, grinning.

I rolled my eyes. “It was if you don’t count some courtly functions Liam had begged me to go with him. Anyway, we got to Chuck’s party, and after the cake and stuff, a couple kids snuck out to a spring near our ranch. They called it the Make-out Point, and we went there and played seven minutes in heaven. I spun the bottle and got seven minutes in heaven with Sarah Covey.”

“And…” Myers bobbed her head, gesturing for me to continue.

“And she kissed me.” I shrugged.

“And you didn’t feel anything? Butterflies in your stomach, or giddy o happy?” Myers asked, a grin on her face.

“Oh honestly… not really. It wasn’t bad, exactly… It just wasn’t special, I guess. I mean, I felt cool cause I’d made out with a girl and stuff, but the kiss itself was just okay.”

“Yes?” Myers repeated. “Well, okay. Let’s look on the bright side: it could’ve been worse.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. I honestly had never felt butterflies in my stomach with any of the girls I’d dated, until… well, Myers. I blushed at that train of thought as I stared at her, while she continued the conversation with Hana and Maxwell.
Soon, before any of us realized, it was time for lunch, and we all made our way to the dining cart once more. Liam once again joined us for lunch, but we all dispersed to our rooms afterwards. I decided to catch up on some sleep, as Maxwell left the room to find Myers. And just like that, the train slowly stopped at the station.

We were in Italy.
When in Rome

Chapter Notes

Again, this chapter is also half plot, half figments of my imagination. There's a slight nod to one of my other favorite books from the Choices app; you'll know which when you read it. Also, not to spoil anything, but did any of you think it's weird you go to Rome, but never go sightseeing? Think about it ;)

As always, thanks for reading, and if you would be so kind, please leave a comment or review, they make my day! Enjoy!

While the rest of the court made their way to the State Dinner, I stayed on the train, toying with an idea… We were going to be in Rome for two days -- which for the Royal Family and some of the more influential members of court meant two days of policy meetings. Then, there was also Madeleine's bachelorette tomorrow night, which was something Myers would be preparing for with Maxwell, Bertrand and her new press secretary.

But… there was nothing on Myers' schedule for tomorrow during the day… She'd probably begin to get ready for Madeleine's party after dinner, which meant she had the whole day to sightsee… And I… really wanted to take her out. It was her first time in Italy, and she deserved to fully experience it.

My thoughts were interrupted by Maxwell coming back into our room to get his wallet. Who in the hell forgot their wallet before going out?

"Maxwell!"

"Hmm?" He said distractedly while going through his bag.

"I've been thinking… we should go out tomorrow. Take Myers sightseeing."

He finally looked up at me. "What?"

"Think about it. It's her first time in Rome and all she's going to do is go to some boring State dinner and Madeleine's bachelorette party? Myers has been reading up on Roman Ancient Culture and History since she was a little girl… she deserves to come to Rome and really experience Rome…"

"Oh my God, you're right! I'll tell her tonight, and we'll all go tomorrow after breakfast. Wait a minute…” He began typing furiously on his phone, until he found something and pushed the phone on me.

"ROME IN A DAY: 1 DAY IN ROME ITINERARY." I read through the website, noting that it had recommended times and an order to visit all the major monuments, to minimize traffic and any other inconveniences. "Maxwell, you're a genius!"

"Great! It's a plan, then. I'll tell Milla and Hana!"

"Great!"

He found his wallet and tucked it into his pocket. "Are you coming?"
I squirmed a little bit. "I, uh… hadn't really planned on it."

"You should come. We could always use the extra eyes to help us find the reporter."

I sighed. "You're right. Okay, I'll come. I'll just hang out with Bastien, keep an eye out, I guess."

"You could sit with me and Milla."

"And the Italian Statesman? Pass. I'm, uh… not really one for talking politics."

He looked like he wanted to say something, but instead he just shrugged. "Okay… Let's go, then."

"You go ahead, I'll catch up later."

Maxwell left our cabin and I went to the bathing car for a quick shower. Once I put on a clean shirt, I left for the restaurant. I walked quickly through the lamp lit streets, and went in through a service entrance up to the restaurant. Once inside, I quickly surveyed the scene. Reporters were everywhere, some sitting around eating dinner, others socializing and interviewing the members of court. Bastien was a shadow on the wall behind Liam and Madeleine, while the rest of the King’s Guard were spread out through the restaurant.

And sitting at a table near the windows, in the most beautiful red dress I’d ever seen was Myers, talking with the Italian Statesman, Olivia, Maxwell and Bertrand. Her hair was up in a side bun, with a single white rose framing the other side of her face. She quite literally took my breath away, and I couldn’t stop staring at her…

"Well, I can certainly see why you didn’t want her to go that night."

I jumped at Tanner’s voice. I didn’t even realize when he walked up to me. I rubbed my neck, embarrassed at being caught staring. "Tanner."

He rubbed it, grinning. "It’s not made of glass, though you certainly tried to test that theory."

I laughed. "I’m sorry about that night. I know you guys were just following orders."

"That’s okay. I can tell she means a lot to you. You guys must be close, huh?"

I shrugged. "She’s a good friend. One of the few honest people here."

"Is it true? Those pictures with that guy?"

"No. Absolutely not. I was there that night. It was definitely a setup."

Tanner nodded. "You know, my wife was really rooting for her."

"You’re married?"

"Going on two years now. We’re expecting our first child to be born in May."

I couldn’t help but smile. "Congratulations, man. I mean it." I offered Tanner my hand and he shook it. "So… no hard feelings?"

"No hard feelings." He motioned to Myers’ table with his head. I saw as the Italian guy got up, kissed Myers’ hand and left to find Liam. "You should go now."

"Yeah, thanks, man." I walked to Myers’ table and gingerly sat down next to her. "I thought you’d
never stop talking to that Italian guy.” I gave Myers a small, lopsided grin.

She smiled, her dimples fluttering to life. “Awww, did you miss me?”

“You’re preferable to standing alone in a corner.”

Myers frowned, bewildered, before smiling and shaking her head. “Clearly a high bar.”

“Yet so many fail to clear it, except you of course.” I let my gaze roam down her body, blushing just a bit. “Nice dress, by the way.”

“Just adorable, you two.” Olivia’s voice interrupted our moment. I had almost forgotten she was here.

I rolled my eyes. “What are you even doing here, Olivia?”

She scowled. “Helping Camilla.”

I bristled at that. *Helping Camilla? After trying to sabotage her all of last season?* “I’ve seen your kind of help. We’re better off without it.”

Olivia scoffed indignantly. “It’s good to see you too, Drake.”

“Drake,” Myers squeezed my hand briefly under the table, “She’s actually helping.” Her eyes pleaded with me to play nice. “She’s sincere, Drake.”

Olivia smirked triumphantly at that.

“Sincere in her cruelty.”

“We met up earlier because she’s looking for the blackmailer too.”

I glanced at Myers, then at Olivia. I did not trust that woman! She was a cruel, vicious snake, who didn’t care for anyone but herself! … And Liam.

“I was targeted just like Camilla.” Olivia told me, “We have the same enemy.”

I shrugged, rolling my eyes. *I hope you’re right to trust her, Myers.* “If Myers’ okay with it, then fine. But I’m watching you.” I warned her.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” She glared right back at me.

“So, did you find anything?” Myers asked Olivia, trying to diffuse the tension. She was good. She knew the only way to do it was to take action and talk about the investigation.

“I’ve been following a lead.” Olivia stated matter of factly. “During the social season, someone tried to sell a pack of photos with Camilla and Liam in New York to the tabloids.”

“How do you know about that?!” I couldn’t stop my jaw from dropping.


“But Bastien and I bought the photos back before they were published. How did you find them when no one else did?”

“The details aren’t important. We’ll leave it at that.”
“So, does this mean the person who sold Drake the photos is the same person who had the photos taken of me and Tariq?” Myers tensed up beside me.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Don’t be dense, Camilla. If I knew the answer to that, we wouldn’t be here having this pointless discussion.”

“No need for insults here, Olivia.” I spoke up for Myers. She wasn’t dense, she was just eager to get to the bottom of this shit hole. “We want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do.”

She rolled her eyes once more. “I think that whoever sold the photos could have a connection to the person who blackmailed Camilla and me.”

“That’s… a possibility. But unless you have something to show us, we’re no further in this investigation than we were before we started talking to you.”

“Funny you should mention that. As a matter of fact I have a copy of those photos with me. And I think I have a hunch about who took them. But I want you two with me on this.” Olivia eyed Myers, then me.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this on the train?” Myers asked.

Olivia frowned pointedly. “Because somebody forgot the meaning of ‘come alone’.”

“And I don’t count?” Of course not, you’re nobody to her, I thought, rolling my eyes.

Olivia looked at me, then at Myers, and back to me, with a raised eyebrow and a world of meaning in her gaze. “You’re not a threat.” She said simply. That was Olivia for “I know you wouldn’t hurt her.”

“Sure.” I glared at her. The last thing I needed was Olivia, of all people, finding out about me and Myers. I had enough with Maxwell and Hana… well, mostly Maxwell.

Olivia turned back to Myers. “Besides, I said I’d find you when I had more information to share, and here we are. Are you going to help or not?”

“I’ll look into it. Camilla doesn’t have to get her hands dirty with this.”

Olivia gave me a slow, catlike grin. Oh, shit… Thankfully, she said nothing. “Please. Camilla’s a big girl. She can take care of herself.”

“We don’t know where this lead will take us, and Camilla could still be a target.” Not like you’d mourn if anything happened to her!

A small hand on my shoulder brought me back from that… horrible train of thought. Myers looked at me, and squeezed my shoulder. “The dignitaries can wait. If she has new evidence, then I want to be there to see it.” I’ll be fine, her eyes pleaded, Please trust me.

I sighed. “I don’t want people going after you because we overturned the right rock.” A chill crawled down my spine, pure fear coursing through me. I couldn’t bear to lose her, like my mom lost my dad, or Constantine lost Queen Eleanor… Please, Myers, stay here, where you’re safe!

Myers reached for my hand under the table, lacing her fingers with mine. Drake… I trust you to protect me. She gave me a small hopeful grin, before looking quickly and pointedly at Olivia, then back at me. Remember we have an audience… “I think I’m fine, but I love the concern, Drake.” She teased, trying to act cool in front of Olivia.
I let out a long sigh. For one, Olivia didn’t miss anything, so the act was useless. And two… nobody could stop Myers from doing what she wanted, not even me. “Alright, not much use protesting.”

“Good.” Olivia nodded once, all business. She began laying out prints of the photos on the table in front of us. “These are copies of the images that were sold to the tabloids.”

Myers looked at the pictures intensely for a moment. “So what’s your hunch?”

Olivia pointed to a picture on the far right corner of the table. “Look. In this photo, you can see Drake and Liam.” She pointed to another one next to it, “Here’s you and Liam. Blah, blah, blah.” She pointed to several pictures, of Liam and Myers drinking, of them dancing, of Liam tucking a strand of Myers’ hair behind her ear… “What’s interesting is in this photo,” she motioned to the one of them dancing, “way in the background, you can see Tariq. So you know what that means? There’s only one person who’s not in a single photo. Maxwell.”

_Holy shit… Shit, she’s right!_ My eyes darted frantically from one photo to another. I didn’t want to believe it. “No way… I thought Bastien screened all the photos.”

“That means the only person who could be the photographer is…” I could tell Myers did not want to finish that sentence. She didn’t want to believe it.

“Maxwell.” I finished it for her. _God, I trusted him! I thought he was my friend! Liam’s friend! Practically Myers’ older brother! That two faced son of a--_

“Maxwell? It can’t be!” Myers shook her head adamantly. “This is Maxwell we’re talking about!”

“It certainly wasn’t you, me, or Liam. I hate to say it, but the evidence points to him.”

Myers looked at me then, her eyes filled with disappointment, though I couldn’t tell if she was disappointed in Maxwell or in me, for not believing in him.

Olivia sighed. “Whatever you think of him, he needs to be questioned.”

“Agreed.” I nodded. Myers looked hesitantly to the corner of the room, where both Beaumont Brothers were talking furtively. “Let’s get him.”

The three of us got up and headed towards them.

“Excuse us, we’re discussing important matters here.” Bertrand told us as we got closer.

Maxwell smiled at us apologetically. “I know I’m holding up the tiramisu, but we’re almost done here. Oh, hey, are we bringing Olivia with us too?”

_Tiramisu?!_ I glared at him, feeling every bit of the betrayal in my body.

Maxwell smiled at us apologetically. _Really, Myers? You have nothing to apologize for --_. to me, to Olivia. “Why are you all looking at me funny? Is it a staring contest? I’m game.” He glared at us as a joke, “Gr… I’ll beat all three of you.”

Myers sighed and rolled her eyes. “Maxwell,” she said softly, “Explain yourself.”

Before Olivia could shove the pictures in his face, he grinned. “I know I’m holding up the tiramisu, but we’re almost done here. Oh, hey, are we bringing Olivia with us too?”

Maxwell looked from Myers, who looked at him apologetically. _Really, Myers? You have nothing to apologize for --_. to me, to Olivia. “Why are you all looking at me funny? Is it a staring contest? I’m game.” He glared at us as a joke, “Gr… I’ll beat all three of you.”

Myers sighed and rolled her eyes. “Maxwell,” she said softly, “Explain yourself.”

Before Olivia could shove the pictures in his face, he grinned. “I’m an enigma. I’m beyond explanation.”

Olivia held up the images, and Maxwell’s eyes widened. “You took these.” She stated.
“Thanks for citing your sources. Those are my pictures from the bachelor party in New York. I actually like that one. I’m not much of a photographer, but I gave that one a nice Dutch angle.”

And he had the nerve to admit it as if it wasn’t a big deal! “I can’t believe you.”

He flinched at my tone. “Did I do something wrong?”

“You’re connected to the blackmailer.” Olivia said, her face not betraying anything. I guess she was playing good cop, and I was the bad cop… and Myers was the reluctant cop.

“What?!” Maxwell’s eyes widened. He scowled at Olivia, truly angry. “I would never betray Camilla.”

“Maxwell, I believe that, but we need an explanation. These photographs didn’t end up in the tabloid’s hands without some help.” Myers told him calmly. “Telling us what you know will help track that person down.”

Maxwell eyed Myers, then Olivia, and then me. I was still so worked up, I couldn’t stop glaring at him. “This is serious… I can’t hide it any longer.” Maxwell’s shoulders slumped. Oh, crap, he’s really going to admit to it. “I took the pictures because I was going to make a scrapbook of all our time spent together… There, the surprise is ruined.”

It took my brain a minute to process that. A scrapbook? A scrapbook?! Seriously?! That didn’t make any sense! “Then why sell them to the tabloids?!”

“That wasn’t me! I could never do that!”

“You can and you did!” Olivia pointed a finger to his chest. Okay, I guess we were bad cop and bad cop, now. And reluctant cop, of course.

“You betrayed Liam! You betrayed Camilla! You betrayed all of us!” I accused him, genuinely hurt that he would do this. I trusted him! We all trusted him!

“We trusted you.” I said, unable to hide my sadness and disappointment.

“No! I… I…”

“Guys, stop!” Myers stepped in front of Maxwell at the same time as Bertrand.

“Stop! Please. Stop. If you would please direct your ire away from Maxwell. The indiscretion in question is mine and mine alone.”

“Meaning…” I turned my glare on him.

“I was the one who sold the photos of the bachelor party to the tabloids.”

Myers flinched, her eyes filling with hurt.

Maxwell, on the other hand, looked alarmed. “Bertrand! No! Why? How could you do that to Milla and Liam?”

“ Explain yourself.” I told him, my tone threatening.

He sighed. “There is no excuse for what I did, but the reason enough was simple… money. Most nobles didn’t think Lady Camilla would last a week… I was one of them.”

I felt the anger bubbling at the pit of my stomach, while Myers tried to put on a brave face. I could
see right through it.

Bertrand continued, speaking solely to Myers, his eyes pleading. *Pitiful.* “Here I was facing the terrible reality of having agreed to sponsor a failure of a candidate… House Beaumont’s last chance at being restored to its former glory would be ruined, and it would be on my shoulders.”

I rolled my eyes at his so called plight. I still didn’t think it was a good reason for betraying Myers.

“I decided to salvage what I could and sell any material related to you, the photos in question being the only thing I could find.”

“Bertrand… you went through my phone.”

“I was doing research, all in the name of saving House Beaumont.”


*Oh, will you cut the theatrics, already?!*

“Father would be ashamed if he knew.”

I really hoped Myers wasn’t buying any of this crap, and that she wouldn’t let him off easy.

Myers, however… “Bertrand,” she sighed, straightening her shoulders and lifting her chin, leveling him with a cool stare. *Let him have it, Myers. “I understand why you did it.”*

I mentally facepalmed myself.

“You’ve been struggling to scrape every cent together to support your house.”

“Camilla… he sold private photos of you and Liam…”

She turned her stare on me. “That doesn’t mean I approve of it.”

“Nor should you.” Bertrand agreed. *Kiss ass.* “If it means anything at all, and I don’t suspect that it does… Please know that I’ll never forgive myself for this.” I groaned inwardly, rolling my eyes. “For what I did to you. If it’s any solace, I can only say that this was before… Before I knew you. Before I saw that you had a chance here at court. Before I… before I began to believe in you.”

*You mean before you realized she had what it takes to win that stupid competition and bury you in money!* “Another mistake by the oh-so-illustrious Duke of Ramsford.” I glared at him.

He nodded. “It would appear so. Lady Camilla, I do not believe my actions are worthy of your forgiveness… Even so, let me extend to you my most sincere apologies.”

“Mine too.” Maxwell piped up, really looking sorry.

“No, Maxwell.” Bertrand shook his head and stepped forward, shielding Maxwell from the rest of us. “You had nothing to do with this. The blame is mine to shoulder. I know it’s too much to hope for your forgiveness, but I’d at least like to offer my continued services. My misconduct has no relation to the cretins who so wrongly hurt you.”

*Uh… you’re one of those cretins!*
“I may still be of some use in helping you uncover your true enemies here.” Bertrand continued.

Myers took a deep breath, moving forward to wrap her arms around Bertrand. He hesitated for just one second, before awkwardly patting her back. “I forgive you.”

“I…” Bertrand shook his head, pulling away to look at her. “You never cease to surprise me, Lady Camilla. You have my heartfelt gratitude and eternal loyalty.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Thank you.”

“I promise I shall do what I can to prove my worth.”

I shook my head and sighed. “I guess at least we know the truth.”

“Yes, and now that it’s clear this little revelation isn’t related to either of our blackmailers, I’m leaving. Hopefully the next lead I find will be more fruitful.”

“Thanks, Olivia. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

I bristled a little at that. It was the truth -- I mean, Bastien hadn’t managed to crack this case -- but that didn’t mean I had to like it. “You were actually… helpful.”

“Don’t make much of it. We’re allies of convenience.” She said, with a cocky expression on her face.

Myers simply smiled. “We’re still allies.”

For a split second, Olivia’s expression softened. “Yeah, we are.” And with that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

My head was still reeling from all of this, so I told Myers I was going back to the train. She gave me a sympathetic look and bid me good night. As I walked back, I felt myself getting all up in my head again. I’d gotten lazy, and content here at court. Before Myers, I knew no one in this god forsaken place was to be trusted, and that everyone would be looking out for themselves. Then Myers came along, and I didn’t forget exactly… but she made me want to believe the best in people, the best in our small group of friends. And then stuff like this happens… Now, I know Bertrand wasn’t exactly my friend, but he was still Maxwell’s brother, Myers’ sponsor… I thought… we could trust him.

Myers still trusts him… That annoying voice in my head reminded me.

*Yeah, but Myers is Myers.*

I got to the station and climbed onto the train. I made my way up to my train car and dropped onto the bed with a groan. I started playing with my phone, trying to find that Rome in a Day website that Maxwell showed me. It was the third page on my search, and after finding it, I began trying to chronogram how we were going to do this. We would have to leave the train at eight, and out first stop would be at the Colosseum. Since it was still early, I made a quick call to buy us Omnia Rome and Vatican Passes, and schedule a private tour. I grinned as I hung up the phone, thinking that there were some benefits to traveling with the royal court. With those tickets I got, we’d get a private tour of the Colosseum, the arena and the Forum, and be allowed to skip all the lines to the other tourist spots.

The tour would take about two hours to get the full experience, and I’m sure Myers is going to try to
linger around the gladiator pits and stuff. So, I figured around 10:30 - 11:00, we would be arriving at our next stop: the Pantheon. I guess we’d be there for about an hour, and then on to Trevi Fountain. After a picture or two at the fountain, and a gelato stop, we’d make our way to Castel Sant’Angelo, and then the Vatican Museum. Now, Myers didn’t strike me as a religious girl, but still… You can’t come to Rome and not go to the Vatican. So after a tour of Castel Sant’Angelo, we’d got to the Vatican Museum and the Sistine Chapel. I honestly couldn’t wait to see Myers’ face when she saw it. Last but not least, we would end our day in Rome at Saint Peter’s Basilica, and we should be back on the train in time for Myers and Hana to get ready for Madeleine’s bachelorette party.

At that moment, Maxwell came into our room. “Oh, hey…”

“Hey, Maxwell…” I said awkwardly. I knew I owed him an apology. “Listen… I’m sorry about how I treated you back at the restaurant. Things got kinda heated, and…”

He shrugged. “That’s okay… Seeing it from your point of view, I know how suspicious it looked.”

“Thanks. But it’s not okay. I shouldn’t have been so quick to doubt you. I should have known you would never do something like that to Myers and Liam.”

He nodded. “Yeah, you should have.”

“I’m sorry.”

He sighed. “I forgive you.” He grinned. “Come here.” With surprising strength, he pulled me off my bunk and drew me into a hug. I clapped his back, before stepping back.

“So, how was the rest of the dinner party?”

“Great! We confronted the photographer!”

*The photographer!* With all the drama from the New York photos, I forgot we were supposed to be looking for the *real* photographer! I groaned. “That’s great, man. I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“Where were you anyway? I turn back for one second and you disappeared from dinner.”

“I was back here, planning everything for our trip tomorrow, and I guess I just… forgot.”

“Pretty big thing to forget…”

“I know! I know! I guess… my head was all over the place.”

“Hey, Drake, relax! We got her, and she gave us our next clue! Bertrand’s working on it right now.”

I couldn’t help but roll my eyes.

“Hey, I know he’s not your favorite person right now… but he is sorry.”

I sighed. “I know, man.”

I showed Maxwell my itinerary for tomorrow and he began googling more about places we could get lunch and stuff, as well as texting the press secretary to see when Myers had to be back here. At that moment, my stomach rumbled loudly. With all of this, I realized I’d forgotten to eat dinner. I told Maxwell I was going out, and he just hummed in response, still glued to his phone.

I walked down the hall, and who do I bump into…? “Myers.” I took her in. Her hair was out of its bun, falling down the side of her neck and chest, a bit damp and the flower was nowhere to be
found. The hem of her dress was also wet, and she smelled faintly of the sea.

“Oh, hey, Drake.” Her eyes widened when she saw me. “Where are you going this late?”

“To get a real meal. I don’t know about you, but I don’t ‘get’ fancy food. That stuff was designed to impress my eyes, not actually feed me.”

She nodded once. “Right…”

“You’re welcome to join me to whatever place I find, but be warned, after tonight, I’m in the mood for something with a Michelin rating of zero. If that doesn’t bother you, then I can promise a full stomach and decent conversation.”

Myers gave me a small smile. “You mean you’ll actually tell me more about yourself?” She asked with mock surprise.

I rolled my eyes, unable to stop the smirk that crawled its way onto my face. “Whatever secrets that’ve made it this far, sure.”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “I could use a bite to eat.” She looked down at her dress. “Can you give me just one second to get changed?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” I walked her to her car, and waited outside. Five minutes later, she came out, her hair tied up in a messy ponytail, wearing a leather jacket over a simple red top, jeans and boots. She grinned as my eyes widened. “So? What do you think?”

“Uh… I… You look…”

Myers laughed. “I'll take that as a compliment. Now, let’s go, I’m hungry.”

I shook my head. “Right this way then.”

We walked down the streets, talking and joking, and when we were a couple blocks from the train station, I took her hand. Myers smiled at me, and I marveled at how normal this felt. It honestly felt like we were a regular couple, walking down the city to get some dinner.

“So… wanna explain why your hair and your dress was all wet?”

I felt her tense up a little beside me. “I went with Liam to the Blue Grotto.”

Huh… I knew that place, that was one of Leo and Liam’s favorite secret hideouts. It was also extremely romantic, I thought as a tinge of jealousy made its way through me.

“He wanted to talk about something.” Myers continued, glancing worriedly at me. “We just talked.”

“Yeah, I know.” I told her. I did trust her, and I knew how she felt about me. It was just… almost second nature to feel insecure when it came to her and Liam. Or to… just Liam in general. “You’re a free woman, Myers. You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

She nodded. “I know. But I just… I need to know you trust me.”

“I do.” I chuckled, shaking my head. “You’re the only person here who gets to say that.”

Myers squeezed my hand. “I don’t take that honor lightly.”

I shook my head, and spotted an open restaurant. I led her in and a server led us to a table, offering
us menus.

“Grazie.” Myers gave him a beaming smile. She turned to me. “So this is more your style?”

“A menu, a table, and the promising smell of good food. That’s all I want.”

“Buona sera, signore, signora. Mi chiamo Sergio e sarò il tuo cameriere in questa bellissima notte. Ora, cosa posso ottenere tu e la tua bella signora?” He smiled warmly at us, the corners of his eyes crinkling.

“Buona sera, Sergio.” Myers smiled at him, then at me. “Drake…?”

“Err…” Okay, buona sera was good evening. His name was Sergio… and that’s all I got from that.

“Didn’t think your plan through, did you?” Myers teased with a gleeful grin.

“No, no, I’ve got this.” I took her menu and mine, and handed them back to Sergio. “Spaghetti and pizza.”

“Perfetto, sarò solo un momento, signore, signora.” He bowed, and made his way to the kitchen.

“Drake, you forgot the lasagna.” Myers laughed.

“You’re right. My vocabulary’s too limited.”

“I’m disappointed in you.”

“We’ll just have to make due.”

“So do you do this often?”

“This isn’t my first time going rogue. When you follow Liam around, you end up in foreign lands pretty often.”

“And in fancy parties with too-fancy food?”

“All the time.”

“Well, now you’ve got me for company.” She smiled warmly at me, taking my hand.

“That means more pressure not to make myself look like a fool.”

“Oh, Drake… you could never not make yourself look like a fool to me.”

“Gee, thanks, Myers.”

“Hey, you don’t have to worry about looking like a fool if you already are one.”

At that moment, Sergio came out of the kitchen with a simple mozzarella pizza, and a couple of plates of spaghetti carbonara. He set the pizza down in the center of the table, and then the plates in front of me and Myers.

“Grazie.” Myers told him, and I shot him a grateful nod.

“Prego, signore, signora. Buon Appetito.”

Silence descended on our table as we enjoyed our food. I took a bite of spaghetti, the flavors

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm!” Myers moaned in delight. “That is good!”

“You can always trust me to find the right food.”

“Mm-hmm.” Myers nodded, eating bite after bite of spaghetti. “So… is this a secret date?”

I nearly dropped my fork. “What?”

“A nice meal at an Italian restaurant you invited me to.”

“I invited you for food. Because I thought you were hungry. Normal people eat when they’re hungry.”

“I’m okay with it.”

“I… err…” I sighed. “You’re killing me, Myers.”

She laughed and we got back to our food.

“Hey, I just realized something.” Myers said as she reached for a slice of pizza and placed it on her now empty plate. “We didn’t have to dodge any palace security guards to get out here. Do they just let you come and go as you please?”

“I’m nowhere near as important as Liam. But Bastien also knows me. He knows I can take care of myself… and you.”

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Bastien trusts you?”

“Yeah. Don’t sound so surprised. We kind of go way back.”

Myers clapped her hands. “Story time!”

“… I didn’t mean for this to turn into some sharing circle.”

“Too late. You already tipped your hand. You’re usually much more careful than this, Drake.”

“Hmm… what is it about tonight that has me in a sharing mood?”

“Maybe the company?”

I tried to hide a smile behind my napkin. “I want to give you a hard time, Myers, but the truth is I’m just so damned glad to spend some time with you away from that circus…”

“Drake…” She said sweetly.

“So I’ll tell you. Bastien was my father’s junior agent in the King’s Guard, so I’d see him around pretty often. Bastien didn’t have any family at court, so he’d join us for dinner. He’d even watch me and Savannah sometimes when we were younger.”

“That’s cute. How was he as a babysitter?”

“Surprisingly lenient. The opposite of how he is while on duty. He’d let us eat chocolate chip cookies and watch cartoons all night.”

“Aww…”
“He and my father were close. I think after my father died on duty, Bastien took it upon himself to look out for me.”

“Oh, Drake… I’m sorry.”

“It was hard, but I got through it.”

“Tell me more about Bastien.”

“He’s a model of duty. If there’s something you need done, he’ll do it for you. He’s more dedicated to his job than anyone I’ve ever seen. I don’t think he has many friends… But he always made time for me.”

“Was he like a father to you?”

“More like an uncle, but a good uncle I could always go to. It’s nice. He’s one of the few who’s also on the outside looking into this strange noble world.”

“You must be close.”

I fidgeted a little at that. We were close, but now, with this whole fight over what happened at the Coronation… we didn’t feel close. “In an unusual way, yeah.”

“And your dad? How was he?”

“Tough, honest, with a firm but fair way of handling things.” I smiled at the memory of him. “Growing up, it seemed like there was nothing he couldn’t do.”

“You really looked up to him, didn’t you?”

“Yeah… if Savannah idolized the courtly life, I idolized him and the King’s Guard.” I wanted to be him when I grew up. I wanted to protect people, just like he did. Protect my family, my friends. And so far… I wasn’t making much progress on that front. I shook my head. “So, yeah. Dad died. Mom eventually went back to the U.S. She was… struggling. Bastien was as present as he could be, but his duties kept him busy. I stayed at court with Savannah. Liam’s family kind of took us in.”

“Right… Huh. Actually, Drake, what do you do at the palace?”

“I do lots of things! I do things all the time!”

“Like?”

“Er… Well… I train with Liam every morning, help him with anything he needs, work at the stables, cook… It’s hard to put into a single title.”

“How about Professional Best Friend?”

“I kinda like that. Liam should get me a shirt with that on it. Maybe some business cards or something? Would that satisfy you, Myers?”

“Come on. I want to know what you do on an average day. It’s not all sulking at noble’s parties, is it? If that’s all there was to it, I know you. You would have left a long time ago.”

“I did leave… for a while.”

“Really?”
“When I got older, I thought it was time to make it on my own. I went to college.”

“You didn’t want to join the King’s Guard?”

“They’re experienced security agents. I would’ve had to cut my teeth protecting some stuck up nobles first. I decided to build a life away from court. Liam and I started to drift apart. I was finally living in the outside world and he was busier than ever being introduced at court.”

“Liam didn’t go to college?”

“He didn’t have to. He’d already received a first class education on everything from history to politics to economics. He still sometimes meets with some of Cordonia’s best professors to discuss these things.”

“Wow… So, what happened?”

“Well… there was an assassination attempt on the royal family, including Liam.”

“No…”

“The King’s Guard stopped it before anyone was injured, but it still shook Liam.”

“He never told me about this.”

“It doesn’t really come up in casual conversation. Besides, I don’t think he wants to remember those times… it was rough. He seemed fine to most people, but his brother dropped by my campus one night in the royal family’s private jet asking if I could come back. He was worried about Liam. Behind closed doors, Liam was not himself. He wasn’t eating and was growing distant. I knew I had to be there for him. Things were bad… He needed me.”

“Wow… it must have been hard to give up your outside life.”

I shrugged dejectedly. “He’s my best friend. I had to do it. After that, I never really left. When I saw how things were at court for Liam, I knew I couldn’t leave him to these sharks. Liam plays the game well, but his heart’s not in it. He’d rather focus on the needs of the Cordonian citizens than reading press statements and attending parties. He needs someone cynical like me to have his back.”

Myers reached across the table and took my hand. “You’re a good friend to Liam.”

I looked at her then, and gave her a half smile. She looked so beautiful tonight, and all I wanted to do was kiss her. “… Most of the time…”

She leaned forward, pressing herself against me. With one hand on my cheek, she brought my lips down to meet hers. “Myers…” I whispered her name, cupping the back of her neck as she pulled me once more into a long, lingering kiss. Much too soon, we pulled apart. “You’re full of surprises tonight.”

She laughed, her lips and cheeks a pretty pink. “You can’t just take me to dinner, pour your fluffy marshmallow heart out, and not expect me to fall a little more for you, Drake.”

There it is… Well at least she didn’t say the L word. “You’re right. What was I thinking?” This time I pulled her in for a soft kiss, until we both heard soft footsteps. Sergio discretely left the check on the table, right next to me, and bowed back.

Myers sighed. “Well. Thank you for a wonderful evening. I never thought I’d learn so much about
the elusive Drake.”

I scoffed. *Elusive? She probably knew me as well as Liam by this point.* And yet… I sighed. “Yeah, sorry, it was a lot to drop on you all at once.” I reached for the check. “Let me cover it.”

“Did you just offer to pick up the check?” Myers raised an eyebrow, a self satisfied smile on her face.

“Well, yeah, I guess I did. It’s the least I can do after talking your ear off all night. I’m not the king or anything but I can afford a handful of euros, Myers.”

Myers rolled her eyes. “Drake… sharing your feelings didn’t bother me… I like this softer side of you.”

I groaned. “This is my lowest low. What have you done to me, Myers?”

“Nobody said it was bad that you’re soft.”

“Yeah, well, at least the sob story didn’t bother you.”

“It could never bother me.”

“Thanks, Myers.” I set the money on the table, making sure to tip Sergio. “We should probably head back. It’s getting late.” I stood and offered her a hand.

“And I’m full!”

“What did I tell you?”

Myers took my hand and nodded goodbye to Sergio. “Buona notte, Sergio! Grazie!”

“Buona notte, signora, signor!”

We walked down the street, hand in hand. “Hey, Myers, thanks for coming with me tonight.”

“Anytime, Drake. As far as first dates go, this was pretty great.” She bumped her shoulder with mine.

“Yeah… mine too.”

Soon, we were back on the train, and I walked her to her car.

“So…”

“So.” I said, nodding.

“Good night, Drake.”

“Night, Myers.”

She gave me a final peck on the cheek, before slipping inside. I sighed, and went back to my car, hoping Maxwell would be fast asleep, hoping he wouldn’t grill me about where I’d been.

I woke up bright and early the next morning, and shook Maxwell awake. We got dressed and went to get the girls. Myers came out of her car wearing a loose white top, jeans and sneakers, and she was practically jumping. She looked so excited and so happy, it was infectious and oh, so endearing.
Next, we went to Hana's cart, only to discover she was rooming with Olivia. "Can you tell me why you are all outside my door at seven in the morning?" The Ice Queen snarled at us.

"We're going sightseeing! Drake got us Omnia Rome and Vatican Passes!" Myers told her. "You're more than welcome to come with us! We're going to--"

Olivia rolled her eyes. "The Colosseum, Piazza Navona and that awful fountain that appears in every movie about Italy ever? I'll pass. But have fun getting pushed around by tourists."

Myers rolled her eyes good naturedly.

"I'll be out in just one second!" Hana said, slipping on her heels.

"Hana, wouldn't you be more comfortable in sneakers?" Myers asked, looking at Hana's shoes like they were some painful torture tool.

"My mother taught me to withstand long periods on my feet and long distance walks in heels when I was eleven." She shrugged.

Yikes, Myers mouthed at me and Maxwell and I couldn't help but chuckle. Hana smoothed her dress, doing a once over in the mirror and stepped out to join us. We stepped off the train and onto the platform, Maxwell offering Hana his hand to help her down. She really should have listened to Myers about the sneakers. We made our way out of the station and onto a limo the tour company had sent.

Once inside the car, and on our way to the Colosseum, Myers suggested a picture. "Come on, Drake! Please! It's my first time in Italy!" She curled her lower lip and leveled her best puppy eyes in my direction.

I groaned. "Ugh… Fine." We all squeezed together while Maxwell took a selfie with his phone and showed it to all of us.

"Maxwell, you need to document everything today!" Myers told him. "I want a million pictures of my first time in Italy with the best friends a girl could ask for." Myers looked at all of us tenderly.

"Yes, ma'am!" Maxwell gave her a military salute, "My phone's all charged up and ready to go."

"Thanks, Maxwell. Thanks, guys. I know you've all been here a million times already. Just… thanks for doing this." Myers nodded, a bit embarrassed.

"Don't thank us, it was Drake's idea." Maxwell mumbled, fumbling with the settings of his phone camera. My eyes widened, and Hana elbowed him in the ribs.

"Drake…" I turned to Myers, blushing furiously, as she looked at me, her eyes shining brightly. "You didn't tell me this was your idea…"

I rubbed the back of my neck, as Maxwell and Hana suddenly became very interested in their phone screens. "Uh… Yeah…" I shrugged. "I just figured… you can't come to Rome and not see Rome."

Myers smiled at me, nodding. She looked to Maxwell and Hana – who were still immersed in their phones, trying to give us at least the illusion of privacy – before turning back to me. "Thank you, Drake."

There were a thousand meanings to that thank you. Thank you for doing this. Thank you for caring. Thank you for thinking of me.
"You're welcome, Myers." *Anything for you. I'm happy if you're happy.*

She nodded. *I know.*

Just then, the car slowed and eventually stopped. We got out and were greeted by a tour guide. Myers fidgeted excitedly as the guide led us through the Colosseum, alternating between asking him a million questions and taking pictures of everything on her phone. While Myers took pictures of the barracks, the arena, the trap doors, the multitude of weapons, Maxwell took pictures of us. He alternated between group selfies, making us pose in front of different exhibits, and candids.

At one point, the guide allowed us to explore a bit on our own, before continuing the tour. Myers walked up next to me, pulling me with her to show me an exhibit of some ancient armor. She sighed, looking down wistfully at the pieces on display. "I would have loved to have lived in this time period."

"Really? Any particular century?"

"Definitely during Caesar's reign. I would have loved to have seen him, met him, talked to him, meet Cleopatra and Marc Antony, Brutus and later, Octavian…"

"You know you'd likely have been a slave or a servant, right? The odds of you being a noble woman, or even just a free one…" I shook my head. "Besides, it was an extremely sexist society. Women had practically no rights."

"Okay, first of all, I'm aware of that, but still…" she looked around at the imposing structure around us, "I would have loved to have seen this in all its splendor. Actually live and experience the culture, not just read about it in some history book." She shook her head, and gave me an impish grin. "And second of all… I would not have been a slave, I would have been a courtesan."

I raised my eyebrows quizzically. "A… prostitute?"

Myers rolled her eyes. "They were *not* prostitutes! Or, well… not *all* of them. They *chose* their patrons, as well as how far they were willing to go with them. They were treated better than royalty sometimes, and commanded the respect and admiration of the most powerful men of the Republic. They trained for years in the arts of conversation and seduction, and could make the most powerful men do their bidding with a snap of their fingers. And I bet you *I* would have been the greatest Courtesan of Rome." She stuck out her chin proudly, but her smile was light and teasing.

I chuckled. "Okay, I'll bite. What would I have been?"

Myers contemplated me for a second. "I think… you would have been my bodyguard."

I raised an eyebrow. "You really think you would have been so important as to need a bodyguard?"

She batted her eyelashes. "But of course. The greatest Courtesan of Rome needs protection. You would have been my stoic and incredibly sexy bodyguard, who shadowed my every move and kept unwanted patrons at bay."

"Stoic and incredibly sexy?"

"Yeah!" Myers shrugged. "It's pretty much you now, but with armor and weapons instead of denim." Myers teased, looking back down at the display.

I shook my head as I stared at her, unable to stop the smile from spreading on my face. The moment was broken, however, when I heard a camera shutter. Myers and I looked up to realize it was
Maxwell, who had his phone aimed towards us. "Great shot, you guys!" He gave us a thumbs up, and walked away. Myers and I looked at each other quizzically, before bursting into laughter. Soon, the tour guide began calling us to continue the tour.

The rest of the day went by much the same. We walked a lot, with Myers asking the tour guide millions of questions and taking millions of pictures, Maxwell taking pictures of us specifically, and Hana and me just going along with everything they wanted to do. We went to the Trevi Fountain and made two wishes, one for Rome and the other for love. We went to the Pantheon, where Maxwell made us pose in front of all the statues of the gods; the pose itself depending on what that particular god represented. We stopped for gelato and cappuccino, and for some pastries as well. Myers eyes widened as she stepped foot in the Sistine Chapel, and her jaw dropped. We had to literally pull her away, or otherwise she’d have stayed there for the rest of the afternoon.

Finally, the tour ended and we made our way back to the train. In the limo, we scrolled through all of the pictures Maxwell had taken, Myers trying to desperately convince him to send them to her. He kept on arguing all about the airwaves and how they could be tracking their phones, and emails, and group chats and stuff. We kept on perusing through the photos, until we got to one… Myers’ jaw dropped and she blushed furiously. Hana looked from Myers to Maxwell to me, trying her best to stop the grin from spreading across her face. Maxwell just smiled, and I could practically feel the blood rushing through my ears.

“Aww… you guys look…” Hana didn’t finish that sentence, but her tone was soft and tender.

“Don’t they…?” Maxwell added.

“Maxwell…” I growled.

Myers remained silent, her eyes glued to the image on the screen. It was the picture Maxwell had taken of us in the Colosseum. Myers was smiling, the dimples on her cheeks coming to life, as she looked down at the display case, whereas I was looking down at her tenderly, a soft smile on my face. God, we looked… like a real couple. More than that, I… You know how they say a picture’s worth a thousand words? Well, in this one… in this one you could see from a mile away how I felt about her. Maxwell had captured the moment so perfectly; anyone who looked at it could see I was crazy about her.

Myers finally looked up at me, shaking her head just a bit before grinning at me. “We look good, don’t we?”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding, and laughed. “Yeah, we do.”

The tension seemed to dissolve around us just like that, and we kept on scrolling through the pictures until we finally arrived at the train station. Hana and Myers said their goodbyes and went to get ready for the bachelorette party while Maxwell and I headed to our car.

“Hey…” Maxwell said, just as my phone vibrated. I opened up a new message from him, and saw that he had sent me the picture. I looked up at him, completely stunned, and he grinned and shrugged. “I just… thought you should have it.”

I looked down at my screen once more. “Thanks, Maxwell.”

“No problem. I, uh… I’m going to go for a walk, clear my head.”

“We walked all day, aren’t you tired?”

He shrugged. “Not really. I just need some air. I’ll see you later!”
And with that, he left the train, leaving me to stare at that picture and overthink myself to death. *Nope, nope, nope. Not tonight.*

I grabbed my phone and shot Liam a text. “*Hey, you busy?*”

A second later, my phone chimed. “*Mercifully, no! Dinner?*”

“*Meet at the diner cart.*”

I blocked my phone and headed to meet him. He sat down at a booth just as I came in.

“*Hard day?*”

“*You have no idea.*”

“*I’m sorry.*”

“It’s okay. We were able to come to an agreement regarding the tax deal, and our legislators should have a draft of the new policy soon. It was a tough, yet very productive day. How about you? How was the tour?”

“It was… fun. My feet hurt like hell, though. I’m surprised I didn’t end up with blisters on my feet.”

“I wish I could have gone with you all. Did you guys have fun at least?”

I knew what he was really asking. “We did. Myers was definitely the most excited out of all of us though. She took pictures of everything, and prodded the poor tour guide so much, I think the poor guy might be considering a career change.”

“Hah!” Liam smiled. “I wish I could see Rome with fresh eyes again. Did you take her to see what’s left of the Julia Basilica?”

*I… think I remember the tour guide showed it to us? “Yeah, I think so…”*

“Good. Milla has a thing for Caesar, so I’m sure it was one of the things she was most looking forward to see.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, she… once commented to me she greatly admired his military prowess, as well as his sharp mind for politics.”

“Right… wasn’t he a dictator?”

Liam clasped his hands on the table, his brows knitting together as he thought. “From what I remember from my history lessons, he was a dictator, but that was the title he gave himself after defeating Pompey Magnus. Now, society recognizes a dictator as someone who rules by force, and against the will of the people, but during the time of the Roman Republic, it simply meant there was a man at the top who made all the decisions and had all the power. But Caesar wasn’t a bad ruler. He was a pretty great one, actually. He won the love of the common people, because he fed them and gave them jobs, money, stability. He passed many reforms, and he was determined to weed out corruption from the Senate.”

“Wow… Anyway, we had fun today. Ask Maxwell to show you the pictures when you see him.”

“Of course. Drake… thank you for doing this for Milla.”
“I just… wanted her to see a bit of the city. She likes that stuff, you know? Archeology and stuff.”

“I do…” He grimaced. “I should have thought of it. I’m so busy with the engagement and all the policy meetings, I…” Liam shook his head. “I’ve barely had time to think. And the one moment I get to spend time with her, I take her to the beach…”

“Hey… I’m sure she appreciated it. She knows you’re a busy man. You’re King, for god’s sakes!”

“Yes, but… I should have thought of it…”

Was he… upset I was the one who did something nice for Myers, and not him?

He shook his head, "I… I feel her slipping away. And I’m trying, Drake, I really am, but… “

“What do you mean?” I blurted out, my morbid curiosity getting the better of me.

“I just... feel like I’m losing her. Camilla seems to have this wall around me, there’s a distance she’s putting between us.”

“Why do you think that is?”

He looked at me, like he wanted to say something, but changed his mind at the last moment. “I don’t know, honestly. She says she’s confused, or that finding Tariq is the only thing on her mind right now. And yesterday… yesterday I asked her what will happen when we do find him. I asked her about the future. Our future.”

“And…? Don’t do this.

Liam shook his head. “She told me she hasn’t really thought about it. She just wanted to clear her name. And also… that she couldn't bring herself to think about me that way while I was engaged to another woman.”

“That makes sense.” I mumbled under my breath.

“What do you mean?”

“Has Myers… ever told you about her family?”

Liam shrugged. “Only that her parents divorced when she was twelve, and she petitioned the judge for her father to have her sole custody.”

Okay… A small part of me was jumping with glee as I realized how much she trusted me. She trusted me more than she did Liam! “Okay… well… the thing is… Myers’ mom left her dad for another man.”

“That makes sense.” I mumbled under my breath.

“What do you mean?”

“Has Myers… ever told you about her family?”

Liam shrugged. “Only that her parents divorced when she was twelve, and she petitioned the judge for her father to have her sole custody.”

Okay… A small part of me was jumping with glee as I realized how much she trusted me. She trusted me more than she did Liam! “Okay… well… the thing is… Myers’ mom left her dad for another man.”

“She told you that?” Liam's eyes widened, and I realized he had come to the same conclusion I just did. Quick, downplay it. It's not a big deal that she told me about her family and not you.

“Yeah, it came up. Anyway… Myers was pretty much there for all the bad stuff during her parents’ split. I’m guessing…” I shrugged, knowing this was an assumption more than anything. Myers had never actually told me her thoughts on the matter, “that the whole concept of marriage and commitment is pretty important to her. It actually means something to her to be engaged.”

“But she knows I don’t love Madeleine! It’s all just for the cameras.”

“But even so… you’re engaged. She’s not going to get in the middle of that. She’s not going to be
your mistress or the other woman.”

Liam sighed… “I know. And I have no right to ask her to. It’s clear that she has very strong beliefs on the matter. And even if she didn’t… she deserves better than that.”

I sighed. “For what it’s worth… I’m sorry, Liam.” *I’m sorry you’re going through this. I’m sorry your engaged to the Wicked Witch of the West. And I’m mostly sorry for lying to you about Myers. I’m sorry for how I feel about her. I’m sorry for betraying your trust.*

“I know, Drake. Thank you.” He clapped me on my shoulder, and we dug into our food.

A few moments later, Bastien came to find him. "Your Majesty, the Minister of Homeland Security is on the phone. Apparently, there has been a major earthquake off the coast of the Duchy of Portavira."

I could see Liam’s eyes darken. He looked at me and nodded, before getting up quickly and following Bastien. I was about to head to bed when my phone rang. I smiled as I looked up at the screen. “You’re not supposed to be using your phone, remember?”

I could practically hear Myers’ good natured eye roll. “I know, I know, but this was an emergency.”

“Are you okay?” I asked, letting my immediate worry color my tone.

“Fine, Drake. I’m not in mortal danger or anything. I’m just calling to ask if you wanted to come to a little fondue party we’re having here.”

“Wait, aren’t you supposed to be at Madeleine’s bachelorette party?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line, before Myers finally spoke. “We were…” She sighed. “It turned out we all had to prepare something for tonight, and Hana prepared a chocolate fondue tasting for her. She worked really hard on it, but it turns out Madeleine’s allergic to chocolate. She stormed out, threatening to send Hana back to China… Hana’s pretty upset. Can you and Maxwell come over?”

“Of course. We’re on our way, send me the location.”

“Thanks, Drake. Will do.”

“Bye, Myers.”

“See ya in a bit, Walker.”

I smiled and hung up the phone. Chocolate party, here we come.
So... last night was pretty great. Yesterday in general was pretty great, I thought as I stretched in my bunk. Or tried to stretch, anyway. We had a pretty great time last night at the fondue party, even if Olivia was there, for some reason. As usual, we went around telling embarrassing stories, like when Maxwell wrote Lady Monica that poem when we were twelve, or when I caused the Great Lockdown of 2004. Milla told us about the time she dropped a giant platter of ribs on a customer. Olivia refused to share. Between all our stories and all our games, we managed to cheer Hana up.

Near the end of the night, we were helping Hana clean up, and somehow, I found myself alone in the kitchen with Myers.

"Drake... thanks for coming tonight." Myers gave me a tender and grateful smile.

I shrugged. "What kind of friend would I be if I wasn't here for you -- and Hana -- when you needed me?"

Myers merely shook her head and stepped closer to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. She brushed a bit of hair out of my face. "You... are a great friend... to Hana." She grinned wickedly.

"Well... thanks."

My eyes strayed to her mouth. I leaned in, stopping just before our lips met, and locked eyes with her for one deliciously charged moment, before finally kissing her.

I grinned at the memory. God, Myers, what have you done to me? You've got me grinning like a fool.

I decided to get up, and shook Maxwell awake. We got dressed and went to get breakfast. Maxwell then left to go with Liam to some luncheon or something, and told me he'd be back after lunch, in time for the fashion show.

I had a couple of hours to kill before then, so I thought about going back to our car, and working out for a bit. But... to be honest, I didn't really feel like it, and the space really was too small for a good workout. And so... I decided to go ask Hana if she wanted to get some breakfast. I walked to her car and knocked softly on Hana's door. She appeared a moment later, already dressed and ready to go.

"Good morning, Drake!"

"Morning, Hana!"

"Where's Milla?"

I shrugged. "I think she's still sleeping. I haven't seen her, and her car was eerily quiet."

"She must be tired after last night..." Hana murmured. "Anyway, have you gotten breakfast yet?"

"Yeah, I did, but I was going to get some more coffee. Wanna come?"

Hana nodded. "Sure! I haven't eaten breakfast yet, so I'll do that while you get your coffee."

We made our way to the diner car, and I made it straight to the pot, pouring myself some black coffee in a mug, as Hana began piling her plate with food from the breakfast buffet. We sat down at
a small table, and Hana dug in. Well… "dug in" is not the term I'd really use when talking about Hana.

"So… how are you feeling?"

She sighed. "I feel a bit better… I'm still terrified of facing Madeleine today at the fashion show, though…"

"Aww, Hana… it wasn't your fault… you didn't know…"

"I know, but I should have… I'm one of her ladies in waiting! I'm supposed to be one of the future Queen's closest confidants."

I rolled my eyes. "Hana… I know it's an important position, but realistically speaking, Madeleine doesn't have confidants. She has her own agenda, and nobody but Madeleine is privy to it."

Hana mulled this over. "You're right. Besides, it's only temporary, right?" She breathed deeply.

"Right. Exactly."

We got back to our meal in a comfortable silence. That was one of the things I enjoyed about Hana's company. We could just hang out, and yeah sometimes we'd slip into silence, but it wasn't an awkward silence. Unlike Maxwell, Hana didn't feel the need to fill the void with conversation, nor did she try to pry into my private life.

"Have you spoken to your parents?"

"I called them this morning."

"And?"

"They were very disappointed in me. And embarrassed."

"Aww, Hana. Why?"

"Because they also think, that one: as Lady in waiting to the future Queen, I should be aware of any and all allergies her future Majesty might have. And two: because if I can't plan and execute a simple activity for a bachelorette party, how will I do when I have to plan major events for my husband? 'Inability to be a good hostess is not a desired trait for your suitors' Mother says."

I rolled my eyes. "Why are your parents so intent on you getting married?"

Hana looked at me like I'd just grown a second hand. "It's what's expected of me, to raise my family's standing at court."

"Hana, your parents are rich. Your dad owns his own multinational company."

"It's not just about the money…" Hana shrugged. "I guess… it's about the power that comes with a title…"

Power, money, power, money… it was always about power and money! And what good was power and money if you weren't going to use them to actually help the common people of Cordonia? In all my life, the only person I'd seen that had actually used his power instead of abuse it is Liam. He's the exception that broke the rule of all other dirty, corrupt politicians.

I sighed. "And what if you didn't get married? Isn't there some other way you could help your
parents raise their social standing?"

Hana grimaced slightly. "I… don't know. All my life, all I've done is acquire a set of skills that would help me find a husband. I have been groomed all my life to be someone's dutiful wife. I… don't know who I could be, besides that."

"You could find out… Hana, this isn't the 1960's anymore. Women can survive without a husband. Women can be self sufficient and self reliant. Just look at Myers, before she came to court!"

"But I'm not like Milla, Drake…"

"You can be, Hana. You're a strong, intelligent woman. I know you can do this."

Hana's eyes softened. I knew self doubt better than anyone, and I could still see a glint of it in her eyes, but she smiled at me nonetheless. "Thank you, Drake."

"You're welcome."

She let out a small laughter. "You sound just like Milla. I can see why she--" She cut herself off, eyes wide.

"You can see why she what?" I tried really hard not to pry, but my curiosity got the better of me.

"I can't tell you. I'm sworn to secrecy." Hana smiled mischievously.

"Ok… fine." That was confirmation enough that Myers had said something to Hana about us. I have to admit I was extremely curious to find out what exactly Myers had told her, but I could live with it. I mean, we're adults, not kids in high school anymore.

"Thank you."

We changed the topic to lighter things, like that god awful fashion show we were supposed to go to this afternoon, or the tsunami in Portavira. A couple hours later, Maxwell came and found us.

"Where's Milla?" He asked.

"We haven't seen her. I think she hasn't come out of her cabin yet." Hana told him.

"Well, let's go get her! She has to start getting ready for the show!" Maxwell urged us, and so we got up and made our way to Myers' train suite. Maxwell knocked on her door insistently. Myers' new dog, Chase, immediately began barking, and we heard a very loud groan.

"Go get them, Chase!" We all looked at each other, when Myers' yelled once more, "Just a second!"

A moment later, Myers opened her door, wearing a simple black top and jeans. "Hi, guys." She said, rubbing her eyes.

"Morning, sleepyhead!"

Myers winced at Hana's loud, and cheery, voice.

"Last night must have been rough. You slept all the way from Italy to Paris. How are you feeling?"

Myers sighed. "I've felt better."

"That's because you partied all night looooooong!" Maxwell cheered.
Myers frowned. "That, and because I found out--" She cut herself off, looking around the hall. "Guys, you should come in."

We all looked at each other. "Okay…" I said, stepping inside.

Once we were all in, Myers closed her door. "I found out the noble lady who set me up was Penelope."

"What?!" Hana's jaw dropped.

So did mine. "Penelope? Penelope? Poodlelope?! "I can't stop talking about my poodles' Penelope?"

Maxwell frowned, already in full detective mode. "I always knew she was a few dogs short of a pack."

Myers sighed. "Maxwell…"

"What?" He shrugged.

"To be honest… I feel kind of bad for her, actually. She's obviously not cut out for court. The pressures of being here were probably just too much for her."

"Wait, what! "You feel bad for her? She betrayed you!"

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not happy with her… It's just… it's kind of hard to be angry at someone so pathetic." She shook her head. "Anyway, we need to strategize. I didn't confront her last night, but I have to talk to her. I need answers."

"Please be careful, Milla. If she's been able to fool us for so long, who knows what else she's capable of?"

"Oh my god. What if she was a serial killer? A serial killer who fed the remains of her victims to her poodles!"

"She's right down diabolical! I bet she doesn't even have poodles!" Maxwell said.

"Yeah, be careful. We've got the upper hand now just because she doesn't know that you suspect her." I told her.

"That's right. If we're able to get close to her, we may be able to get some answers." Hana suggested.

"Good idea." I nodded. "She probably wasn't a serial killer. It was probably what Myers said."

"The ultimate game of cat and mouse. Cat and poodle? Poodle and lion!" Maxwell cheered.

Myers frowned, her eyes fierce. "This lion is ready to pounce."

"I'll be there if you need help. I know it won't be easy to be nice to her after all she's put you through." Hana's voice brought me back to the situation. "Oh, I have an idea! Penelope loves dogs, right?" She shot a meaningful look at Chase, who was laying gently on Myers' lap.

"Oh, yeah!" Maxwell snapped his fingers. "Maybe you can butter her up with a little corgi time."

As if he knew we were talking about him, Chase barked.
"Who is the very best little detective? Is it you?" Maxwell cooed. Chase got up and began wagging his tail furiously. "It sure is! You're the best detective in the world."

As Maxwell and Hana became preoccupied with the dog, I moved to sit down next to Myers. I was still worried about her. "Be careful, Myers. Think you'll be able to get her alone?"

"That might be harder than it sounds," Hana piped up. "We're going to a charity fashion show today, so there'll be tons of people."

"Speaking of which, we should get going. We're supposed to meet Justin in the limo in a few minutes." Maxwell looked up from playing with Chase on the floor to Myers.

"Mind if I catch a ride with you guys?" I asked.

"Plenty of room in the limo."

"Ugh..." Myers groaned and put her head on her hands.

I raised an eyebrow. "You okay, Myers?"

"Yeah... I just..." She shook her head. "Nevermind. I need to change. And Hana? Could you help me with...?" She pointed her finger to her face, moving it in circular motions.

"Of course. I'll go get my makeup bag from my suite. See you boys at the show!" Hana left to get her things.

I looked at Myers... then at Maxwell. He caught my eye, and looked at Myers, then at me, and his eyes widened as his mouth made a silent Oh.

"Milla, have you decided what to wear yet?"

She shrugged, looking very disinterested. "No... I don't suppose you have?" She gave him a wry grin.

"I forgot to check the boutique last night, but you could just wear the pink Chanel dress. You haven't had a chance to wear it yet, and it's classic and elegant. You could almost say it's timeless." He winked at her.

"Okay! Fine by me!" She got up and went to her suitcase, where she pulled out a pink dress.

"Okay, we'll let you change." Maxwell motioned for us to go. "We'll be waiting outside. Meet us when you're ready."

As we stepped out of her suite, Hana was coming back. "Hey, guys, is Milla changing?"

"Yeah. How long do you think it will take until she's ready?" Maxwell asked.

She shook her head. "Not long at all. Twenty minutes tops. Milla has a great complexion, so I don't really need to apply much product. It's mostly touch ups."

At that point, Myers opened her door, "Okay, Hana! Beautify me!"

Hana gave us one last smile, and stepped inside. While we waited, I turned to him. "Hey, Maxwell. What's the deal with Myers?"

He shrugged. "What do you mean?"
"I don't know, she just seemed weird…"

"Oh, Milla's always like that before an event."

"What do you mean?"

He shrugged again. "She finds the whole process of getting ready kind of tedious…" He laughed. "I didn't know this when we first met, but did you know she doesn't even really know how to do her own makeup? I swear it was the greatest coincidence that she ran into Hana that first night at the boutique, because otherwise, we would've had to hire a hair and makeup artist!"

"Huh… and you, uh… you pick out her outfits, too?"

"Yeah. Milla has great personal street style, but she's still learning about formalwear, so I try to help out, give her options, but she's the one who ultimately chooses."

I nodded at that. I remembered one of the first interviews she gave, where the guy ended it asking her about her dress. She looked so composed at the time, but maybe that was just an act. Come to think of it, it must be exhausting having to look perfect for every single event, or otherwise risk the press ripping you apart.

Finally, Myers and Hana stepped out of the suite, and we made our way to the venue. Myers' publicist was already inside, and I don't know what it was about the guy, but something about him rubbed me the wrong way… But Myers seemed to trust him, so I guess… Maybe I was just paranoid, I don't know.

Once inside, Maxwell and I split from the girls to go find Liam, who was speaking to the press. They asked him different sorts of frivolous questions, which he was able to expertly turn around with perfect diplomatic answers. They asked him about the show, he answered with how it was a way to raise support for Portavira. They asked him about the earthquake, he emphasized the relief efforts that he'd deployed. They asked him about the engagement, he smiled and claimed to be ecstatic to have Madeleine as his partner in life, someone who was just as devoted to serving Cordonia as he was.

At least his acting chops have gotten better, I thought as I shared a look with Maxwell. We both could see he was trying to take our advice to heart and be more convincing. When Liam spotted us, he waved his hand, thanked the press for their time, and Bastien moved in front of him and began shooing the vultures away.

Liam sighed as he reached us, giving me a tired look. "Better?"

I clapped his shoulder. "Much better."

"Thanks." He gave me a small half smile. I knew it was still difficult for him to have to lie for his people, but he had to do it until we cleared Myers' name. He'd said himself it was the only way to keep her safe.

"How are the relief efforts coming along?"

"They're coming along well. We've successfully executed our emergency action plan. Our search and rescue teams are collaborating with the Duchy's authorities, as well as with the fire department and local police. We've already set up temporary housing for those who lost their homes, and we're organizing donation drives across the country. Our volunteers are already hard at work delivering food, clothes, and other necessities to the Duchy. Meanwhile, American Red Cross volunteers arrived this morning with medical and pharmaceutical relief, as well as several teams of health
professionals to support the Duchy's hospitals."

I nodded, taking it all in. "You really have everything under control, don't you?"

Liam tried not to blush. "I'm only doing what must be done."

"You're a good king." I told him sincerely. He really was. He was in another country, but he was still on top of everything that was going on in Cordonia.

"Thank you, Drake. Truly."

Before we could take our seats, the Wicked Witch of the West strutted up to us and looped her arm through Liam's. "Hello, Darling." She kissed his cheek, smiling sweetly, "The show is just about to start. Should we take our seats?"

"Of course, Madeleine." Once again, he gave me and Maxwell an apologetic look, and left with her.

I sighed, shaking my head.

"Come on, let's go find the girls." Maxwell told me.

We walked to the second row, just behind Liam and Madeleine, only to find Kiara sitting alone. "Bonjour, Lord Maxwell, Drake." She nodded, smiling.

"Hello, Lady Kiara."

"Where's Mye-- I mean, Lady Camilla? And Lady Hana?"

Kiara rolled her eyes. "Monsieur Lancelin St. Claire asked Lady Hana and Lady Camilla to walk in the show, and they invited Penelope to come along."

"That's great! Do you mind if we sit here with you?" Maxwell asked.

"Not at all." She gave me a sultry smile.

I nearly sighed in relief as Maxwell took the seat next to her, leaving me to sit next to him. The light dimmed, as the first model stomped out on the stage. A couple more walked down, until Myers came out, walking tall and proud in a beautiful gold dress. She spun halfway down the runway, letting her skirts flare around her. The audience cheered and clapped, all except Madeleine, whose face was carefully neutral. I stifled a laugh seeing Madeleine like that. At the end of the catwalk, Myers struck a commanding pose, glaring at the audience, before walking back. She was followed by Hana, who was the picture of grace and poise, and then by Poodlelope, who looked surprisingly confident.

"Woo! Go Penelope!" Kiara cheered.

Maxwell was glued to his phone, looking at the picture he'd managed to catch of Hana and Myers. "They really look great!"

I rolled my eyes. At least one good thing will come out of this... Well, two good things: awareness for a good cause and good press for Myers. Even so, I couldn't wait to get out of here already. After a couple more models stepped out in just plain ridiculous clothes -- clothes that, let's be real, no one would wear in their day to day life -- the designer stepped out, waving and bowing, and called an intermission. We all got up, Liam and Madeleine left to mingle, and of course, gently pressure people to donate to the cause.

I spotted Myers talking with Liam, as he petted Chase. His smile was genuine, and so was hers, and
for a moment there, a small tinge of my usual insecurity came back. But… after our conversation in Italy… and Applewood, and Fydelia… after the Coronation and the Beaumont Study -- "I want you, and I'll keep saying it, as long as it takes for you to believe me" -- it slowly lessened.

Maybe… maybe I was finally beginning to see that I'm not, and never was, less than Liam. We're just different.

I turned back to Maxwell and Kiara with a small smile on my face.

Finally, the lights dimmed once more and Hana and Myers made their way to the second row to sit with us. "I saved you a seat!" Hana told Myers, which just so happened to be the seat next to mine.

"Oh and you saved one for Chase, too!" Myers cheered. Hana offered her arms and Myers handed the dog to her, taking a seat next to me. She grinned at me, and I just shook my head and smiled

"It's starting!" Maxwell squealed, as the first model made her way down the runway.

"Look at that dress!" Lady Kiara exclaimed. "Is that an off shoulder tartan capelet?

"It definitely is…" Myers gaped at the dress, before rolling her eyes. She bumped my shoulder. "What is this, Outlander? These clothes are ridiculous."

In the front row, Liam coughed, trying to disguise a chuckle. Madeleine turned her head around and glared at Myers, before tossing her hair and turning back to the runway.

I snickered, and Myers shrugged. "An off the shoulder capelet, for just when your biceps are cold."

"Hey. They are rather silly, aren't they?" Hana agreed.

"That's part of what I like about it. Art has to be impractical. Otherwise, it isn't art." Poodlelope said.

My eyes widened as a model walked out, wearing a purple dress that's poofy at the top, and had long tendrils of fabrics for a skirt.

"Oh my! This next model looks like a jellyfish!" Hana pressed her fingers against her lips, trying to hide a smile.

"An elegant haute couture jellyfish." Kiara grinned.

Maxwell nodded. "Sea creature couture? I could dig it."

Models continued to make their way down the runway, each wearing outfits more ridiculous than the last. As soon as the lights were on, I decided it was time to jump ship. I told the guys I was going, and began to walk back to the train station. The streets of Paris were filled with citizens and tourists alike, and as a young kid screamed to her friend to "bring her back a croissant", I couldn't help but think how out of place her voice sounded here.

Did my voice sound like that here?

It almost seemed wrong to contaminate this city with English; not when this country had such a beautiful, almost musical language. I remembered my French lessons from high school. I never had the talent nor the patience for it. Savannah, on the other hand, had an ear for languages. Savannah… Savannah was learning French... before leaving. She was learning French from Kiara… She never told me that she was taking lessons, and I never got to finish my conversation with Kiara, I realized. Damn! I should have asked her at the fashion show.

My heart began to race just a little bit, and I didn't even know why… I felt like I was onto something
here, and not just *here* as in "Savannah and her French lessons", but as in *here* like Paris… there was something about this city I couldn't quite put my finger on…

I looked around, as if trying to get a clue from my surroundings, from the streets, and the lights, and the people. *Nothing*. This was going to bother me for the rest of our stay here… it was like this nagging feeling, like when you know you're forgetting something, but you can't put your finger on what. I sighed. It began to get dark, and so, I got up and made my way towards the train station.

I walked to my cabin, and found Maxwell fiddling with his phone. As soon as he saw me, he locked his phone and tried to hide it without me noticing. *Okay… weird*. I shook my head. Maybe it was Maxwell just being Maxwell. "Hey, want to get some dinner?"

"Uh… sure! Just… give me a minute! Go on ahead, I'll meet you there!"

He seemed more excitable than usual.

"Sure…" His hand was still clutched tightly around his phone. "Everything okay?"

He shrugged, rolling his eyes and sputtering. "Uh… yeah! Why wouldn't it be okay? Everything's fine! Peachy! Swell!"

"Uh huh…" I pursed my lips. He was lying through his teeth right now. "You sure…?"

"Yeah! No, yeah, yeah, yeah! It's all good!"

I sighed. "Okay… I'll meet you at the diner car."

That gnawing feeling came back to me… there was something going on here… Maxwell, Paris… Maxwell, Paris. And that's when I realized it.

*The envelope from the Beaumont Study!*

---

Hours later, I was lying in my bed, unable to sleep. I shot Liam a text. *"You up?"*

My phone vibrated a second later. *"Yes, still going over relief reports."* That was Liam for *"help!"*

*"Let's go out. Saw a hotel with a billiards sign not too far."*

*"Yes, please."*

I got up, careful not to wake Maxwell, and made my way to Liam's private car. With Bastien tailing us not far behind, we made our way to the little hotel. As Bastien settled things with the owner, we got around to shooting some pool.

"So, how is the investigation coming along?" Liam whispered.

I looked at the door, where Bastien was standing guard. His eyes widened and he shot me an inquisitive look.

"Maxwell and Myers found the photographer, and she gave them the receipt of the payment of the pictures. Bertrand was able to find the last four digits of the credit card used to pay her, and Myers found out whose it was."

"And…? Whose was it?" His face hardened. *"Was it Madeleine's?"*
"No… it was Penelope's."

"Lady Penelope's?"

Bastien began coughing loudly. Liam and I turned around. "Bastien are you alright?" Liam asked.

"Fine, Your Majesty." He cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, if I may…"

"Yes?" Liam nodded.

"I was unaware Drake and Lady Camilla were conducting an investigation. Perhaps this could be left in the capable hands of the King's Guard, so as to not trouble either of them, or the Beaumonts."

I rolled my eyes. "We got it, thanks."

"But--"

"I agree with Drake. I trust him and the Beaumonts to see this investigation through, and Lady Camilla has proven herself quite resourceful. I appreciate your suggestion, Bastien, but I would rather not use the King's Guard for this particular investigation."

Bastien looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead he nodded and stepped back. "Of course, Your Majesty."

I nodded. "Anyway, Myers was going to confront Penelope at the fashion show today, but I haven't talked to her to see what happened."

"She didn't mention anything to me after the show."

"She was with you after the show?"

Liam grinned. "Yes. I decided to take a cue from my best friend and I took her to the Eiffel Tower."

"Bet she loved that…"

"I hope so. She seemed to enjoy herself, anyway."

I felt eyes on the back of my head, and was sure Bastien was watching our whole exchange. I bet he was trying to gauge how I would react, so I tried not to let my face betray anything. "That's great, man."

"It was… I tried not to bring up anything about the engagement or the investigation, and she seemed visibly more relaxed and comfortable." He gave me a half smile, and I clapped his shoulder.

"Good. Listen… I'm sure you'll know where you stand with her once we get to the bottom of all this. Once she clears her name… you'll be free to end your engagement to the Wicked Witch of the West, and…" I almost didn't want to finish that sentence. "And you'll be able to be together."

Liam nodded, staring intently at me. "I hope so." We got back to the game, and after a couple more rounds, we decided to head back, but not before Liam spoke to the owner, asking him to keep this open for me. We headed back to the train, and Liam left for his suite, bidding me and Bastien good night.

"Aren't you supposed to follow him?"

"I'm not on duty tonight." Bastien said simply.
"Drake…" Bastien stopped me. I turned. "You… you're a good friend to Liam."

I nodded and left for my bunk.

After a night of fitful sleep, I woke up first thing in the morning to go find Myers.

"Whoa! You're up early!" Maxwell told me, already dressed.

"So are you!" I narrowed my eyes. "Going somewhere?"

He shrugged, not meeting my eyes. "Just… going for a run…"

I raised an eyebrow. "In jeans? And a dress shirt?"

He shrugged. "I didn't bring any workout clothes, and since this shirt's dirty anyways…"

"Okay…"

"Okay. Bye!" He made his way out hastily, plugging his earbuds in and jogging out.

I went to the diner car, got a coffee and a cup of green tea for Myers, and two croissants to go. Then I made my way to Myers' suite. She opened the door just before I had a chance to knock, and with the momentum I almost spilled the scalding hot tea on her.

"Whoa! Watch where you're going there, cowboy!" Myers said good naturedly. She looked down to the food in my hands. "Ooh, is that for me?"

"Hey! There you are! I've been looking all over for you!"

"And now you've found me!" She said cheerfully. I handed her the cup of green tea, and she grinned at me. "You remembered."

"Yeah, of course. Hey, we need to talk."

She immediately stepped aside, allowing me to enter her cabin. "I missed you at the end of the fashion show last night. Were the fishnet jumpsuits too much?"

I groaned. "I don't ever need to see that much of a person."

"I need to tell you something…" Myers looked at me, a hint of sadness in her eyes.

We sat on her bed, placing the drinks on her bedside table, and I handed her a croissant.

"Thank you. Penelope confessed everything at the fashion show, but… she claimed she was working with…" She bit her lip.

"With…?"

"With Bastien."

Wait, what? "Bastien?! Our Bastien?"
"I'm sorry… I know you and Bastien are close."

I couldn't believe this! Bastien? It couldn't be! But, at the same time… why would Poodlelope lie?

_Oh, crap... that's why he got so nervous last night when he heard of the investigation!

"Bastien, of all people. Hell."

In the confines of her own cabin, Myers reached for my hands. She pulled me into a hug, before pulling away. "Have you seen him at all? We need to talk…"

"No, he's preparing security for Liam's bachelor party. He'll be there tomorrow night."

"I guess that means I'm crashing."

"Can I be there when you talk to him? I need to know why."

"Of course."

"Thanks, Myers." I sighed. "Not much to do until then. But there's another mystery I wanted to talk to you about."

"What's up?"

"Do you remember when we found that envelope of cash in the Beaumont Study?"

Myers eyes widened. "Of course! The address on it was in Paris! Do you still remember it?"

"I took a picture of it." I scrolled through my phone gallery. Myers sidled up next to me, looking at the pictures. She stopped my hand when she found the one of us.

"Maxwell sent it to you?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Uh… yeah."

"I didn't say it that day, because we were with the guys, but… I love that picture."

I looked at her, my face just inches away from hers. "Why?"

"Well, first because it's the first picture we have together. And second, because…" She looked down at the floor, her cheeks turning pink.

I place my finger under her chin, turning her face to meet my eyes once more. "Because…?"

"... I love the way you look at me." She whispered.

_Aww, Myers. _I smiled, pulling her lips to mine for a small kiss. We pulled away and I noticed she had a pretty blush on her cheeks. She took a deep breath. "Anyway… the address."

"The address." I scrolled through my phone until finally finding the picture. "201 Rue de Trois Freres, 75108 Paris, France." I looked it up in Google Maps and it turns out… "It's… not too far from here, in fact."

"Are you thinking that we should go to that address?"

"At the very least, it might give us a clue about what's going on. And right now, it seemed like we could use all the answers we can get."
Myers clapped her hands on her things and stood. "Okay, let's go! Just let me change." She looked at me. "You should bring something nice to wear."

I narrowed my eyes. "You're just trying to get me into a suit, aren't you?"

"As much as I enjoy forcing you into formal wear, you never know when you'll need to look nice to blend in."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine, fine, I'll bring one with me. Let's go."

"Do you really want to be carrying a suit around all afternoon?"

I shrugged. "I don't mind. If I need it, I'll change. If not…"

"Okay." She shrugged, and crossed her arms over her stomach, pulling the hem of her shirt over her head. My jaw dropped as she began taking off her pants. "Uh, Myers…?" I tried to look at the ceiling. "What are you doing?"

"I told you I was going to change. Unlike you, I don't want to carry a garment bag all over town."

I sneaked a peek, blushing slightly as I saw her lacy pink underwear. *Huh... what is it with Myers and lace? Every time I've seen her in her underwear, she was always wearing lacy underwear...* I thought, trying to distract myself from the half naked woman a meter away, my eyes practically glued to the ceiling.

"Ready. You can look now, Drake." I saw Myers had changed into that simple pink dress, her eyes alight with laughter.

I sighed. "You're going to be the death of me, Myers."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. It's not the first time you've seen me in my underwear. Now, come on, let's go."

"Okay, let me get my suit." I walked briskly to my cabin, got my grey tux, and met Myers outside. She had called a car for us, and after a quick drive, we arrived at a simple apartment building. We climbed the stairs to the second floor, and stopped before a door.

"It looks like an ordinary apartment." Myers commented.

"So far. Here we go." I knocked on the door three times. Soon, the door opened to a small apartment and behind it…

My jaw fell. My heart began pounding so hard, I could hear it in my chest. My eyes filled with tears I tried to blink back. Her hair was longer, and she had bags under her eyes, but it was her.

*Savannah!*

"Drake!"

My head was spinning. "What… Savannah?!"

I heard steps approaching behind her. "Who's at the…" Maxwell came out from behind her, his smile evaporating as he saw me and Myers. "Whoa… Drake and Camilla! Uh, hi…"

*What the actual fuck?! "Maxwell?!"* I glared at him. *He knew where Savannah was this whole time?!*
"Oh, shit." I heard Myers cursed softly under her breath.

Maxwell squealed.

"Drake, I--" Savannah looked at me with wide eyes.

"Waaaah!" A shrill cry shook me to my core. *Was that...?*

"Is that...?"

Savannah ran inside. "Hang on, Bartie. Mama's coming!"

"Mama...?" It was like I was in a daze. I felt like I was literally having an out of body experience; like I wasn't seeing this scene play out through my eyes, but from somewhere else in the sky.

"Drake." Myers took my hand, and I squeezed hard. Myers squeezed right back, and took my chin, making me look at her. "Drake, breathe. We need to stay calm."

I snapped out of my stupor. "Calm?" I could have laughed at the silliness of this whole situation. My sister, who I haven't seen in over a year, is living in France and is apparently a mom, and yet you want me to stay calm?! "Calm?! At a time like this?! Calm is the last thing I'm feeling!"

Myers glared at me, and I was sure she was going to slap me or something. "You need to get calm then!" She didn't slap me. "For Savannah's sake!"

I felt like the walls were closing in, despair creeping up on my chest. "I shouldn't even be here... Savannah didn't want me here. She didn't want me involved in her new life." I looked around, at her new apartment, with new furniture, and I wondered if there was a new husband or partner who was going to show up at any moment. I gasped. *What if it was Maxwell?! No... no... no... I have to get out of here!" I should go. I'll only upset her if I'm here."

I started walking back into the hall, with Myers never letting go of my hand, but pulling insistently. "Drake, wait! You don't know for sure that's true!"

"If she wanted me around, she would have called. Written. Anything. Let's go."

"Drake, stop!" Myers pulled her hand from mine, and grabbed my arm with both hands. "Stop, please!"

I did. I stopped walking towards the stairs. Myers walked in front of me and wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me into a hug. I leaned into it, and suddenly, I couldn't blink the tears back. Myers held me tighter, pressing her lips to my forehead, and rubbing my back soothingly.

"Ssh... it's okay. I'm here with you." She whispered softly.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, pulling her closer to me. She was my landline right now, literally the only thing keeping me together.

"Drake." She pulled back to look me in the eye. She wiped the tears that had managed to escape from my cheeks. "I know you're feeling hurt, and betrayed, and like she shut you out. But you just found her after all this time. We can't leave now. We need to be here for her. Just stay for a minute to talk to her. If she really wants us gone, we'll go."

I sighed, closing my eyes. Breathe. In. Out. In. Out. I opened my eyes and locked them with Myers'. Those beautiful browns were filled with sympathy and concern. I nodded once, and took her hand.
She squeezed right back and interlaced our fingers. I turned back to find Maxwell in the doorway, staring at our whole exchange with wide eyes.

But... I was honestly so fucked up right now, I couldn't care less who saw me holding Myers hand. Decorum be damned. And as I looked at Maxwell, who let a slow smile spread over his face at our joint hands, I almost saw red.

_He knew where Savannah was this whole time! He knew what happened to her! And he never told me! He looked me straight in the eye for the past year, and he didn't tell me! He prodded and poked into my personal life, and yet he knew where my sister was and didn't tell me!_

I glared at him, Myers' hand the only thing keeping me from punching him. His eyes widened, and he had the good sense to step back.

"Uh... can I get anyone some water or anything? No? Tea?" He looked to Myers desperately.

Myers shook her head, disappointment clear in her eyes. "Maxwell... are you going to talk or what?"

I didn't trust myself to speak to him yet.

"I..." Maxwell looked everywhere but us, "better go get that tea! You said you wanted tea?"

"No one wants tea!" I yelled. Myers squeezed my hand.

"There's the kettle..."

Myers rolled her eyes. "I don't hear anything."

Maxwell ran off into the tiny kitchen.

Myers turned to me. "Wait a minute... the baby's name is Bartie." Her eyes widened. "I bet the baby is named after Bertrand and Maxwell's father!"

_Oh shit... "Barthelemy Beaumont. You're right."

"I knew I heard them mention his name before." She muttered under her breath. "If the baby is named after their father, then either Maxwell or Bertrand's got to be the father... right?"

"Right." _Oh, god... I have a blood connection to the Beaumonts!_

"I bet the father is Bertrand." Myers kept muttering. "I just don't think Maxwell would be the type to let her go off on her own. And Bertrand is always so mysterious, like he's just full of secrets."

"Well..." _Oh god... Bertrand... and my sister..._

"Drake..." Myers squeezed my hand once more. _Come back_. "Are you okay?"

I sighed, looking at her. "I will be, once we get some explanations."

She nodded. "They're coming back..."

Savannah stepped into the living room, holding a little baby on her arms. The boy had her brown hair, and big brown eyes that just melted my heart. He squealed in my sister's arms.

I tore my eyes away from him, to Savannah. "Savannah... before you say anything, if you want me to go, I'll go. I don't want to force anything you're not ready for."
Her eyes filled with tears. "... That's not... oh, Drake..." She handed the baby to Maxwell, and threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck and pulling me down for a hug. Myers let go of my hand and stepped back discreetly, and I wrapped my arms around my sister. I tried to hold back my tears once again, as Savannah sobbed into my chest.

"I'm so sorry I shut you out." She cried, "I just didn't know how to tell you. I didn't think you'd understand. I didn't want to ruin things for you at court." She rambled.

"For me? Savannah, don't you know your happiness means so much more to me?"

Savannah sniffled, letting out a soft laugh. "I know. I guess I always knew. I just wasn't ready to reach out. But now that you're here... I'm so glad I could cry. Again."

I squeezed her, my eyes looking for Myers. She was standing a few steps away from Maxwell, with her hand over her mouth, hiding a small smile, and her eyes filled with happy tears, conveying her emotion.

I nodded my thanks. She nodded back, taking her hand down and giving me a beautiful, sunlit smile. The moment was broken when the baby groaned. "Don't worry, little guy. No one forgot about you." Maxwell shushed him.

Savannah laughed and stepped back, wiping tears from her eyes. "Drake... are you ready to meet your nephew?"

"Uh..." My eyes instinctively found Myers. She nodded. "...yes?"

Savannah stepped back, took the baby from Maxwell, and offered him to me. I placed both hands under his arms, but that left his legs dangling freely, with no support. "I... am I doing this right?"

It didn't help that the baby glared at me, and looked like he was about to erupt into tears. Thankfully, Myers was by my side in an instant. "Here, let me help."

Myers took the baby with surprising ease, "Excuse me, little guy. I'm just here to help Uncle Drake." She cooed, and the baby giggled. Then, she placed him over my chest, taking my left hand and placing it under his butt for support, "This hand should go here, and then..." and then she took my right hand and placed it over the baby's back, securing him. The baby squealed with glee. I shot her a grateful look, and she stepped back.

I turned back to Savannah. "Just because you've got me holding this little bundle, don't think that you're going to avoid any questions."

"No, I'm ready to talk to you. Go ahead."

"Well, let's start with what happened? When you left, I mean."

"It was a very difficult time for me..." she sighed, "At one of the Beaumont's house parties, Bertrand and I ended up alone in the study. I'd always thought the world of him, but I didn't think he'd ever look twice at me. But that night... we talked for hours... and then... Well, I'll spare you the details."

"Thank god."

"But suffice to say, this little miracle was the result. I didn't even realize I was pregnant until a month later. I went to tell Bertrand, but before I could get a word in, he started giving me a big speech about how we couldn't be together."
I fought to control the anger that seemed to course through me. A small hand touched my shoulder, and I turned my head to find Myers. I was so engrossed in Savannah's story, I didn't even hear her step next to me. I looked back at the baby, and took a deep breath to calm down. *Wait a minute…*

"Are you saying…?"

Savannah nodded. "Bertrand doesn't even know about Bartie. I tried to play it cool and tell him I was fine… But as I left the Beaumont house, I couldn't help crying."

"And that's where I come in…" Maxwell timidly stepped out from behind my sister, "I saw Savannah in tears and got the whole story out of her."

I rolled my eyes. *Yeah, you have a tendency to annoy people into telling you the truth about their personal lives.*

"Wait a second…" Myers piped up. She had been my silent support system until now. "Maxwell… have you been sending Savannah money?"

"Oh… you figured it out, huh? Yeah, I try to help out here and there." He shrugged nonchalantly. Savannah smiled at him warmly. "Maxwell's being modest. He's been amazing. This apartment, all our food and clothes… he's sent us money for everything so I wouldn't have to get a job."

"Well, little Bartie needs his Mama. And I knew things would be hard enough without Bertrand in the picture…"

A small tendril of warmth tried to crawl their way through me, but I squashed it down quickly. No, I was still angry at Maxwell, and we still had a long conversation pending.

"And why didn't you tell Bertrand?"

"Believe me, I wanted to. But Savannah made me promise I wouldn't. I couldn't betray her by telling Bertrand…" He looked at me, pleading with me to understand.

I ignored him. "Savannah, why don't you want Bertrand to know?"

"Oh, Drake, can you imagine anything more pathetic? I don't want Bertrand to feel like he's obligated. It was *my* choice to become a single mother. I don't want to drag him into this now, or make him feel pressured to be with me because of Bartie. He made his feelings quite clear on the matter, and I don't want him thinking I had Bartie to get him to change his mind. I might not have Bertrand, but at least I have my pride."

I nodded. I couldn't argue with her there, and… it was *her* choice, like she said. All we could do was to respect it, and help her the best we could…

*Which is exactly what Maxwell has do--*

*Don't get me started on Maxwell right now!* I told that voice in my head.

"Savannah, I have to ask… why did you name the baby Bartie?" Myers asked.

She sighed. "I wanted him to have *something* from his father… And I couldn't give him the Beaumont name… but I could at least honor Bertrand by using his father's name. And it makes me happy to think of Bertrand every time I look at Bartie. Even if we can't be together, I like to think that Bertrand is happy, wherever he is, whatever he's doing."
Myers looked at me, then at Maxwell, and then Maxwell looked at me, too. "Er…"

"Um…"

"Is this the same Bertrand that I know?"

"What are you trying to say?"

Myers elbowed me discreetly. "Nothing! He seems… perfectly content."

"Anyway, I'm very glad to see you, Drake. I was dreading this, but… you're taking it a lot better than I thought you would."

I laughed. "Honestly? I missed you so much, I just want to be here for you however I can. And… for little Bartie, too."

"Aww… Drake." She reached out to me, enveloping me in a big hug.

Then, she stepped back, and turned to Myers. "And you, Camilla, Maxwell's told me all about you."

"Just Milla." Myers smiled warmly at her. "And really?"

"Of course! Maxwell keeps me up to date on all of the courtly gossip." Savannah laughed.

"Well, I might have heard a few things about you from Drake. All good, of course."

Savannah shot me a playful glare. "He'd better."

At that moment, Bartie started to get fussy, and began stretching his arms out to Savannah. I handed him back to her.

"Oh, but where are my manners!" Savannah said suddenly. "Can I offer anyone a drink? Some tea? It's almost dinner time…"

I rolled my eyes, and was about to tell her not to worry about it when Myers jumped in. "Oh, Maxwell and I can make some tea. And we could go out and get some take out, right?" She shot Maxwell a pointed look.

Maxwell jumped from his seat on the couch. "Right! Take out! Uh, let's go! There's this lovely little bistro just a block away, I think they sell food to go!"

"Great… We'll be right back." Myers squeezed my shoulder, and left.

"So…” I looked at Savannah.

"Milla's very nice." She commented, shooting me a knowing look.

"Yeah…” I raised an eyebrow, "she's pretty great… kind of."

"Mm-hmm. Anything you want to tell me?"

*Nope.*

"Uh…"

She burst into laughter. "Oh, Drake! Take your time…"
I scoffed, "You're one to talk." We teased each other good naturedly. "So... when was, uh... when was Bartie born exactly?"

If she was a month pregnant when she left, and she left a little over a year ago, after last year's Beaumont Bash... and a nine month pregnancy... Ooh, unless the baby was early, of course, or late...

"He was born on April 3rd."

"So that would make him..." I did the math in my head, "six months old."

"That's right. He'll turn seven next week."

"And... he's okay? Eating okay?"

"He's a perfectly healthy baby boy. He just started eating solids, and I chose to breastfeed him exclusively for his first six months of life."

"That's great."

"Yeah, it is."

"And... how was it, doing it all alone?"

"It was... really scary. Maxwell tried to be as present as he could... He took me to my first doctor's appointment, and my first ultrasound... the doctor thought he was the father..."

I rolled my eyes.

"Drake... don't be so hard on Maxwell. Everything he did, it was because I asked him to. I made him promise not to tell Bertrand... and you."

I sighed. "That's between me and Maxwell. And anyway, I want to know how you've been."

"I've been good. It was very difficult for me at first, but I got used to it. It's gotten much easier now that Bartie's only waking up once at night."

"That's good. Do you hire a sitter? Go out by yourself from time to time?"

Savannah shrugged. "I try to use the money Maxwell sends me for important things... like rent or food. Besides, I get some me time when Bartie sleeps."

"You really are superwoman." I grinned at her.

"It's the Walker gene. We're tough."

We both laughed at that, before descending into silence.

"Savannah... I know today has been a lot, but... have you called Mom?"

She gulped. "Not yet... I... I was embarrassed, Drake, and then too much time passed, and I thought it was too late."

"Oh, sis," I got up and knelt before her, giving her a one armed hug, careful not to squash Bartie. "It's never too late. Do you want to... call her now? With me?"
She took a deep breath. "Okay. Today was a lot, seeing you again, but it also made me happier than I've been in a long time. And I don't want Mom to worry anymore. And… I want Bartie to get to know his grandmother. But… maybe not today?"

"Okay…"

"I just meant that Maxwell and Milla will be back with dinner soon, and I want to get to know the girl that's taken Cordonia by storm." She grinned impishly. "So--"

She was cut off by the door opening, and Maxwell and Myers making their way back inside. "Hey, guys!"

"I hope you like duck!" Myers said cheerfully.

"Ooh, I love it!" Savannah stood, and I followed.

Myers absolutely refused to let me and Savannah get up and help, making us go back to the living room couch, while she and Maxwell set the table. Once they were done and the food was served, we sat down.

"Can you drink wine, Savannah?" Myers asked.

"I'd rather not. The doctor says I can have an occasional glass now and then, but…" she looked to Bartie, who was happily playing in his playpen, "I don't think it's worth it."

"Fair enough." Myers poured out a smooth red Pinot Noir for me, Maxwell and herself.

We dug into the meal, conversation flowing easily. Myers asked about our childhood, what I was like as a kid, what I was like when Savannah was at court… Savannah was only too happy to answer, and to ask Myers some choice questions in return.

"... and then, he literally told me to, and I quote, 'ask Liam, it's his party'!"

"No!" Savannah looked aghast.

"Yup." Myers gave me a tender look. "He hated me. Hated me."

"I didn't hate you!"

"I can't believe you put up with him that night! I would have stopped right there and asked him what his problem was!" Savannah yelled.

"I told you you were kind of an ass that night." Maxwell chimed in.

"Okay, okay. So maybe I was… still, she completely took over the party! And then, kidnapped the groom!"

"I was only doing him a favor! You guys spent a week in New York and none of you took him to see the Statue of Liberty? Shame on you, supposed best man!" Myers teased. "Besides, I saw you getting cozy with some blond chick. You totally had fun that night."

I rolled my eyes good naturedly.

We kept on talking, Savannah asking Myers about the social season, about the competition, everything. We even caught her up a bit in our investigation.
"Bastien?!" Savannah looked at me, shocked. "He wouldn't do something like that! He's a good man. And he takes his job too seriously to meddle in Liam's personal life."

Myers sighed. "I know how close you are with him… but why would Penelope lie about this?"

Savannah mulled this over, chewing on her lower lip. "There has to be a reason for that."

Myers shrugged. "We'll confront him tomorrow night. Until then…"

The clock chimed, letting us know it was already 6 o'clock. I sighed. "We should be getting back before Lady Camilla is missed."

Myers quirked her eyebrows at me, probably at my use of her name and "title".

"Yes, it wouldn't do for Bertrand to get too curious and discover where you've been. But thank you all for coming. I'll treasure the memory." Savannah reached for my hand across the table and squeezed.

"You need a family portrait to remember it!" Maxwell chimed.

"I don't think that's necessary."

"Aww, it'll be nice! A token to remember this by." Myers said.

"I would like that. Something to show Bartie what Uncle Drake looks like so he doesn't forget you!" Savannah said.

Uncle Drake… I’m an uncle now. I looked to Bartie in his playpen, and my chest tightened. "Oh, fine."

"If only you had something nicer to wear…” Myers told me, a sly grin on her face.

"You're talking about my suit. You want me to put it on, don't you?"

"What a nice idea! I'll get dressed up too!" Savannah squealed and got up, practically running to her room.

I sighed, taking the suit with me into the bathroom. I came out to see Myers was fixing Savannah's hair just a tad, both of them laughing and talking quietly. The sight warmed my heart a little bit.

I stepped out and went to stand by my sister, who was holding Bartie. Myers stepped back and Maxwell took out his phone, aiming it at us.

"Hm, it's a little too dark in here. Let's go out to the balcony so I can get more natural light."

"Isn't this fine?" I rolled my eyes.

"No, and I'm the photographer here, so do as I say."

"But not as you do."

Savannah rolled her eyes next to me. "You haven't changed at all, Drake. Come on."

We stepped outside onto the balcony, and Maxwell snapped a couple of pictures.

"Now one with all of us!" Savannah said.
"What?" Myers' eyes widened.

"I think we should take a group picture too! After all, you and Maxwell have helped us so much…" Savannah pleaded. "Besides, you and Maxwell are already dressed up!"

Myers sighed, then let out a slow smile. "Okay."

Maxwell began setting up the timer on his phone, and then placed it on the window. Myers squeezed in next to me, and I placed one arm on her waist, the other one over my sister's shoulders. Maxwell ran up and sidled next to Savannah.

"Say 'Walker Family Reunion!'" He cheered.

"Walker Family Reunion!" Savannah and Myers cheered. I rolled my eyes, but grinned nonetheless. Bartie giggled.

After the picture was taken, we all crowded around Maxwell's phone. "You can send them to my printer!" Savannah said, handing Bartie to me.

As she and Maxwell took care of the technicalities, Myers walked up to me and Bartie. "Who's a handsome little man? You are, little man!"

"Gah!" Bartie giggled, stretching his arms out to her, wriggling his little legs.

"You're going to grow up to be a strong, handsome man, just like your Uncle Drake! Yes, you are!"

I rolled my eyes, blushing a little. "Come on, Myers, you'll give me a big head."

Savannah and Maxwell came back into the room, Savannah holding a double picture frame. "Here, Drake."

"Oh…” I couldn't help my eyes widening as I saw the pictures, "This is…” I smiled, pure joy in my chest. "Here, Camilla, take a look."

She leaned in, her grin widening. "Aww, Drake… this picture is amazing! I always knew you were a total marshmallow at heart."

"When it comes to family…” I looked to my sister and my nephew.

"Even Drake can't keep up the grumpy act." Savannah teased. I laughed, and handed her back the picture, but she shook her head. "I want you to take a copy too. That one's for you."

"Really?"

She nodded. "So you can think of us and remember this happy day."

"I hope I'll get to see you more from now on, too."

"I… I think I'd like that." She moved to hug me and Bartie. "I love you, big brother."

"Love you, too, sis. And you, little guy." I held on to both of them tightly for a long moment. Bartie squealed, and we heard a collective "Aww!" from Myers and Maxwell.

Savannah and I broke apart, but she said, "Get in here, both of you!" She pulled them both towards us, and embraced us all in a big group hug.
"Savannah," Myers took her hand, "I know we just met today, but I want you to know I'm here for you anytime. If you need anything... well, Maxwell can text you my number."

"Thank you, Milla. That means a lot. I haven't had many people in my life lately. But I think you're someone I'd like to get to know better."

"Me too." They smiled warmly at each other. "And if you ever need a babysitter, just call! I've been babysitting my cousin's children since I was 14!"

Savannah laughed. "I might take you up on that!"

"Okay, now we'd better get back before we're missed."

"Good luck out there." Savannah told both of us.

"Thanks." Myers nodded, then crouched down to Bartie's eye level. "Bye, Bartie! Buh bye, little man! Take good care of your mommy, alright?"

"Eeeeh!" Bartie squealed, wriggling in Savannah's arms.

"Bye!" Myers waved goodbye and stepped back.

"Bye, sis. Could I... could I stop by tomorrow?"

"Of course." She gave me a last one armed hug, and I stepped out the door.

"Give the little guy a kiss good night for me!" Maxwell yelled as Savannah closed the door.

"Always. Bye!"

Even though I felt a huge weight lift off my shoulders, the ride back to the train station was spent on utter silence.

"That went really well, I think!" Maxwell grinned.

"Don't think you're off the hook."

"Huh?"

"You knew where Savannah was this whole time! You know how worried I've been about her! You could've said something... at least dropped a hint that she was okay!" I yelled, my chest heaving with anger and sadness and betrayal.

Maxwell looked to Myers, who was sitting next to me silently.

Maxwell sighed. "Yeah... you're right. I just didn't know what to do. I'm really, really sorry, Drake! I wanted to tell you so many times, but I just couldn't. It wasn't my secret to tell. We... we're still friends, right?"

I just glared at him. I honestly didn't know if, with one apology, we could go back to being friends...

"You think about that for a while, and we'll come back to it."

The limo pulled over. Myers sighed. "In the meantime, let's get back to the train."
We got off the car and Maxwell excused himself to go to our bunk. I walked Myers back to her suite. She opened the door and stepped inside, but I just leaned against the door frame, exhausted. It was like all of the day's events were catching up to me.

"Well, here you are."

"Yep. Here I am."

I looked to the floor, nervously tapping my fingers against the door frame. "Hey, Myers… thanks for convincing me to do that."

"Don't mention it."

"I… I want you to know… You're a good friend, Myers." The corners of my lips quirked up in a small crooked smile. "Good night." I turned to go, but she stopped me with a hand to my shoulder.

"Drake… don't go. I want you."

It felt like I was glued to the spot. "Myers…"

She pulled me around, meeting my eyes. "Are you telling me the feeling isn't mutual?"

"Myers… you know damn well that it is. But we can't. You know we can't. I'm a mess right now…"

"So this all comes down to will power, huh?" She stepped closer, with her arms at her side, but her body so close, our lips almost touching I could feel her warm breath on my mouth. I let out a gasp, but held tight. She nodded. "You're a model of restraint, Drake."

I laughed. "Don't tempt me too far, Myers. I'm only human."

She nodded once more, before tilting her face, her lips meeting mine. I groaned against her mouth as the dam broke. I wrapped my arms around her, her mouth opening up to me, our tongues dancing together. "Myers…" I spun her around, pinning her against the wall. She gasped in anticipation, her hands running greedily down from my chest, to my waist and up my back. I took them both and pinned them over her head with one hand, the other one running over her body. My mouth left hers to place kisses down her jaw, her neck and her collarbone. Myers moaned softly, letting her head fall back against the wall.

"Drake…" she whispered. In one heated moment, she freed her hands from mine, wrapping them around my neck, using for leverage as she wrapped her legs around my waist. She ran her fingers through my hair as she kissed me passionately. I pressed her up further against the wall, holding her steady. She jutted her hips against mine and I couldn't help but groan.

I wanted her, needed her, so badly. But not like this… I thought. Myers deserved candles, and flowers and champagne, not a quickie in a train. I broke the kiss, pressing my forehead against hers.

She sighed contentedly. "Drake…"

"You're all of my weaknesses, you know that?"

She laughed. "It's one of my charms." She unhooked her legs from my waist, stepping down. Her hands were still around my neck.

I took them gently, and brought them down. "Now I'm really leaving."

"Good night."
"See you tomorrow temptress." I kissed her forehead. "Don't forget, we have a big night tomorrow."

"I know. I'm ready."

"Good. I'm ready too, and I'll be right there with you."

"I know. Thank you. Something tells me if I'm going to confront Bastien and finally get some answers, I'll need all the help I can get."

I nodded. "Good night, Myers." I let go of her hands and stepped out, as she shut the door.

Oh, boy... What a day. I thought as I walked into our cabin. Maxwell was already snoring, fast asleep, so I climbed in my bunk and closed my eyes.

Tomorrow was another big day.

Chapter End Notes

So... this is one of my favorite chapters in book 2, and to be honest, I was extremely nervous to write it. I hope I've done it justice and stayed true to the characters, and of course that you've enjoyed it. As always, thanks for reading!
Smoke and Mirrors

I woke up the next morning before sunrise, got dressed and stepped out of my cabin to go get some coffee. I had to admit it was in part to avoid Maxwell, but also in part to have a chance to talk to Liam. His whole day was booked with policy meetings and such, and I knew we wouldn't have a chance to talk tonight at the party, and I really wanted to tell him about Savannah, and update him on the investigation. And so, I went to the diner car, got a couple of coffees and some pastries, and made my way to Liam's private train suite.

Everything was so quiet, it was almost creepy. Trains aren't supposed to be this quiet… It made me wonder why the royal family insisted on spending the nights on the trains instead of at a hotel… I got to Liam's room and nodded to the guard posted outside, before knocking on the door. Liam answered, already dressed.

"Drake! Good morning!" His eyebrows shot up, probably wondering why I sought him out so early. "Is everything okay?"

I sighed. "Yes and no. We need to talk."

He nodded and stepped aside, allowing me to come in, and dismissed the guard. "We'll be fine. You should go get some sleep."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Liam nodded and shut the door. "What is it? Is Lady Camilla okay?"

"Myers is fine. Probably sleeping comfortably in her queen sized bed, alone in her cabin." Liam chuckled. "Seriously, dude? I'm your best friend, who's known you for years, but you give the last private cabin to Myers?" I feigned offense, raising a hand to my chest, "And to top it off, you make me bunk with Maxwell?!"

Liam chuckled. "I thought it would be good for you; an exercise in patience."

"You wound me, Your Majesty, wound me!" I laughed.

"I'll make it up to you on our next trip." Liam told me, reaching for a coffee. "Mmm. This is very good. Thank you, Drake."

"You're welcome."

"As much as I enjoy the company of my best friend, I assume there's a reason for your early morning visit?"

"Yeah, actually. I have news…" I took a sip of my coffee, avoiding his eyes. "I… found Savannah."

Liam's eyes widened, and a slow smile spread across his face. "You found your sister? Drake, that's wonderful!"

"Yeah… thanks."

"How did you find her? Where is she? Did she tell you why she left?"

I sighed, trying to figure out how to tell him. I couldn't tell him about the Beaumont Study without raising questions as to why I was there that day. I couldn't tell him I was there to help, because that
would imply telling him the Beaumont's are broke, and that's not my secret to tell.

"Do you remember when we stayed at the Beaumonts' this past season?"

"Of course."

"You know how I got there early to avoid the crowd?" He nodded, a small bit of exasperation and humor in his eyes. "Well, at one point, Myers and I started exploring the manor," That is technically true, I thought, I'm technically not lying... just omitting some things, things which I will tell him in the foreseeable future... "and we ended up in the study."

"Okay…"

"Well, Myers, being Myers, started snooping around--"

"That doesn't sound like Camilla…" He frowned.

"No, uh… she was snooping around… the books! She wanted to check out their collection."

"Then why wouldn't she go to the library? The Beaumonts have the most impressive literary collection."

"Because she wanted to check out Bertrand's private collection! Anyway, that's not important! We were snooping around and we found this envelope, with a French address on it."

"Are you telling me…?"

I nodded. "My sister is here in Paris."

"And… the envelope… was a letter for her?"

I hesitated, thinking whether I should tell him the truth of why Savannah left. But then again, why shouldn't I? He was my best friend, and a great one at that -- unlike myself. If I asked him not to tell anyone about Bartie, he wouldn't. "It was money."

"Money?"

I nodded. "During last year's Beaumont Bash, Savannah spent the night… with Bertrand."

"Bertrand?!!" Liam nearly choked on his coffee.

"Yeah… and she got pregnant."

"Oh…” Liam's eyes widened.

"And when she went to tell him, he didn't even hear her out and started giving her a big speech about how they couldn't be together."

"And so she left."

I sighed, nodding. "And so she left. But before she left the Beaumont House, she ran into Maxwell and told him everything. He helped her run away and get settled here in the city, and sent her money every month so she could care for Bartie."

"Bartie?"
"My… nephew." I couldn't stop the grin on my face. "Wait here." I literally ran out of his suite, back to my room, where I grabbed the picture frame without waking Maxwell. Once I was back in Liam's suite, I handed him the frame.

He took one look at it and smiled warmly. "Oh, Drake, he's wonderful."

"Right? He's the cutest baby I've ever seen. And Savannah's so good with him…"

"Congratulations, my friend." He handed the pictures back to me and wrapped me in a hug. "I'm happy for you. But… you need to tell me the rest of the story."

"Oh! Right! So, yesterday me and Myers started talking and we remembered the envelope. We decided to give into curiosity and check it out, so we went to the address, and Savannah opened the door to this tiny apartment."

"Ah, so that explains why Camilla is also in one of the pictures."

"Yeah… Myers… was pretty great, actually. I may have… freaked out, seeing my sister again. I thought she didn't want anything to do with me, and that's why she never reached out after she left. I was ready to leave, but Myers calmed me down, convinced me to stay and hear her out." I tried really hard not to blush. "She… is a great friend."

Liam clapped me in the shoulder. "I'm so happy for you, Drake. I know how difficult it's been for you since Savannah left, and I can only imagine the pain and anguish you went through, not knowing if she was okay… But now, she's back in your life, and with a baby, too! I have to meet you nephew. You're an uncle, Drake!"

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. "Yeah, I am… and he's the cutest kid ever. You know how most babies are kind of wrinkly and ugly, but you have to say they're cute almost out of respect? But Bartie's actually so cute. And he's so smart, too, I can tell. And friendly. I swear I had never held a baby in my life, but he took to me really well."

"I can already tell you'll be the best uncle. But… answer me this…"

"Okay…"

"Maxwell knew where Savannah was this whole time?"

"Yeah…"

"And he never said a word? Never at least hinted…?"

"Nope. Not once."

Liam sighed. "And… how are you handling that?"

"Are you kidding?" I scoffed. "I'm furious. I'm so angry right now. He knew everything, and he didn't tell me. He knew how worried I was. He saw with his own eyes how much me and Bastien searched for her, all the dead ends we hit, everything and he didn't say anything…"

"Drake… I… I assume Savannah asked him not to say anything?"

"She did." But that's no excuse. "But still… he claims to be my friend… he should have said something! Even if he didn't want to tell us everything, to respect her wishes! But at least, a simple 'hey guys, she's going through something right now and she needs to be alone, but don't worry, she's
My chest heaved with effort, as the hurt and anger boiled in the pit of my stomach.

Liam sighed. "Drake… I understand why you feel that way… and I know how much it hurt you… but I hope you can forgive Maxwell in time. What he did… knowing Maxwell, I know he was only trying to respect Savannah's wishes, even though he could have handled the situation better."

I hugged a breath. "I don't know…" It still hurts to much. Feels too much like betrayal. I looked to Liam, who was staring at me with concern filled eyes. "But, hey don't worry about it. I'll get over it or something." I shrugged.

"Drake…" Liam looked like he wanted to say something, but changed his mind at the last minute. He hummed and looked down to the floor. "Do you want me to make arrangements to place you in a different cabin? I could place Bertrand with Maxwell, and you could take his place rooming with Lord Rashad."

I let out a small laugh. "No… don't worry about it. I can handle bunking with Maxwell."

Liam nodded. "Very well."

"Now, if you offered me Myers' private cabin…" I teased, and we both laughed.

Liam looked at me hesitantly. "I… also have good news…"

"Do tell."

"I got a call from my brother last night… and, apparently, if all goes well… I'm to be an uncle, too!"

"Aww, Liam, that's great!" I moved in to give him a quick hug.

"Yes!" He clapped my back, "apparently his wife, Olivia, is expecting twins!"

"Twins?! That's great!"

"Isn't it?"

"Yeah! Is this why your parents weren't at the State Dinner in Italy?"

"Yes and no." Liam said, thoughtfully. "Leo and his wife have bought a house, so my father and Regina went to visit for their housewarming party. I don't actually know if they know about the babies, because Leo told me they found out a few days ago…"

"Well, he should be the one to tell them anyway."

"Yes, I know." Liam ran his fingers through his hair. "God, I feel so guilty, though. My brother has been married for over a year, and I still haven't made the time to visit and meet his wife…"

"Liam… he knows you're busy! You're the King now! Everyone knows your time is not your own. Besides where does he live anyway?"

"He and his wife bought a beach side property in Maine."

"In the US?"

"Yes."
"Well, maybe we could make some time to go when we get to New York."

Liam looked thoughtful. "Yes… we might. Thanks, Drake."

We looked at each other and laughed.

I miss this … I realized. I missed just hanging out with my best friend, and actually talking -- not just about Myers or court intrigue -- but about normal things, things like family and friends. Now, I'm not saying that Myers and the investigation was less important… I guess it was just nice to be able to lean on my friend again. We talked for a while longer about lighter subjects, before he had to go.

I decided to walk him out, then walk over to Savannah's apartment. It was a crisp, cool day where you could literally see the seasons change from summer to autumn. I stopped by a small patisserie and pick up some chocolate eclairs for my sister -- her favorite -- and some coffee.

I knocked on the door and shortly, Savannah answered. "Hello, big brother." She moved to wrap me in a hug.

"Hey, Vanny." I hugged her tightly, then raised the bag of eclairs. "I got you something."

"Chocolate eclairs! Oh, you're the best!" She took the bag from me and moved to let me in.

I stepped inside and crouched down to say hello to Bartie, who was on his playpen, several toys set out in front of him. "Hey, little man! How you doing?"

He merely looked at me, a rubber key in his mouth. I stood, giving him a quick kiss on the forehead, before joining my sister at her small, round dinner table. "So…"

She nodded, "So." Before looking at me and bursting into laughter. "It's really good to see you."

I laughed. "Yeah. You too. A lot has happened since you were gone."

"It's only been a year." She joked and I winced, "Too soon?"

I sighed. "Yeah, a little bit."

Now it was her turn to sigh. "I'm sorry. Really. For everything."

"I just… wish you knew you could trust me. I… would have loved to have been there for you."

"Drake…"

"I'm serious. If you would have told me… I would have left with you, gotten a job, supported you… I would have been here for everything."

"I know… but I was scared, and embarrassed. I assumed… you would have berated me, asked me how I could have been so stupid, said 'I told you so'…" She shrugged, "You always did tell me not to trust anybody. I never listened."

"But I wouldn't have done that to you." I told her quietly.

Savannah nodded. "I'm sorry, Drake."

"I know. But… now there's somebody else you need to apologize to."

"Okay." Savannah steeled herself. "Let's do it."
I took her hand across the table and squeezed. We moved to the couch. In the other hand, I took my phone and videocalled Mom.

After a few rings, she picked up. "Hi, baby!"

"Hey Mom."

"This is a nice surprise! It's been way too long since I've seen your handsome face. How are you?"

"I'm good! Great! And you?"

"I'm… good…" She nodded, seemingly unconvinced. "Me and your Aunt Leona have been working a lot."

"Oh, Mom, I'm sorry."

She batted a hand at the camera. "Oh, honey, don't worry about it. So, I've been keeping an eye on the news! The engagement tour? Where are you now?"

"I'm in Paris, actually."

My mom sighed wistfully. "Oh, Paris! How wonderful. You try to have fun out there."

"I will. Actually, there's a reason I called you today."

"Are you going to take me on a virtual tour of the Eiffel Tower?" She joked, not realizing how serious I was. I gestured for Savannah to get into view.

"Hi, Mom…" She said softly, her eyes glistening with tears.

I watched as my Mom's jaw dropped, and her eyes filled with tears. "Savannah?"

"Yeah…" My sister said.

Mom let out a large sob, struggling to contain herself. "Savannah!"

"Mom!" Savannah also broke, and I hugged her tightly, pressing a kiss to her forehead as both women cried.

After a few moments, Mom managed to calm down enough to hold her phone still. She wiped her eyes. "Savannah Jane Walker! How dare you run off for a year without telling your family?!!" My mom yelled, but there was a relieved smile on her face.

Savannah laughed, her chin quivering slightly. "I'm sorry, Mom."

"You should be! Do you know how worried we were? What you put us through? Do you know how much time Drake and Bastien spent trying to track you down? That I flew out there after years, to try to help out?"

"I… I know, Mom, and I'm so sorry. I really am." Savannah wiped the tears from her eyes. "I… got into some trouble and got scared. It just… felt easier to disappear."

"Oh, honey…" Mom's eyes softened. "You should have told us! We're your family! You know you can trust and, and we'll help you out in whatever you need! You know that, Savannah!"

"I know… I really am sorry, Mom…"
Mom sighed, "It's okay... I'm just... I'm so, so glad you're okay!" She sobbed.

I held the phone for a moment as the two most important women in my world cried, staring into each other's faces. I looked to Bartie, who looked curiously at Savannah, but soon resumed playing with his toys.

"So, you ready to tell me what happened?"

Savannah wiped her eyes and nodded. "I think... I'd rather show you."

"Okay..." Mom looked at me questioningly, as Savannah got up and got Bartie.

"Mom... this is Bartie... your grandson."

Mom's eyes widened as Bartie came into the picture. "Holy shit!" She covered her mouth with both hands. "My... my grandson?! My grandson?! Oh my god... Leona!" She yelled off screen, tears in her eyes once more. "Leona!"

"What?!" We heard Aunt Leona tell back.

"Come here! Come here right now!"

Savannah and I looked at each other, bewildered, not sure if Mom was crying happy tears or...

"What, what?!" Aunt Leona's voice was louder now.

"I have a grandson!"

"What?!"

"Drake... He found Savannah! She was in Paris! And I have a grandson!" We watched as Mom pointed furiously to her phone screen, tears still rolling down her face, but with a huge smile on her face.

"Holy..." Aunt Leona sat down next to Mom. "Savannah Jane Walker, you have some serious explaining to do!" Aunt Leona glared at us through the camera, but her face soon broke out into a huge grin as she sighed. "But, honey, it is so good to see you!"

"Oh, cut it out, Leona, I already yelled at her enough for today!" Mom smacked Aunt Leona's shoulder.

"No, but she's right, Mom. You guys deserve the full explanation."

I took Bartie and laid him down on the carpet, crouching down next to him and playing with him while my sister explained everything. She told him about the Beaumont Bash, Bertrand, everything. My mom and Aunt Leona asked her about Paris, about Bartie, the pregnancy and delivery, everything.

"Oh, honey, maybe one of these days I'll fly out there and kick that Bertrand's ass!" Aunt Leona glared. "I swear, for all their 'nobility', all those Corodonian nobles are nothing but two timing little rats!"

"Oh, that won't be necessary, Aunt Leona." Savannah laughed nervously, "Bertrand is out of the picture by my choice."

"He doesn't deserve a girl such as you."
"Well… that's why he doesn't have me." Savannah shrugged, though I could see the glint of sadness in her eyes.

"Honey, I have to ask… an apartment in Paris? A baby? And you never mentioned a job… How are you affording all of this?" Mom asked, genuinely concerned. I was pretty sure she was waiting to ask Savannah to go back to the ranch.

"Um… well… even though Bertrand doesn't know about Bartie, his younger brother Maxwell does. And he supports us financially. He didn't even want me to get a job, so I could be a full time mom and Bartie didn't have to go to daycare."

"So there is at least one decent person in that effin' castle…" My Aunt mumbled under her breath.

"So… this Maxwell sends you money? Pays for your food, rent…?"

Savannah nodded. "Everything. He even paid the hospital bills and for mine and Bartie's health care."

Mom sighed. "Okay, honey… Well, if you need anything…"

"I know, Mom."

"And honey, now that… you've been found… are you going to stay in Paris? You could… come live with us… we could help with Bartie."

Savannah ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't know… I mean, Drake just found me yesterday! I still haven't thought… if we should stay here, or go back to Cordonia…" Savannah shot me a grin, "…to be closer to Drake… or if we should go to Texas." She shrugged.

"Okay… well, you think about it, alright honey? And please remember we're your family! We're here for anything you need."

"I know, Mom. I won't forget again."

"Good. Now bring my gorgeous grandson back on screen! He needs to get to know his grandma and his Auntie Leona!"

I picked up Bartie and moved to sit on the couch. We talked for about an hour more, until Bartie began to get fussy. After about fifteen minutes of happily tearful goodbyes, we hung up and Savannah headed to the nursery to put Bartie down for his midmorning nap.

She came out about a half hour later, and we headed to the kitchen to begin prepping lunch.

"So…" Savannah said as she diced a sweet potato, "what have you been up to this past… year?" I looked up from the carrot I was peeling to find a dorky smile on her face.

I sighed, "Well… the first four months after you left were spent searching every possible clue and lead we had on you," I gave her a pointed look, "all the while helping Liam after Leo's abdication."

"That's right! Hey, didn't he marry some girl he met on a cruise?"

I shrugged. I honestly didn't care much for Leo's personal life. I was happy he was finally living his life the way he wanted, even if it made life harder for Liam. "Yeah, he did. From what Liam told me, the girl was supposed to receive a huge inheritance at the end of the summer, but only if she was married."
"Wow… talk about strings attached, huh?"

"Yeah, and Liam told me this morning that they’re going to be parents, actually."

"That’s great! I can’t wait to see what Leo’s like as a dad."

"He’ll probably be causing trouble with his kids as soon as they learn to walk."

"Yeah…” Savannah looked thoughtfully to the nursery, no doubt thinking what Bertrand would be like as a dad, or what his relationship with Bartie would be like… "Wait, ‘they’?"

"He’s having twins."

Savannah squealed gleefully. "I can’t wait to see that! Poor Leo’s gonna have his hands full with twins."

I shrugged. "Yeah, well…"

The silence lingered until we got back on track. "So, what else happened after I left?"

"Oh, you know… nothing much, until we went to New York before summer, threw Liam a bachelor party, met Myers… I thought Maxwell kept you updated?"

"He did, but enough about court stuff. I want to know what you’ve been doing."

"Well…” My time has been spent falling for my best friend’s girl and helping said girl find out who framed and humiliated her.

"Drake?"

"I haven’t been doing much, to be honest. I spent the social season on the sidelines, trying to help Liam and Myers the best I could, and now we’ve all been wrapped up in this investigation."

Savannah hummed appreciatively, as she slid all the veggies off the cutting board and into the pot. "That’s nice. Maxwell’s told me a lot about her.” She gave me this look, like she was trying to get a reaction out of me.

I tried my best to play it cool. "Like what?"

"Oh… not much… that she’s a writer, that she’s smart, caring…” She said nonchalantly, and I knew she was fishing for information.

"Yup, that’s Myers alright."

"You two seem close…”

"Uh… yeah, we’re friends."

Savannah nodded oh so slowly. "Friends… who… hold hands?"

“Uh… "It was just for support. Myers is like that."

"Uh huh…” Savannah gave me one of those looks. That look that said she knew I was full of shit, where her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. "Do you think I was born yesterday?"

"What? No!"
"Then why are you trying to act like you don't care about this girl?"

"I-- I'm not! I mean, I don't!"

Savannah sighed, exasperated. "Drake…"

"What?! I don't! We're friends!"

"Right… friends who hold hands, and look at each other with big wide twinkling eyes, and--"

"I do not look at her with twinkly eyes!"

"You do! And you smile so much around her. I've never seen you smile so much as I saw yesterday!"

"Uh… maybe because I found my sister, who I hadn't seen or heard from in a year?"

She clicked her tongue. "No… I don't think that's it. Besides, you're so relaxed around her. You never really let your guard down, but yesterday… you were just so relaxed!"

I rolled my eyes. "It's easier to be relaxed when you're away from court."

"Ugh, you are impossible! Fine, don't tell me, but I know you like that girl! I know it, and nothing you say will make me believe otherwise."

"Fine…" I stuck a fork in the sweet potato. "I think this is done."

"Oh, yeah… sure, change the subject."

"I'm serious! You don't want to overcook it! It'll get mushy."

After an exaggerated eye roll, Savannah said, "Fine." She scooped all the veggies and threw them in the food processor. As soon as that was done, Bartie cried out from the nursery. "Looks like Bartie's hungry! Can you serve this on one of the baby bowls while I go get him?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

I watched her go with a smile on my face, thinking how great it was to finally be a part of her life again.

After lunch at Savannah's, I made my way back to the train, to get some rest before the bachelor party tonight. I was halfway to my cabin when I heard Maxwell's voice.

"Drake! Hey, Drake!"

I groaned. "What?"

"There you are! I've been looking all over for you!"

"What do you want, Maxwell?"

He flinched at my tone, but didn't back down. "I got you something…"

"Oh, really? Is it another long lost relative hiding out somewhere?"

He lowered his gaze, and I didn't know if it was out of shame or hurt. "No… it's something for you
to wear tonight."

I rolled my eyes.

"I just… figured you wouldn't have something for the speakeasy tonight…" He mumbled.

My chest tightened a little bit at his dejected tone… I was still so angry about Savannah, so angry and betrayed and hurt that he knew and didn't tell me… but I couldn't just brush him off. I wasn't ready to forgive him, not yet, but I… I wouldn't be cruel, either. "Fine."

Maxwell's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes."

He nodded, trying to stop the smile from spreading across his face. "Okay. Thank you."

I followed him to the boutique car, where Maxwell walked straight to a garment bag hanging on a reserved rack. He pulled down the zipper and pulled out a simple, yet elegant, navy suit, hanging over a dark green dress shirt.

"I saw it, and immediately thought of you. And it was your size, too…"

I stepped closer, running my fingers over the suit. "It's…" I sighed. "It's great."

Maxwell grinned. "Try it on."

"I--"

"It's my treat." He cut me off before I could get another word out. "I know it doesn't make up for everything, but…"

I simply nodded. I was glad he knew a present wasn't going to fix everything, but… I appreciated the gesture nonetheless. I took the suit and slipped behind a curtain, putting it on. I looked at myself in the mirror, admitting to myself that it fit perfectly. I stepped out and Maxwell's eyes widened, his mouth breaking out into a huge grin.

"Don't!" I raised a finger, cutting him off before he could speak. "Just don't… exaggerate, okay?"

He nodded. "Okay… just… let me say the compliments will be rolling in."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Let's go get Myers. We have to leave soon."

"Yeah, you're right, let's go."

Maxwell began practically pulling me to Myers' car, but we were two step out into the hall when we bumped into her. "Milla! There you are!"

"Good afternoon to you, too."

"Oh, trust me, it's a very good one." Maxwell told her. He pushed me towards Myers, presenting me to her like a prized show dog or something. "Ta da! Look upon my masterpiece!"

Myers raised one elegant eyebrows, the corners of her lips curling into just a hint of a smile. "Drake… you look good."

"Pretty great, huh? Drake, I told you the compliments would be rolling in!"
I shook my head, feeling a tingle of warmth rush to my cheeks. "Yeah, yeah. Thanks for the suit."

"Only the best for my good buddy Drake! We… we're still buddies right?"

"Don't push it." I told him. He grimaced, but nodded.

"So is that the plan for tonight? Dazzle and distract everyone with Drake's new suit?"

"Ha ha. Actually, Maxwell will create a distraction for us while we confront Bastien." I looked at Maxwell pointedly.

He nodded vigorously. "Easy. Distraction is my middle name."

"Sound good?"

Myers nodded, biting her lip pensively. "I'm… thinking… maybe we should wait until the party's over to confront Bastien… Why risk breaking into the 'no girl zone' when we can find him afterwards?"

"Bastien doesn't have a lot of down time. After this event, he'll move on to start preparing for the next one. The bachelor party is our best chance to corner Bastien."

"So. Are we ready to go?"

I looked at Myers, who was wearing a simple black top and some jeans. "Wait a second. If I've got to get dressed up, shouldn't Myers have to put something frilly and sparkly on?"

Myers rolled her eyes good naturedly. "Well, I was going to, before you two showed up."

"Then we're just in time to get you ready to party!" Maxwell turned her around, with hands on her shoulders, and pushed her back towards the boutique.

I followed them, and waited by the doorway while Maxwell perused the dresses on the racks, presenting one to Myers ever so often. She would look at the dresses with narrowed eyes, biting her cheek or her lip, before slightly shaking her head. After a couple of dresses, Myers looked at me, "Any fashion advice?"

Maxwell apparently thought she was talking to him, so he answered distractedly, "Well, the bachelor party is going to be a classic speakeasy, so…" He gasped. "This is the one." He presented Myers with a frilly and sparkly, sleek black dress.

My eyes widened as I took it in, noticing it's plunging neckline, that was covered with a sheer, see-through fabric, and short hem. That dress would fit her skin tight. I gulped. "Maxwell, isn't that dress a little… uh… revealing?"

"Milla can pull it off!" He gave her the dress and she dutifully stepped behind the changing curtains. She stepped out and did a little twirl for us. "So… what do you guys think?"

My jaw fell to the floor.

"It's perfect!" Maxwell exclaimed.

I, on the other hand…. "It's really… uh… wow…"

Stop drooling, man!
Myers merely grinned at me. "Let's go, gentlemen!"

"Er. Yeah. Let's get out of here."

"Wooo!"

We made our way out of the train and into the limo. Maxwell made himself comfortable on one seat, and Myers sidled up next to me. Before long, we were pulling up to the security compound outside the building.

A suited King's Guard made his way up to our window, waiting patiently for us to put it down. "Okay, here comes the guard inspection. Be cool."

Maxwell rolled his eyes and put his feet up on the mini bar. "I never stop being cool." He said, linking his hands and placing them behind his neck.

I rolled my eyes, and rolled the window down, only to find Tanner outside of the car. He gave me a cordial nod, before looking pointedly at the invitation in my hands. I handed it to him with a nod.

He looked over the invitation, mostly as a formality, since he knew I'm Liam's best friend and obviously invited. But then, he turned his head slightly, his eyes narrowing at Myers.

She gave him a beaming smile, sliding closer to me and linking her arm through mine. "I'm with Drake." She said simply.

I couldn't help my eyes widening, looking from her to Tanner, to Maxwell -- both of whom were barely suppressing smirks. "Myers!"

She cleared her throat loudly, running her fingers through my hair, sending delicious chills down my spine. "Ahem! Isn't that right, baby?" Myers turned her smile on me, her brown eyes twinkling oh so mischievously, and planted a kiss on my cheek.

I could feel the blood tinting my cheeks. Of course, it didn't help that Maxwell was barely holding his laughter at my awkwardness, and Tanner was staring at us with this look that screamed "I knew it!".

"...R-right. Baby…"

Tanner snickered to himself, and I looked at Maxwell, who made himself busy with his phone, before turning to Myers.

I felt a bit proud that I could feel her shiver as I whispered into her ear, "Next time warn me if you're going to do something like that."

She pressed her forehead against mine. "You're cute when you're flustered."

"I…" I looked self-consciously at Maxwell, but he was looking away, trying to give us as much privacy as he could. "Have I told you that you don't play fair?"

Tanner cleared his throat and handed me back the invitation, motioning for the other guards to let us in. I rolled the window up, and we collectively let out a breath of relief.

"Smooth work, team." Maxwell and Myers winked at each other.

"I'm glad that worked." Myers said, her arm still wrapped around mine.
The limo rolled to a stop and Maxwell decided to get out first, and for me and Myers to wait in the car for a bit. "Agent Breakdance, breaching the perimeter."

I sighed. "That guy."

"Hey..." Myers squeezed my arm gently, "are you and Maxwell still getting along?"

"Mostly."

She grimaced. *Aw, damn..."Mostly?"

"He knew where Savannah was. He knew how worried I was about her. And he said nothing."

Myers sighed. "He was helping her. He thought he had to keep her secret."

I fought back the slight feeling of betrayal as she defended him. *Because she wasn't defending him.* Up until now, she hadn't said anything about me and Maxwell; no thoughts, opinions, nothing. And I knew she wasn't taking sides, nor pressuring me to forgive him. She was just stating the facts.

"I know. But it makes me sick to think about how everyday, he knew... he kept this from me... and he still acted like we were buddies."

"You are buddies." She took my chin sweetly. "Look, I know you feel betrayed right now, and you have every right to feel that way. I just... I want you to know I'm here for you... for whatever you need, whether it's to vent, or cry or... whatever. I'm here."

*I know. You've proved that to me 10 times over. "Thanks, Myers." It was strangely comforting to know that she wouldn't push me to forgive Maxwell, that she would just... let me take my time. "Anyway, I'll get over it. We've got more important things to do. Let's get inside."*

I moved to get out of the car, but she stopped me with a soft hand on my arm. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I couldn't help the grin that slowly spread out on my face. "Let me guess..." I turned, cupping her face, running my finger through her hair.

She arched her neck higher, parting her lips, looking at me through half lidded eyes. *God, those eyes... Those eyes stared back at me filled with anticipation, with desire, with lust.* I savored the moment, before leaning in ever so slowly, stopping just before our lips met.

Myers groaned. "You... are such a tease."

"Ha! Look who's talking." Before she could respond, I crashed my lips against her. She pulled me by the lapels of the new jacket, moving to straddle me. I ran my hands down her shoulders, her waist and settling them on her thighs.

"Mmm..." Myers moaned, absolutely driving me crazy. "Drake..." Her lips left mine, and she pulled my hair, hard, exposing my neck. She showered me with kisses, nibbling down my jaw, prompting a groan out of me.

"Myers..."

"Mm-hmm?"

"We... have... to... go." I said between kisses.
She groaned and sighed. "Fine." Myers gave me a final peck on the cheek and got off my lap. She began adjusting her dress, which had hiked up her legs during our…

"How do I look?"

_Honestly_? She looked so deliciously disheveled. I just grinned. "You might want to smooth your hair down a bit."

Myers winked, before turning to fix her hair, looking at her reflection in the tinted windows. After she was done, I opened the door and we made our way inside. The bar was dimly lit, with vintage decor, leather couches and chairs, and the smell of cigar smoke in the air.

"Wow…"

"Hey… you can join the party. I'll take it from here." I turned to Myers, who was staring at me with a tender grin on her face. "I'm serious. Bastien can't be that hard to find."

"No, helping you is more important than some party. Besides, I need to hear what Bastien has to say, too… But… wouldn't it help us blend in if I got us a couple glasses of whisky?"

"Of course." She grinned indulgently.

I grabbed two tumblers from a passing waiter, and handed one to Myers. The whisky was silky smooth as it made its way down my throat, leaving a pleasant warmth in my chest. "I think this whiskey is older than I am. And probably costs more than anything I own." I looked to Myers, who took a sip and closed her eyes. "What do you think?"

"It's amazing!"

"Enjoy it. Whiskey like this comes once in a lifetime."

We smiled at each other, before Myers tore her eyes away from mine. I followed her gaze around the room, only for it to land on Maxwell, who was chatting away, eating a steak. I rolled my eyes. "There he is. I'll go remind Agent Breakdance he has a job to do."

I walked to where Maxwell was and put a hand on his shoulder. His eyes widened, "Oh! Right!"

I walked towards the bar, motioning me to follow. "What are you doing?!" I whispered harshly.

"I had to blend in! You can't just come in and set up a distraction! You have to spend some time blending in first!"

I rubbed my face. _Deep breaths, Drake, deep breaths_. "Okay… well, now that you've blended in, could you get this show on the road please?"

He nodded. "I'm on it."

I motioned Myers to come join me, unsurprised to see Liam had already found her. She smiled and said her goodbyes, before walking over. Maxwell walked to the center of the room, jumping on a table and calling for everyone's attention. He began a ridiculous speech, supposedly in honor of Liam.

After thanking his tailor for his underwear, Myers stifled a laugh. "That's an interesting way to toast."

"He's giving it his all." I smiled at her, and from the corner of my eyes I saw Bastien walking towards us. I tensed immediately, frowning as he gently placed a hand on her shoulder, and
motioning us to follow him.

When we were in a more secluded corner, he stopped and crossed his arms. "Drake, I see you've brought a security breach with you. I know you two are close, but I'm afraid Lady Camilla will have to leave."

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Was that really necessary? 'You two are close'?*

Myers looked at him coolly. "We need to talk to you."

"I'm afraid it's leave or I'll escort you out. Talking isn't an option."

_Ugh, why was he being such an ass?!_ I didn't know if I was taking this too personally, or if he really was being a total ass to Myers. "We mean *talk.*" I glared at him.

"Drake, I'll escort you out too, if I have to."

Myers stepped in front of me. "Bastien, we're conducting an investigation."

"I've heard a few things from Drake, but understand that I can't permit Camilla on the premises. The bachelor party has rules."

"You're the one we're investigating." Myers told him point blank.

"Now-- I'm sorry, what?" Bastien turned to me, shock written all over his face.

It only made me angrier. He was also playing dumb, lying straight to my face when he _knew_ how I felt about Myers! "We know you were the one who paid Penelope to sabotage Camilla. I bet you were behind Olivia leaving court, too."

I saw his eyes flicker with a hint of hesitation. "This isn't the time or place for games."

"Penelope confessed. There's no reason to play dumb."

"I'm a servant of the crown. Why would I care who Liam chooses?"

"That's what we want to know." Myers told him.

"I keep asking myself why you'd do something like this, and it doesn't make any sense, unless… someone else is involved. Someone threatened you, or something. "Someone else must've had a hand in it. I want to know who."

Bastien very visibly flinched at that. _I knew it! I was onto something here! _"Drake, you don't want to do this."

I softened at that. "Please, help us out here. I know… I know you're a good guy. You wouldn't--" *hurt someone I care about…"

"Dammit, Drake, I can't!" He whispered harshly.

Myers put a gentle hand on my arm. "Okay! Bastien, I'll go."

"We'll both go."

"Drake… I'm sorry. I didn't want… This wasn't personal. I swear."
"So many apologies." "It feels pretty damn personal from where I'm standing."

We faced off for one brief second, when I hear a raspy, indignant voice from behind me, oozing contempt. "I step out for ten minutes and come back to chaos." Bertrand Beaumont. "What is the meaning of this prolonged disturbance? Lady Camilla?"

"Oh, no..." Myers whispered, both of us turning around to face him.

I saw red. "You." I walked straight up to him, getting in his face. "I found my sister."

I saw as shock, disbelief and longing crossed swiftly through Bertrand's face. "Lady Savannah?" He quickly clears his throat, trying to play it cool once more. "That's splendid news. She is well, yes?"

"Like you'd care."

"We all do. Her disappearance was quite a mystery."

"She told me everything that happened between you two."

Bertrand's jaw fell. "I..."

"She was in love with you!" I yelled it as an accusation. "How could you let her leave with her heart broken?"

"I tried to reach her, but she disappeared from everyone, including me." Bertrand said, genuinely upset. "Of course, right now I couldn't give two fucks about whether or not he was upset."

"Not everyone. Maxwell knew."

"He... what?" Bertrand turned on Maxwell, who was already trying to sneak away. "Maxwell Percival Beaumont! Tell me this man is lying!"

"Er... well..." Maxwell flustered.

"Maxwell actually had the heart to support her, which is more than you ever did!" I told Bertrand.

"How?"

"Well, you know my 'excessive spending habits'? Well, I'd send most of it to her."

"I knew it! You didn't really purchase a dozen peacocks!"

Wait, what? Why would you need a dozen peacocks?"

"Well, the peacocks really did happen, but that was a one time thing. Everything else was made up. The jet skis, the expensive wines... I'd hide the cash in our study until it was time to send it off."

Maxwell explained.

"Now you know where that extra money was going." I glared at Bertrand.

He had the good sense to step back, worry filling his eyes. "I didn't know she was in distress... what happened?"

"I don't know, maybe she needed help raising your kid!" I yelled. Instantly, the room became so quiet you could hear a pin drop. I knew, deep down, that I'd just fucked up, not because of yelling it in front of the whole court, but because I'd told Bertrand. Savannah is going to kill me.
Bertrand looked as if he'd been hit. "A… a child…? When did…? Savannah was pregnant? I didn't know! You have to believe me, I didn't know!"

*Of course you didn't, you pretentious, opportunistic, self centered dick! You didn't even let her speak when she went over to tell you! "Savannah told me you have her a nice long speech about how you two could never be together!"

"You don't understand…" Bertrand shook his head, "The last time I saw her… What I said… She misunderstood."

*She misunderstood?*

*SHE MISUNDERSTOOD?!*

I heard Myers groan. "Fuck…"

"Don't give me that bullshit!" I was so angry, so worked up, I grabbed him by the collar.

"Unhand me!"

"You broke my sister's heart!" I shook him. "You nobles think you can just play with us commoners and throw us away when you're done! Well this time you're going to have to answer for it!" I cocked my fist, already aiming for his face, when…

"Stop!" Maxwell jumped in front of Bertrand.

"Out of the way."

"Guys, stop!" I heard Myers yell. She stepped between us, pushing me gently back, making me release Bertrand. "Drake… look at me." She said, ever so softly. I did. "Is this what Savannah would want?" She turned back, glaring at Bertrand. "All of you fighting each other?"

I grimaced. Savannah would definitely *not* want this. She ran away from court to hide her pregnancy and Bartie, and two days after I found her, I'd gone and let her secret out anyway.

"No…" Maxwell mumbled.

Bastien *finally* stepped up. "That's enough. All of you out!"

I rolled my eyes. *Took you long enough.*

Bertrand had the indecency to smile. "Thank you, Bastien. It's about time you restored order around here."

Bastien turned his glare on him. "Including you."

"What? I've done nothing wrong!"

"This incident has already caused enough of a disturbance. Do you really need to embarrass yourself further in front of half the court?"

"I… No. Come, Maxwell. We're leaving."

"I'll, uh… catch up with you guys later." Maxwell told us dejectedly.

I shook my head. "Come on, let's go." I told Myers, walking away without looking back.
I walked straight to the limo, with Myers' heels clacking softly in the concrete, the only sound in the cool night air. I opened the door and climbed in. "Damn, Myers… I'm sorry. I was such an idiot."

"Hey…" She moved closer to me, reaching out to wrap her arms around my neck. I leaned into the embrace. "It's been a rough few days."

I sighed. "That doesn't excuse what happened."

"No, but I can understand how you're feeling."

"Thanks…" I looked out the window, thinking about how it really had been an awful few days. We found out so much, from Bertrand and the photos, to my sister, to Bastien being the one who paid Penelope… "First the Beaumonts, now Bastien… Can we trust anyone here?"

What next? Hana going behind our backs? Liam? Everyone I'd ever considered important and like, maybe, I could trust? Is this what politics is? What court and palace life does to people?

I felt my chest tighten, my breaths coming in shorter and shorter. "I need to get away… away from this two-faced world and all its lies…"

I turned to Myers, who was looking at me with wide, frightened eyes. "Where are you going to go?" She asked timidly.

It did something to me, to see her so scared and worried about me. To see that, maybe, she would actually miss me if I left this god awful place. I moved to cup the back of her neck, pulling her face against my chest. She wrapped her arms around my torso, and I kissed the top of her head. "Not like that, Myers… I'm not leaving until we've found a way out of this mess." She relaxed in my arms almost instantly. "I meant I saw this dive bar on the way over that should have plenty of drinks and zero nobles."

She let out a small laugh, relieved. "Count me in. A dive bar sounds like a perfect cure for all this drama."

"Really?" My lips quirked up in a small attempt of a smile. She looked up at me and nodded. "Then let's get out of here."

We gave the limo driver the directions, and a few minutes later, we walked into the bar. It was dingy, and dimly lit, its patrons rough looking. "Now this is more like it."

"I didn't expect an American theme in Paris." Myers told me.

I shrugged. "Hey, I'll take it. First round's on me."

"You mean you didn't pick this place just for the ambiance?"

"Hah." I took her hand and led her to a booth, way in the back. She slid into it, and I made my way back to the bar.

The bartender raised an eyebrow, and made his way over to me. "Qu'est-ce qu'il serait?"

I pointed to a bottle of Johnnie Walker Platinum on the top shelf. He nodded once, handing me the bottle and gesturing to the glasses. "Combien de verres?"

I gestured "two" with my fingers. He nodded once more and handed me the bottle and two tumblers. I walked back to our booth, placing the bottle in the center of the table, and a tumbler in front of
Myers. "Here you go."

I filled her glass up to two fingers, and she smiled gratefully before taking a drink. "Easier than ordering pasta in Italian?"

I rolled my eyes, blushing slightly as I scooched in the booth next to her. "Hey, drinks are an even more universal language than food. Just point at what you want and they'll pour it."

Myers nodded, looking around. "How on earth did you spot this place? I didn't even see it when we drove to the speakeasy."

"It's a gift. Drop me in any country and I can find you a dive bar."

"Did you learn that on more solo expeditions while Liam was stuck in fancy parties?"

"I've gotten used to being on my own."

"Aww, sounds lonely. I wish I could've been there to keep you company." She squeezed my hand, sliding closer to me and laying her head on my shoulder.

I chuckled. "You know what? Me too."

"Well, I'm here now and you're going to have a hard time getting rid of me."

"Get rid of you, Myers? Never." I turned my head and met her eyes. They were shining with emotion, with… it was almost like adoration, and I had to look away.

"So… should we talk about what happened back there? I'm sorry we never really had a chance to talk about everything after we left Savannah's place. Judging from what happened with Bertrand, I guess you've been thinking about it."

"Believe me, I wish I could stop thinking about it. I've worried about Savannah every single day since she ran away. I never stopped looking for her. I don't know what's worse, that Maxwell knew and didn't tell me, or the fact that my own sister didn't want me to find her."

"Hey… He was just trying to respect her wishes. I know it sucks but it was what she asked him to do. He was trying to protect her. Isn't that what you would have done in his shoes?"

"Maybe you're right. I just hate the fact that she thought she needed protecting from me. I know I'm not the easiest person to get along with… but I like to think I could've been there for her in some way. After tonight, I'm starting to think I can't trust anyone."

"Oh, Drake, I know Bastien was like family to you."

"Yeah… It wasn't just that he was around for us when we were kids. When my dad died… Bastien was the one who looked out for us. He drove us to the funeral. Told us old stories about Dad."

"I'm so sorry."

"Me too, Myers, me too. I learned a long time ago that I couldn't trust any nobles, but at least we had Bastien looking out for us from the inside. And now… I thought I knew him. Now he's involved in the plot against you, Maxwell helped hide Savannah from me, and Bertrand's a father."

"Drake, I don't think they meant to hurt you." I clicked my tongue. "Hey, I know this is hard, but I'm here for you. You can count on that, no matter what else happens."
I looked at her. I was almost too scared to ask, but... "You mean it, Myers?"

"I promise. Why do you think I'm here?"

Her eyes were filled with genuine affection and honesty. I knew then this woman would never lie to me, never betray me, never purposely hurt me... I swallowed, my heart swelling in my chest, the feeling so strong it seemed to drown out everything else but the beautiful woman in front of me.

"You..." Just say it. Tell her. "You mean a lot to me, Myers. I'm glad you're still on my side, at least."

Coward.

She chuckled. "Someone has to be. Besides, I wasn't going to let you spend tonight moping by yourself. I officially declare all courtly drama off limits until tomorrow. This is a dive bar, and we are not going to let it go to waste!"

I laughed. "Does that mean... more drinks?"

"Very much so. And it means it's time for... a drinking game!"

"Oh boy."

"You don't even know what game it is yet!"

"I have a feeling you're about to tell me."

"This one's called Never Have I Ever. You say something you've never done, and if the other person has done it..."

"They take a drink?"

"See? You're a natural. Whoever's had the least drink after three rounds wins!"

"I don't know about this... Are you sure you want to go up against me in a drinking game?"

She raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like a challenge." Oh boy... "And I accept!"

Myers never could back down from a challenge. "It wasn't... no. Nevermind. You're on, Myers." She grinned wickedly at me. "Alright, it's your game so you get to start." I refilled both of our glasses.

"I guess I'd better make this first question count. Never have I ever... been a prince's handsome best friend."

"Hey! There's more to me than being Liam's best friend."

"So you admit that you're handsome?"

"You..." Ah... I see what she did there. "I... I don't even know how to respond to that."

"By being flattered." She pressed a kiss to my cheek. "And taking a drink!"

I took a drink, trying to think what I've never done that she could've... "Never have I ever... been set up with someone." Women always liked to set their girlfriends up with guys they knew.
"Really? You haven't?" Bingo. The look of shock on her face was all I needed to know.

"Not even once."

"I guess Maxwell and Liam aren't the kind of friends who go setting you up, huh?"

"They've usually got their own things going on. Drink up." She did. "One to one. That's more like it."

"Not for long! Never have I ever… imagined someone in this room naked!"

My jaw dropped, as the blush spread to my cheeks.

"Yes?" Myers looked extremely pleased with herself.

I merely stared at her, taking a long drink. "You never go easy on me, do you, Myers?"

"Never."

"Don't look so smug. How do you know that this has anything to do with you? Maybe I'm thinking of the bartender."

She glanced back at the bar. "I guess I'll never really know."

"Exactly." I cleared my throat, refilling our glasses. "Now it's my turn. Never have I ever…" If she wasn't going to play fair, neither was I. "Taken advantage of a barn raising to stare at someone with their shirt off."

"Hey!" Myers blushed furiously.

"Am I wrong?"

She rolled her eyes. "You know, you could've kept your shirt on that day."

"Maybe I wanted you to look."

Myers shook her head, trying to hide a smile behind her drink. I leaned back in my chair victoriously.

"Don't get too comfortable. We've still got one more round!"

"You're on." I refilled our glasses once more. "Alright, Myers, let's see what you've got."

"Never have I ever… had a scandalous dream of the two of us in bed together!"

"You really play for keeps, Myers. I'm kind of impressed."

"A rare compliment from Drake Walker. And the answer?"

I locked eyes with her, neither of us backing down. With her eyes on mine, I drank. Her smile was downright sinful, lust and wanton and desire clear in her eyes. If we were alone…

"I knew it."

"Don't get too cocky. I still have one chance left."

"Final shot."
"Never have I ever…" Okay, this had to be something I was absolutely sure she had done. I couldn't ask the same question as her, even though I was sure she wants me as much I want her. Something… that Myers would have definitely done… okay… she's a girl… from New York… that's it! "Eaten a deep dish pizza." New Yorkers are famous for their pizzas.

"Nice try, but that makes two of us."

"What? You gotta be honest with me, Myers."

"I am! You're talking to a New Yorker, remember?" Yeah! "Deep dish is a Chicago thing."

Chicago! I mentally facepalmed myself. "Let me guess. There are no do overs in this game."

"Nope. You have to live with your mistakes."

Alright. That brings the score to… Three points to two. Looks like you've won this one, Myers."

"That's it? You aren't going to give me a hard time?"

"Not right now, anyways. You were right. This was way less terrible than thinking about everything back at court."

"So what did I win?"

"Win? I didn't know we were playing for stakes."

"House rules. You owe me something. The stakes are… a promise that you'll stop beating yourself up over Savannah."

I sighed. "That's a lot to ask, Myers."

"I know. But you can't change the past, Drake. You can't take back the time you and Savannah spent apart. All you can do is be there for her now, however much she wants you to be."

I stared into the bottom of my now empty glass. "You're right. I'll try no to let my feelings get in the way of supporting my sister."

"Good. And the other stakes are… a kiss."

I looked up to her then. "Myers… are you sure about this? I am such a wreck right now…"

"I don't want you to do anything you don't want. But after tonight and everything that's happened, I…"

I pulled her chin up, our lips meeting in a passionate kiss filled with longing. Myers ran her fingers through my hair, her nails raking my scalp, leaving behind delicious chills. I cupped her neck, with my other hand on her waist, tracing the lines of her body. She moaned quietly, pulling me closer. When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathless. Myers smiled, her eyes still closed, and sighed. "You don't make this easy, Myers."

She grinned. "I dunno. I felt pretty easy to me."

"Very funny. I meant trying to control how I feel about you. I can't." I… am so screwed. I'm head over heels for this woman.

"Is that such a bad thing?"
"I don't know." I reached out to pull a strand of hair away from her face. *I've never been here before. I've never felt this way before... with anyone.* "I'd be lying if I said I regretted it, though."

She pressed her forehead to mine. "So would I."

We broke apart when the bartender came to our booth and picked up our glasses. He left quickly to the bar, and we looked around and realized it was empty. *God, what time was it?*

"He probably wants to close up."

"Yeah, we should get going." Myers began to move, but I placed a hand on hers. "I just wanted to say... thanks. For coming with me. I'm glad I didn't end up drinking alone tonight."

"Drake..." her eyes softened, "you have to know how much I care about you. I could never leave you to deal with all of this alone. You're important to me."

"I won't pretend to understand why. But I'm glad." I took her in, this beautiful, caring, intelligent woman, who for some reason, decided I was worth something, decided to care about me.

*I... think I love you, Camilla Myers.*

I forced myself to look away, as the sheer truth of those words shook me to my core. I fought against the terror and fear that threatened to get the best of me, clamping down those emotions and locking them away. I chanced another look at Myers, who was patiently waiting by my side. "We should get going, or we'll both be asleep on our feet tomorrow."

"I think you're right." She took my hand, and we walked back to the train.

The wind began to pick up, and it was getting chilly. Myers shivered. Without a word, I took off my jacket, placing it on her shoulders.

"Won't you be cold?" Myers asked me.

I shook my head. "Nah."

"Okay... thank you." She said, blushing. She slipped her arms through the sleeves, and I buttoned her up. She looked so funny and cute in my jacket, that was about two sizes bigger than her, but she also looked warm and content.

With a smile on her face, Myers slipped her arm around my waist, and I placed mine over her shoulders.

And just like that, everything felt alright in the world.

After walking Myers back to her car, I still wasn't tired, and I didn't want to head back to my shared suite with Maxwell, so I decided to go back to the pool hall at the hotel. Once I got there, the guard simply nodded at me and let me in. As I played a solo game of 8 ball, I got to thinking. There was something that was still bothering me, something that didn't add up. *Why would Bastien willingly sabotage Myers?*

I refused to believe it was because of how I felt. He was like an uncle, and he loved me, but I knew he would never stoop so low as to do such a thing so that she wouldn't marry Liam, and *I'd* get the girl. No... besides, *that* would be personal. 'It wasn't personal', he said.

*It wasn't personal... So it was... what? Come on, think!*
I thought back to that night in the kitchen, so long ago. "She's here for Liam. I don't want to see you get hurt."

Then the week before the Coronation:

"She's going to marry Liam." I said.

"You don't know that." He responded. "I'm sorry, Drake."

And then during the Coronation:

"Drake… I really am sorry."

He kept apologizing, over and over again, and I now realized it was because he knew what would happen. And he apologized time and time again. Because he didn't want to do it.

Because someone made him do it. Someone who was above him, someone who was powerful, someone who had their own reasons to want Myers and Olivia out of the running.

I thought back to when we were kids… to how awful Constantine treated Olivia. I thought back to when Myers arrived, and Regina looked her over as if she was nothing, nobody…

Holy shit.

It wasn't Bastien. He was just following orders.

It was the King and Queen.
Okay, three things! First of all, I took a moment in this chapter to show some vulnerability from MC -- you'll see it in this first part of this chapter. I did this because, even though I loved the book's MC's badass New Yorker personality, I feel like she's way too… invincible, I guess? I mean, throughout the series, she faced a conspiracy plot designed by the most powerful authority in the country and an assassination attempt, and she did it all with a big smile on her face. Now, I'm all for positivity in hard times, but I wanted to show that, at least my MC Milla… is a human being, who can cry, and feel fear, and bitch and moan -- at least with those close to her, those she knows she can trust.

Second of all, you'll see another mention of a one of my favorite Choices book. Because of the way I used it though, I'll once again say: I own and wrote nothing; Pixelberry owns everything.

Tbird of all, and this is the last thing, I promise… I was watching the Princess Diaries the other day -- don't laugh if this was something everyone knew already! -- and I realized that Cordonia is basically based on Genovia! I mean, a small country with different geographical landscapes and a tiny obsession for their national fruit? Even the names are similar! Genovia! Cordonia! Anyway, since this chapter will feature the infamous tea party scene, the anthem sung here by the boys is from the Princess Diaries. I tried writing an anthem myself, but it sucked, so… I used Genovia's national anthem.

With aaaaaaaaaall of that said, here's the chapter! Enjoy!

I woke up the next morning with a start, after a completely shitty night of sleep. After figuring out that the King and/or Queen could be behind this plot against Myers, I couldn't sleep, imagining all the different scenarios where Myers could get hurt. And when I finally did sleep, I had horrible nightmares, of Myers being assassinated, shot, poisoned, everything.

Coffee. I needed coffee, and… I needed to see her. I got dressed, and went to the diner car. I poured myself a cup of coffee and some tea for Myers, and got us both bagels. With food in hand, I went ahead and practically pounded on the door of her suite.

Chase barked from inside, until Myers finally opened the door. "Drake?"

I stepped inside, looking around before shutting the door, making sure no one saw. "Myers, I had a realization." God, I really hope I don't sound paranoid. "There's a very short list of people Bastien would feel compelled to obey, no matter what the order."

I handed her her tea. She took it with a grateful nod. "What are you suggesting?"

I took a sip of my black coffee. It was hot and bitter and just the thing I needed to clear my head. "This runs all the way to the top. We need to investigate the former king and queen."

Myers couldn't hide the fear from her eyes, but she tried to play it cool. "Drake… they're still
powerful royalty. How do we question them?"

"I checked the itinerary. You're due for a tea party with Queen Mother Regina tomorrow. That's as good a place as any."

"What if it is her? Then what do we do? She's still a powerful woman. How can I stand a chance against her?"

"You'll have me…" I took her hand and squeezed. "And, more importantly, Liam. We'll figure something out. He's the King now." I placed both hands on her shoulders. "You just have to be careful, Camilla. If the former king and queen are involved… than you are in more danger than ever."

Myers began pacing around the room until suddenly, she dropped her tea. "Shit!" She crouched down to pick up the paper cup that still held some tea. I left my coffee on the table and moved to help her.

"Can you hand me a towel, please? It's inside that side pocket in my bag."

I opened her suitcase, and found a small towel. I handed it to her, and she placed it over where the tea spilled. "Thank you."

"Are you okay?"

"Well… you just told me it was either the King or the Queen of Cordonia, or maybe both who set me up and, to top it off, that I might be in life threatening danger, so…" She looked at me with wide eyes. "I'm… I'm scared, Drake."

I am too. "Come here." I wrapped my arms around her in a hug. She let out a shuddering breath, holding me tight. Chase whined as he cuddled into her ankle. "Myers… I'm here for you. Liam, Hana and Maxwell, we're all here for you. We'll keep you safe. Nothing, Myers I swear nothing will happen to you as long as I'm around."

Myers nodded into my chest, once again releasing another shuddering breath. She began shaking slightly, and I could tell she was trying extremely hard not to cry.

And then I felt it. One small drop of moisture falling onto my chest. Then another… and another. I held her tighter, running my hand through her hair. She sniffled, wrapping her arms around my waist. "Myers," I cupped her neck with both hands, lifting her face to mine, "I'm here. Believe me when I say I'll protect you." A single tear streaked down her cheek, and I brushed it away with my thumb. "I will never let anything happen to you, Myers. Ever. Okay?"

Her shimmering, red rimmed eyes met mine, fear intermingling with trust and affection. I kept wiping her tears away with my thumbs, until finally she nodded. "Okay. I trust you with my life, Drake, quite literally it seems." Her lips quirked into a small smile, and I moved in to meet them with mine. The kiss was calming and sweet, meant to soothe, not stir, and soon, we pulled away.

I took her hands and walked her to her bed. "Sit down. I'll get breakfast." I got the bagels I'd brought and handed her the bag of warm bread. I reached into the paper bag, and handed her a small package of cream cheese.

"Thank you."

"Better?" I handed her cup back to her.
Myers took a large sip, and nodded. "Better. I'm, uh…" she fidgeted with her hands over her face, "really sorry about that. I'm, uh… feeling pretty embarrassed right now."

"Don't be. Myers…you have every right to be afraid. And you really don't need to apologize for feeling scared or overwhelmed. At least, not with me…"

"So you don't mind if I ugly cry?"

I laughed. I honestly didn't think she could actually ugly cry. But if she did… "Not at all."

Myers nodded, taking a deep breath and letting it out with a whoosh. She placed her elbows on her knees, bringing her head down to rest on her hands.

"You need a distraction right now." I told her. "Do the Beaumonts or Justin have anything on your schedule today?"

"No, thankfully. I'm actually free today."

"Well, let's do something! Let's go out, sightsee, hang out with the guy--"

"Drake…" Myers cut me off softly, "I just… want to lay low today."

"Oh… okay. I'll, uh… get out of your way then."

"No! I didn't mean it like that! What I meant was… could we just hang out here?"

I couldn't help the grin that broke out in my face. "Yeah. Yeah, let's do that. What do you want to do?"

Myers laughed. "I don't care. Let's just talk."

Or… "We could watch a movie…" I thought back to that night in Applewood, remembering she liked to watch one particular movie when she was feeling down, "I think Pitch Perfect's on Netflix."

Myers raised her eyebrows, her jaw practically falling to the floor. "You want to watch Pitch Perfect?"

"Yeah… I'd watch just about anything for you, Myers."

Myers' lips quirked upwards into the hint of a smile. "Okay…" She shrugged. "Just figured such a buff, manly man wouldn't like musical romantic comedies."

Now it was my turn to shrug, trying to play it cool. "Hey, it's got music, it's got comedy, and it's got romance. What's not to like?"

Myers laughed, and popped the movie on her computer. For the next three hours, we proceeded to relax and watch the movie and its sequel, just enjoying each other's company. She snuggled closer to me, resting her head on my shoulder. I rested my head on hers and twined our fingers. A sense of tranquility seemed to settle over the room, a sense of comfort, of… home. Here we were, laying on her bed, not doing anything… just watching a movie, talking quietly, with her head on my chest and my arms around her. And it felt so normal… Not just "normal" as in "what every normal couple does on a lazy afternoon", but as in "something Myers and I do as a normal couple on a lazy afternoon" -- or morning, in this case.

Soon, the movies were over, and Myers closed her laptop, and we were left just… snuggling on her bed.
This would actually be a great chance to ask her about her writing…

"Hey, Myers?"

"Hmm…?"

"Have you written anything lately?"

She raised her eyebrows at the question.

"It's just… I haven't seen you do it in a while."

"Um… honestly, no, not really. I've tried, but since we left Cordonia… let's just say there hasn't been much time."

"Yeah, no, I get it. What about your journal?"

"Oh, that's different. The journal's practically a habit by now. I write in it every night without fail."

"Okay… good." I sat there awkwardly for a while, trying to figure out how to ask this. "So… um, other than your journal… what have you written?"

Myers laid back down on the bed, propping up her elbow to support her head. Chase hopped on the bed and curled against her chest. Myers patted him absently. "Well… I wrote a bunch of essays for my classes at NYU, poems -- not my forte --" She grimaced, "some short stories -- definitely my forte -- and a short novel for my thesis."

"Wait, you wrote a book?"

"Uh… yeah. It got picked up by a small publishing house in New York. Not exactly on the bestseller list, but you know… it's something."

"Myers! You're telling me… you're a published author?"

"Yeah… but I mean, it's not a big deal or anything. I still have a lot to learn, and I'm not exactly an established or famous author."

"But still! You wrote a book! You should be proud of yourself." She blushed. "Do you have it with you?"

Myers rolled her eyes. "Why, you wanna read it?" She said, sarcasm oozing from her tone.

"I do."

Myers looked at me for one long moment. "You're serious…"

"Why wouldn't I be?" I shrugged. "I… I like you, Myers, and writing's such an important part of your life… I'd like to get to know that part of you too."

"Okay… give me a second." She sprung from the bed and reached inside her suitcase. She took out a small book, clutching it to her chest. "Okay… so I wrote this when I was twenty one, and I've grown a lot as a writer since then… so don't judge me too hard for it, okay?"

I scoffed. "Are you serious? Myers, if your book was good enough to be published, I'm sure it'll be good enough for me."
Myers looked at me timidly, before slowly handing me the book. It was a simple paperback with a lighthouse on the cover, titled *Veil of Secrets*, with her name on the bottom of the cover. I turned it around to find a small summary.

*Ever jaded reporter Jesse Stein doesn't believe in romance. A hardened, serious reporter, Jesse's devoted to finding the truth in any and every situation. When she comes to Birchport for her best friend's wedding, she's thrust into the story of her life as her best friend mysteriously disappears, and her fiance's family gets taken out one by one. As she tries to solve the mystery and stay alive, Jesse will learn that things in Birchport aren't always what they seem, and that in this town, everybody has a secret.*

"Wow…"

Myers rolled her eyes. "You haven't even read it yet."

"But… I'm interested. Definitely interested. A serial crime drama?"

"What did you expect, romance and erotic novels?"

"No… but I gotta admit, I didn't peg you for a crime drama girl. I mean, your favorite books are *Pride and Prejudice* and *Me Before You* …"

"Yeah… but this was my thesis. I didn't want to go my typical route, I wanted more. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do something other than romance and angst…"

I skimmed the book, fanning its pages. "Well, looks like you did it."

"So…" she nodded, her lips pressed together, "give it a go later, and tell me what you think."

"Actually… I'm going to crack this puppy open right now."

"W-what?! Why?"

"You said you wanted to lay low today, and it's been a long time since I've gotten the chance to relax, just me and a good book." I laid down on her bed. "I'll tell you what, since you wanted to hang out here today, this is what we'll do: I'm going to read your book, and you're going to write… whatever it was you were working on before."

"But I--"

"No buts, Myers. You were working on something before we left Cordonia. I don't want you to quit writing because of this mess, and you just so happen to have a free day! Use it. Okay?"

A slow, cat like grin slowly spread on Myers' face. "Okay." I made myself comfortable on her bed, and after getting her laptop and headphones, so did she. "Do you mind if I…" She raised her headphones.

I shook my head. "Not at all. I read better when it's quiet."

Myers nodded and put them on. She sat next to me on the bed, and turned on her laptop. After opening up her last document, she began typing away. I couldn't help the grin on my face, happy to finally see her completely in her element.

And with that in mind, I opened the book.

*Chapter One: Missing Persons*
She sat in a cold metal chair in a police interrogation room, watching the minutes tick by on the clock…

The book was actually pretty good, and Myers wrote the characters and descriptions beautifully. I found myself becoming engrossed in the small town of Birchport, and the rest of the morning was spent in companionable silence.

"Wow, that Scarlett woman's a real bitch. If I'd known you back then, I'd have asked if she was inspired by Olivia."

Myers chuckled and shook her head.

I found myself burning through the first two chapters quickly, the book being quick and to the point with its conflict.

"Ugh… Birchport's high society is not much different than court. And that guy Walsh? Totally in the Sterlings' pockets."

Myers merely smiled and resumed writing.

I didn't even realize it was time for lunch, until Hana knocked at our door. I mean, Myers' door. Myers closed her laptop and I dog-eared the page I was on.

"Hi, Milla," Hana's eyes widened as she saw me, "and Drake! Hello!" She gave Myers a pointed look and a pleased smile. "Well, I was wondering if you wanted to get lunch with Maxwell and I, but I can see you already have company!"

"Oh, but we can still get lunch with you gu--"

"No need! I can see you are both very busy, so I shan't disturb you any longer!"

"But Hana--"

"Bye!" She quickly closed the door and walked away. Myers turned to me and we both burst into laughter.

"So… should we get some lunch?" Myers asked.

"That depends…" I told her, "Are you hungry?"

"Not really…" She shrugged.

"Then, no. I wanna find out what happens with Kate."

Myers laughed at that. "Oh, come on! It's not that good…"

"It really is. I like it and it's got me hooked."

Myers rolled her eyes and grinned, and I didn't miss her light blush. "Fine. I'm on a roll anyway." She laid back on the bed, and I laid next to her, both of us returning to our tasks.

"Eww, who gave Kate the nanny cam?"

Myers smiled. "Keep reading."

Later, I had just reached the end of the fourth chapter -- "Myers! You killed Tanner off in the fourth
"Hello?"

"Drake?!!"

"Hey Savannah!" I said happily.

"You told Bertrand?!!"

Oh… shit… I looked to Myers, who took off her headphones, worry in her eyes. "Hey, who is it?"

"It's Savannah."

Who was still yelling into the phone… "...and you go ahead and do the one thing I asked you not to! I can't believe you!"

I sighed. "I'm sorry, sis, okay? Really…"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I heard a sigh. "I know… can you just… tell me what happened? And the reason as to why Bertrand was outside my door this morning?"

"Bertrand went to your apartment this morning?"

"Drake…" Savannah growled.

"Okay, I'm sorry. So… you know how we were going to help Myers crash the bachelor party to confront Bastien?"

"Mm-hmm…"

"Well, things with Bastien didn't really go well, and then Bertrand got involved and I just…"

"Saw red?"

"...Yeah."

"Drake…"

"I'm sorry! I really am, sis, but… when I saw him I just got so angry, and I just… blew up."

"And you told him everything…"

"Yeah…" I sighed, rubbing my face, "I'm sorry, sis… I just got so upset when I saw him. I swear if Myers wasn't there, I would've beaten the crap out of him."

"Drake…"

"I'm sorry, Savannah… but you can't expect me to not hate him right now… he's the reason you left…"

There was a moment of silence on the other line. "Okay… I forgive you…"

I breathed out a sigh of relief. "Thank you… So… Bertrand went to your place, huh?"

"Yeah…"
"Are you okay?"
"I'm... I will be."
"Wanna tell me what happened?"
"Well..."

She proceeded to tell me how Bertrand had come to "declare his intentions" but when he went inside, he totally choked and opted for giving her his financial support instead. And then he proceeded to insult her, telling her that she "clearly needed his help". That's when Savannah got mad and asked him to leave.

"Aw... I'm sorry, sis."

"That's okay... to be honest, after you showed up at my door, I kind of figured he would too. I guess I couldn't hide out forever... I had to face him at some point..."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know yet. I'll stay here for now, since Bertrand will apparently keep helping me with the rent and stuff... I don't know if I'm ready to go back to Cordonia yet."

A part of me wanted to try to convince her to come back, that we could get an apartment together in the city, away from court and the palace... But the other part of me knew I had just found her, and I shouldn't push her into anything she wasn't ready for. I had to give her time and respect her decisions.

"Okay... well, I'll be here for whatever you decide."

"I... know that now. Thanks, big brother." I heard Bartie cry out. "I have to go. Love you, Drake."

"I love you, too. Give Bartie a kiss for me."

"Will do. Say hi to Milla for me!" And with a giggle, she hung up before I could respond.

I groaned and slumped back into bed.

"Everything okay?" Myers asked, leaning down next to me. I instinctively raised an arm and she rested her head on my chest. I absently petted her hair.

"Bertrand went to see Savannah."

Myers pressed her lips together. "Well... after last night, I kind of saw it coming."

"I know..."

We talked for a little while more, as night began falling, the sunlight gently fading. My stomach grumbled and we finally made our way to the dining car, which was -- thankfully -- empty. Both of us made quick work of our meals, and afterwards, Myers looked down at her phone.

"Thanks, Drake. For today. It was exactly what I needed."

"You're welcome. I'm glad I could help you get your mind off things."

"You really did. And you got me writing again. Thank you."
"You're welcome. What are you working on, anyway?"

She grinned. "Nu-uh, no talking about a work in progress. You'll just have to read it when it's done."

I shook my head, smiling. Myers yawned. "Tired already?"

"I guess so… I should go… I want to try to get some sleep before the tea party tomorrow."

"Yeah, you should. Try not to worry too much… I-- we've all got your back."

She nodded. "I know. Thank you, Drake." Her eyes darted quickly around the room, and she moved to give me a quick kiss, taking me by surprise.

"Myers!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes?"

"I-- You'll be the death of me."

Myers smiled, and stood. "Good night, Drake."

"Night, Myers."

And with that… she walked back to her suite, leaving to stare after her.

The next day, Maxwell woke up early to go get Myers ready for the tea party. I got some breakfast and kept making my way through Myers' book. I was already at the part where Jesse found Kate all drugged up in the basement of a cabin, and I couldn't wait to keep reading. Liam was right, this book was actually pretty good. It was rightly paced, the characters were complex, and Myers had planned and described the events to damn near perfection. Without even realizing, I'd skipped lunch and it was already time for the tea party.

I decided to walk to the venue, immediately finding the food once inside. Liam greeted me, laughing at the rate I was munching down some pastries. He then left to greet some other nobles, and I was left alone by the dessert table.

"Monsieur Drake." I turned to find Lady Kiara behind me, "Bonjour."

"Uh… hello, Lady Kiara."

"How are you?"

"I'm… good… how are you?"

"I am well, thank you. I heard you found your sister…" Of course you did… I basically screamed it at Liam's bachelor party. "It turns out she was here in Paris the whole time?"

"Uh… yeah. Here she was."

For a minute there I thought she was going to ask about the pregnancy or Bartie, but… "Well, I am very glad you found her. I know how worried you were about her…"

"Yeah, I was. I was really happy to see her."

"She is well, yes?"
"Yeah, she fine."

"I'm glad. And I'm glad some of those French lessons could be put to good use. Your sister had an ear for languages. I'm sure, after spending a year in the country, that she parles francais like a native now."

"Right… So Savannah was taking French lessons for months?"

"Oh, yes. I really enjoyed teaching her. French is my favorite of all the languages I speak. I've always found it to be such a romantic language."

"Hey, guys." Myers greeted us.

"Oh, hello, Lady Camilla."

"Hey, Myers."

"Well… Not to interrupt… but I'm interrupting." She gave Kiara an apologetic smile.

I rolled my eyes. "Interrupting? Nah, you're not interrupting anything other than a desperate search for something edible on this table."

"Yes, of course." Kiara grimaced, though she tried to hide it. "Nothing at all. I'd… better go." She nodded goodbye to me and Myers and left.

Myers moved closer to me, under the pretense of looking at the desserts. "You know you're mine, right?" She whispered, jealousy clear in the undertones of her voice.

I grinned. "You're cute when you're jealous, you know that?"

Her eyebrows furrowed as she frowned, and yet I just thought she looked adorable. "Believe me, if I stake my claim on you, I'm not going to be shy while doing it."

"And what would that look like?"

"I'm debating between a very public, very passionate kiss… and shoving Kiara into the petit fours next time she flirts with you."

I chuckled. "As much as I'd love to see that, we both know you've got nothing to worry about. You're the only girl for me, Myers." Her eyes softened, and she looked at me so tenderly it almost made my heart stop. I rubbed the back of my neck awkwardly, still not used to anyone looking at me like that. "Anyway, don't we have more important things to talk about?"

"Like the fact you stick out like a sore thumb here?"

"Very funny."

"Anyway, I'm really glad you're here with me. I know this is exactly the type of event you usually bend over backwards to avoid."

"Well, I figured you might need some support today, with the… er… mission. Not that I think you need me. But in case you wanted help, I wanted to be here for you."

"Aww… thanks, Drake. But you're wrong on one thing."

"What's that?"
"I do need you." She grinned wickedly, though her eyes were filled with longing and vulnerability. I blushed and ran my fingers through my hair awkwardly. "So... what's your plan?"

I followed her gaze to see Regina surrounded by nobles.

"We might need some backup. Maybe a diversion to draw most of the nobles away?"

"I'll go find Maxwell."

"But I thought you and Maxwell..."

"It's for you." I told her softly. "I'm not going to let my personal gripes get in the way. And maybe you can see if Liam is available to help. Meet back here?"

"Roger."

She brushed past me, the scent of her hair lingering in the air. I shook my head, forcing myself to get back in the game. I found Agent Breakdance stuffing his face with pastries and tea. I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder, motioning him to follow. I walked back to where Myers was already waiting with Liam.

"I'm here to save the day!" Maxwell yelled.

"Tone it down, chief!" I glared at him.

"Toning it down!" He said, just as cheery.

"What's our play here?" Liam was all business.

"I need a distraction so I can talk to Queen Mother Regina away from the crowd of nobles."

Liam nodded. "So we must draw a crowd."

"Dance off?" Maxwell was practically vibrating with excitement. "I'm feeling a dance off. Drake, drop a beat!"

I shook my head, bringing my hand to my forehead. "Maxwell, we're at a fancy tea party. Somehow, I think that might be too distracting."

"Right. We need something that will get people's attention, but not something that will stop the party in its tracks. I still need people around so Regina doesn't run off or try to kill me or something." Her tone was light, but there was a hint of real fear in her eyes as they met mine.

You've got this. And I'm right here beside you.

Myers nodded once, shooting me a grateful look.

"I'm not sure we should be putting you in such danger." Liam frowned, clearly just as scared for her life.

"Well, that might've been an exaggeration." Myers shook her head, trying to convince herself just as much as Liam. "What I really mean is... what's one step down from a dance off?"

Liam's eyes widened, as they went from me to Maxwell. He grinned.
"There is one thing we could do… we haven't done it since primary school."

"No." No. Just… no.

"Do you really mean it?" Maxwell's eyes widened.

"Now I have to know."

"The three of us were briefly in a singing quartet with Bertrand."

"Oh my god. That's adorable! I can't think of anything cuter than the four of you singing together as kids!"

"How about the three of us singing together as adults?"

"That'll be a close second."

"How about it then?"

Maxwell grinned. "I'm always up for… pretty much anything, actually."

I groaned. "Is there no other way? Can't we light something on fire, or critically wound Maxwell?"

"Remember, we've got to do this for Camilla."

I looked at Myers, who looked equal parts gleeful and terrified. "Oh, fine. Fine. Let's get it over with." I looked at Myers directly. "You are not allowed to bring this up ever again."

"Your request is noted." She nodded, her smirk teasing.

She walked away without another word, sliding ever so slowly closer to Regina.

"So? What are we going to sing?" Maxwell asked, rubbing his hands together.

Liam and I looked at each other. "National Anthem?" We said at the same time, and chuckled.

"Okay, let's do this!" Maxwell screamed. "Red leather, yellow leather. Red leather, yellow leath--"

"Just come on…" I rolled my eyes, grabbing him by his collar and pulling him away.

"But I need to warm up! Bumble bee-eeeeee!" He pitched. "Bumblebee-eeeeeeeeee!"

"I think that's enough, Lord Maxwell." Liam told him, trying very hard not to laugh. "Excuse me." Liam called, drawing everybody's attention. "If I might have your attention, my friends and I would like to provide a tribute to Cordonia." He grinned at us, as the ones began jumping over themselves to get a glimpse of their King. "Cordonia…"

"Cordonia…" Maxwell matched his pitch to Liam's.

"Cordonia…" I added my voice in. Just do it for Myers. For Myers. For Myers.

"Land of apples, home of snow

Place where all good things grow
Teach us all we need to know"

I saw that, way in the back, Myers jumped into Regina and Adelaide's conversation.

"Oh, Cordonia, Cordonia
The land I call my home,
From the green clear summers,
From blossoming apple trees,
Magnificent her mountains and seas
Cordonia, Cordonia
You're noble, proud and brave
Cordonia, my home, sweet home
Forever will your banner wave!"

The crowd broke into immediate applause. We bowed shortly before making our way back to Myers.

"Thank you all, my adoring fans!" Maxwell waved to the dispersing crowd.

"I'm really glad that's over." I ran my fingers through my hair, still a bit nervous.

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Hana making her way over to us. "That was a good performance."

"Thank you, Lady Hana. Drake still has some notes in him." Liam clapped my back.

"And they should stay inside me."

Maxwell asked Myers how'd it go with Regina. She frowned and responded that she actually managed to get some information, but it didn't really add up. Looking at her, I could tell she was starting to get frustrated; said frustration being fueled by anxiety and fear.

God... how I wish I could take her away from all this. Get her outside the city, out in nature... reconnect with the things that truly matter...

"Hey..." I said softly, and Myers' shining eyes met mine. I reminded myself we were in public.
"You look like you could use something to take your mind off of all this. How about a group camping trip? The leaves are changing, and there's a spot over in the Forêt de Fontainebleau where we can see all the trees over the valley. Sunset included."

Myers grinned. "Did you just suggest we do things... with people?" She teased.

"I can take it back if you'd like." I shrugged.

"She's teasing you, Drake." Liam chuckled. "Fortunately, there's a break in the tour schedule tonight, so I can slip out for the night."

"Are we allowed to just leave like that?" Hana asked.
"I only need to notify a few guards, and we're good to go. Nobody will miss us for a night."

"How about it, Myers? We can escape for a bit."

Myers caught her lower lip between her teeth, making my mouth go dry.

"Milla! Milla! Milla!" Maxwell began chanting.

"Milla! Milla!" Hana joined him.

"Okay! Let's go! I desperately need a reprieve from all this."

Liam laughed. "I think we all do."

"I hope we see fluffy critters." Hana commented.

I wrapped an arm around her. "Let's go."

"Yay, camping!"

I glared at Maxwell. "Who said you were coming?" I could barely tolerate you today, and it was only for Myers' sake.

Maxwell looked stricken. "Of course I'm coming..." He looked at the guys. "We're all still friends, right?"

"Of course we're friends." Myers told him sweetly, before leveling a glare in my direction. "Drake, a word?" She jerked her head backwards, urging me to follow, and led me to a secluded corner of the room. "Was that really necessary?!" She whispered angrily. "I know you're upset with him because of Savannah, but that was plain cruel."

I took a step back, shocked, before the anger started crawling up my back, fueled by an ever growing feeling of betrayal. "Are you serious? What he did was cruel. Hiding my sister from me was cruel. Lying to my face every single day for a year was cruel! And you're seriously taking his side?"

Myers eyes widened. "How dare you?! I have never taken sides. What's more, I've always leaned just a little bit to your side! I've stood by you all this time, and now you accuse me of taking sides?"

Some of my anger deflated at her words. "You just took his side. You told him we're all friends. He is not my friend. Not anymore."

The anger slowly faded from Myers' eyes, leaving sadness behind in its wake. She took a deep breath and exhaled. "Okay. That's completely your decision, and I respect it. But he is still my friend. Do you think... you could tolerate his presence on this trip? Please?"

The rest of my anger evaporated when I saw that look in her eyes. That somber, slightly disappointed look. "Okay. I'm sorry, Myers."

"Thank you, Drake. But I'm not the one you need to apologize to." She let that statement linger between us, before stepping away. "We should go if we want to get to the campsite before sunset."

And with that, she walked away, back to our group, leaving me to follow behind. They guys were staring at us awkwardly, none of them sure of what to do or say. And so, we climbed silently into the limo, the tension inside the car palpable. Soon, we came to a sporting goods store, where we got everything from tents to sleeping bags and any other outdoor gear we might need. We also got appropriate clothing for hiking; my jaw dropping when Myers stepped out of the dressing room in a
skintight pink shirt and light grey leggings, completing the look with a pair of killer hiking boots. *I've died and gone to heaven*, I thought, thinking of how this woman could manage to look so goddamn sexy in workout clothes.

Myers caught me staring, raising an elegant brow, the hint of a smirk playing in her lips, before raising her chin and walking away to pay for her gear. *Still mad, then…*

When we finally had everything we needed, we got back in the limo and asked the driver to drop us off at the Forêt de Fontainebleau. And so, the hike began. The tension and silence lingered, though it lessened as we hiked up the trail. Slowly, conversation and laughter began to flow once more, especially after Maxwell fell on his ass on a particularly steep part of the trail. That event got us all laughing, and soon we found ourselves stopping every once in a while for water breaks or pictures along a particularly scenic post. In one particular stop, when we were almost to the top, Myers came up to me.

"Hey." She said.

"Hey."

We stood there, next to each other, in awkward silence for a moment.

Myers sighed. "I'm sorry." She offered me a half smile.

I couldn't help the small grin that slowly made its way into my face. "I'm sorry, too."

We looked at each other then, and burst into laughter.

"Hey, everything okay?" Liam walked over to us, a pleasant smile on his face, yet his eyes were filled with curiosity and interest.

"Yeah," Myers told him, "I was just apologizing to Drake for chewing his ass out earlier."

"Ah." Liam nodded, relaxing almost instantly. "Well, we're ready to go. We're almost to the top."

"Great. Let's go." Myers began walking away, calling out Hana and Maxwell. They walked up the trail, but Liam fell back in step beside me.

"Drake… are you okay?"

I looked at him, trying to guess what he was thinking. "Yeah… why?"

"Just… that exchange between you and Maxwell back at the party was… *intense*. And then Camilla…"

"Yeah, she got pretty upset."

"Well, while I am glad she apologized… the question still stands. Are you okay?"

I sighed. "I am… I just… Hmm…" I pursed my lips, looking at Maxwell, who was chatting animatedly with the girls. "I'm still pretty mad, and I have trouble controlling my temper sometimes."

"Yes, well… I just want you to know we all understand you, even Maxwell… and we'll give you all the time you need."

"What if I never forgive him? What if I never get there?"
Liam shook his head. "I know it may not seem like it right now, but I'm sure you will. You're not the type to carry a grudge and, deep down, you know he didn't hide Savannah out of malice. I can see that, and so can Camilla. I'm sure that's why she felt the need to apologize."

I nodded. "Thanks."

"Of course. Now let's go. Whoever's last to the top owes the other ten push-ups." Liam grinned, and breaking into a jog.

We finally got to the top of the cliff, Liam and I getting to the top at the same time, and deciding to call it a tie.

While everyone admired the view, I got to work stacking up wood for a campfire. I set up a large portion of kindling in a pile, placing the wood over it at a perfect 30° angle. Then I placed some more kindling over and around the wood, circling it all with some stones. My brain effectively quieted as I busied myself with this, every movement almost second nature to me.

"Drake… you should take in the view." Myers said softly.

I met her eyes briefly, then drew them over the valley. "Yup, sure is nice."

"Didn't you suggest coming here for the view?"

I shrugged. "I'll get to it later. Right now, I'd rather make sure we have warmth."

"I'm okay with that. Maybe Drake's caveman instincts are kicking in." Hana teased.

"Protect and warm the tribe. I'm all over it."

"This is how he gets when he goes camping. Best to let him have his way." Liam told Myers, fondness in his tone.

"Exactly. This trip was my idea. It's my responsibility to make sure you all survive out here."

"Aww, we'd be fine on our own. I'm very resourceful." Maxwell said.

"You'd be the first to go." I told him, stating the simple facts.

I finally lit the fire, while Maxwell and Hana bickered behind me about who would go first. Liam and Myers laid out a blanket near the fire, and Hana began laying out snacks for everyone. We sat down, and as the guys chatted and joked, I took a moment to gaze out over the valley. In the distance, you could see the ocean, but before it, it was just orange and yellow leaves as far as the eye could see.

"Finally taking in that view?" Myers asked.

"Now that the basics are taken care of? Yeah."

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I'm glad we came out here to see it."

The sun slowly went down as we laughed and talked and ate. Maxwell found a lizard on his shirt, and Myers dared me touch it. The damn thing bit me, and we let it loose. When it started getting dark, I got to work on the tents. Liam quickly built his tent, moving to help Myers with hers. Hana was able to successfully build her after dutifully reading and following the instructions. I… was stuck
helping Maxwell, who was more of a nuisance than a help.

"Alright, everyone. Time to settle in. We head back first thing at dawn tomorrow." I commanded, when I was finally able to finish Maxwell's tent.

We all said goodnight and I crawled into my tent. Despite the long day, I was still feeling a little restless… I didn't know exactly why, but… I sighed. *Not much to do about it now, and we have an early morning so might as well try to get some sleep*. Slowly, I began undressing as silence fell over our camp, and crawled into my sleeping bag. I tossed and turned for a while, and resigned myself to staring at the ceiling of my tent. You could hear nothing but the wind slowly picking up speed, rustling the trees in the distance, and the roar of the fire outside. I honestly didn't know how much time had passed when my tent flap was opened, and Myers crawled in. I sat up.

*Okay, this was seriously reckless! These tents are not soundproof and Liam's tent is literally a few meters away.*

And yet, Myers crawled in, grinning impishly as her eyes roamed my torso. "Oh… I'm glad I didn't knock." She whispered.

"Myers!" My whisper was a bit harsher, "what are you doing here?"

"What does it look like? I'm here to seduce you."

That caught me off guard. "What?"

"Isn't this a little romantic at least?" She crawled up to me and made herself comfortable in my sleeping bag, cuddling next to me.

I shook my head, and yet raised my arm in order to let her rest her head on my chest, my other arm settling over her waist, pulling her closer. My heart began beating really fast, so fast I was sure she could hear it, so I took a deep breath.

"It feels good to be out here, with you."

Myers shifted to get on top of me, linking her fingers over my chest and propping her chin on them. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself. I wasn't sure."

"What do you mean?"

"You've been pretty bossy with everyone since we got out here."

"Bossy? I'm just trying to keep everyone safe."

"Yeah…" She grinned, "by giving everyone tons of orders."

"I guess my dad always ran a tight ship when we went camping. Maybe too much of that rubbed off on me… Sorry. I hope I didn't ruin the trip."

I groaned inwardly. This whole trip was for her, and I'd ruined it by getting on everyone's nerves--

"Don't apologize. To be honest, it's cute."

"Really?"

"Yeah, in a very Drake sort of way. It's adorable that you take it so seriously."
I chuckled quietly. "I aim to please. Is there anything I can do to make your camping experience more enjoyable, Ms. Myers?"

"Well… there is one thing…" She lightly traced circles over my chest with her finger, "You could kiss me senseless."

"Myers…" I traced my thumb over her lips. "You know I want to," Especially now, with you on top of me… God, the things I'd do to you, Myers.

"Then do it."

But everybody's outside, less than 10 meters away… and if we get caught… if Liam were to see or hear…

Myers caught my thumb in between her teeth and sucked gently, eyes fixed on mine.

That did it. "Aw, hell."

I tangled my hand in her hair, pulling her lips to mine. Myers opened her legs so that she was effectively straddling me. Her hands were cold as they cupped my neck, sending delicious chills all the way to my bones, before running her fingers through my hair. I moved my other hand to her back, running it gently down her spine, feeling her shiver.

She began pulling away, and I followed, moving so that we were sitting up. She ran her hands all over my chest, down my abs, brushing them over the waistband of my pants, before pulling them up over her head. Without a thought in my mind other than how much I wanted her, I grabbed the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head, breaking the kiss for a few agonizing seconds. I pressed my lips to her neck down her collarbone, showering her with a flutter of kisses, while my hands roamed over her shoulders, pushing down the straps of her bra down her arms, before running them up on her waist, her back, her chest… Myers gasped in anticipation, and I captured her mouth in a fiery kiss once again to quiet her. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pressing herself flat against my chest, and bucked her hips against mine, sending heat coursing through me.

I had half a mind to take her right here and now, everything else be damned, when…

CRASH!

Myers startled, clinging to me and we froze in place as Hana yelled, "Bear! Bear!"

"Hana, it's just me!" Maxwell answered, "I was looking for a snack!"

Myers and I looked at each other as Hana and Maxwell began laughing. We didn't hear Liam, so I guessed he must be sound asleep. Myers and I exhaled a breath we didn't know we'd been holding, our bodies slowly relaxing.

The moment, however, was effectively broken… which, truth be told, was probably for the best. "Next time we go camping, how about we do it without the rest of them." I whispered.

Myers smiled, getting off and laying next to me. "I'm in."

I pressed one last, gentle kiss to her lips, and she turned around, pressing her back to my chest, and laying her head over my arm. I wrapped my other arm over her waist, holding her tight against me, and she linked her finger with mine.

"You know… this is my first time camping." Myers said softly.
"Really?"

Myers yawned, her eyelids fluttering shut, and she opened them again. "Yeah… my dad and I went hiking a lot, but we never camped out."

"What about with friends?"

"Nope."

"Well… what did you think?"

She snuggled next to me contentedly, her voice taking on a sleepy tone, and as hey eyelids drooped, they stayed shut this time. "10 out of 10, 100% would do it again with you, Walker."

I smiled. "Well, I'm glad you had fun."

Myers yawned once again. "Mm-hmm, the end of the night was the high point."

I chuckled. "Sssh. Go to sleep. You've had a long day."

"Mmm…" She murmured, "you smell good…"

I chuckled. "Thanks."

"It's not fair how gorgeous you are…"

"Sssh… sleep." I raised my head just a tad to see her eyes were shut, and her breathing was completely relaxed.

"Yeah… Good night, Drake." Myers muttered

"Night, Myers."

"Love you." She mumbled oh so softly, before snoring lightly.

I froze, my eyes wide open. I couldn't move, not only because she was holding my arm hostage, but because… she'd said it.

_The L word._

_Holy shit. She said it._

_No… Did I hear right?"

I shook my head. _Nah… she was sleeping already, probably dreaming. She didn't know what she was saying. She wasn't even conscious! It didn't count if it was said unconsciously!_ 

_I'm fine… we're fine. This never happened._

But as much as I tried to deny it, I couldn't help my heart swelling, pounding so loudly against my chest I was afraid it would wake her. Hell, I almost wanted to shake her awake and ask her what she said.

I groaned, rubbing my face with my hand.

_I'm not getting any sleep tonight, am I?_
Truth be Told

I woke up the next morning before dawn, with Myers' warm body snuggled up against mine, and the memories of the past night came flooding back. "I'm here to seduce you..." I smirked as I remembered that mind numbing kiss, and how it would have gone further had we been alone.

As for what was said towards the end of the night, when one of us was asleep... well, best to pretend that never happened.

Myers stirred, turning around and bumped her nose with mine. Her eyes fluttered open, and a slow smile crept upon her face. "Morning." She whispered.

"Morning, Myers."

She stretched contentedly, almost purring like a cat. "How'd you sleep?"

Well... my arm's almost numb, my shoulder hurts from not moving all night, and I spent most of the night staring at the ceiling wondering if you meant what you said...

I grinned wryly, "I slept great. And yourself?"

"So did I."

"Well..." I could help but blush a little as she trailed her finger lazily over my chest. "As much as I hate to say it..."

Myers sighed. "I have to go back to my tent, don't I?"

"Yeah..."

She looked at me from underneath long, straight lashes, now trailing her whole hand over the planes of my chest. "But it's so cold in my tent... You wouldn't really send me out there all by myself, would you?"

I rolled my eyes affectionately. "I think you're overestimating my affection for you, Myers."

That caused her to chuckle quietly. "Well, how about this? We get dressed and go out there together, so no one's the wiser I spent the night here, you build a fire and I cook breakfast for everybody?"

I pretended to think about it. "Deal." We got up and tried to dress quickly in the small confines of my tent, before stepping out. I breathed in deeply the clean forest air, taking in dawn's first light, and then got to work. In a couple of minutes, I got the fire going, and Myers got to work making everybody grilled cheese sandwiches and coffee.

Liam's tent flap opened, and he stepped out, rubbing his face, before turning to us with a huge smile. "Good morning!"

"Good morning!" Myers greeted him, walking over to him to hand him a sandwich and a cup of coffee.

"Thank you." He smiled at her gratefully, before moving to sit on the blanket next to me.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked nonchalantly.
"Very well. I must have been more tired than I thought. I fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow."

"So you didn't hear Hana scream 'bear' last night?" Myers chuckled.

"Uh… no…" Liam looked at me with wide eyes. "Was there a bear at camp last night?"

"Nah, it was just Maxwell." I told him.

Hana was the next person to come out of her tent, grinning from ear to ear. This had also been Hana's first time camping, and I was relieved to hear she had also had a great time. We had breakfast, talking and laughing as we waited for Maxwell to get up so we could get going. Around 7:00, I realized Maxwell wasn't going to wake up until someone woke him, so Myers volunteered for the job. Fifteen minutes later, an exasperated Myers and a frumpy looking Maxwell stepped out of the tent.

As soon as Maxwell finished shoving his breakfast down his throat, we broke camp and began the long hike down, where Bastien was waiting for us with a car. As soon as we got to the train, everybody dispersed to get ready for the Opera House later, but since I wouldn't be caught dead in there, and it was our last day in Paris… I decided to go say goodbye to my sister and my nephew.

I texted Savannah and began walking to her apartment. A few minutes later, I was outside her door with a box of chocolate eclairs.

"Hey, Drake." Her eyes widened when she saw the eclairs. "Oh! You're a lifesaver!"

"Hey, sis. And… consider these an apology… for telling Bertrand."

Savannah's eyes softened. "Oh, Drake… that's okay. You just did what any big brother would have done…"

"No, if I did what any big brother would have done, the Duke of Ramsford would be in the hospital right now." I mumbled under my breath.

"What?"

"Nothing!" I told her, and moved to the playpen to say hello to Bartie. The chubby baby squealed when he saw me, stretching his arms out towards me. I looked to Savannah, who nodded, and I picked him up very carefully, just like Myers taught me.

"So, besides the whole Bertrand debacle, how did it go at the bachelor party? Did you talk to Bastien?"

I sighed, walking around the room rocking Bartie. "We did… and it didn't really lead anywhere except… that he was ordered to sabotage Myers."

"By wh--" The question died on Savannah's tongue, as she inevitably came to the same conclusion I did. "Oh… oh, no…"

"Yeah… In a couple hours, Myers is going to try to confront the Queen Mother to see if she had a hand in it, and if not… we're going to start looking into Constantine."

"Drake… please be careful…"

"I will… Honestly I'm more worried about Myers. I'm Liam's best friend, and Constantine knows me
since I was a kid. I don't think he'd hurt me. But Myers…"

"I don't know… I've always been a bit scared of him, even when we were kids…"

"I know." I told her.

Savannah sighed. "So, how is Milla doing with all of this?"

Scared shitless and trying not to show it? I rubbed the back of my neck. "Myers… Honestly? She's scared… but she's trying to stay strong, I guess. That woman is so stubborn, she won't leave until she clears her name, so…"

"Sounds like someone else I know." Savannah smirked.

"Yeah, well… we're all just doing our best to be there for her. Hell, we even took her camping last night."

"That sounds like fun."

"Yeah, it was…" I told her all about our impromptu trip last night -- minus Myers sneaking into my tent, of course.

Savannah listened attentively, frowning when I told her about the incident with Maxwell. "Drake… please don't be so hard on Maxwell."

"Savannah…"

"No, I get it. I do. You feel like he betrayed you by not telling you, but Drake… I begged him not to tell you. And he wanted to tell you! Everytime you and Bastien made progress on your investigation, everytime I sent him a text or a picture of Bartie, every time he visited, he tried to get me to give him permission to tell you. Especially during this past season, when he told me you guys were actually starting to get close… he begged me to call you, or to at least let him tell you where I was… And it was I who always said no."

"He still should have told me…"

"But he didn't. Because he was honoring my wishes. Drake… doesn't that show you what kind of person Maxwell is? Yeah, he might be goofy and fun loving, but he's infinitely loyal… And he loves you, almost like a brother…"

I swear part of my anger evaporated as she continued to talk about how loyal and caring and amazing Maxwell was. I knew all those things, and I knew he was just respecting my sister's wishes…

And, to be honest, if the roles were reversed… wouldn't I have done the exact same thing?

I sighed. "Fine… Savannah… I'll… talk to him… see where it goes, okay? I'm not saying I'll forgive him, I'll just… give him a chance to explain his side, okay?"

Savannah beamed at me, and hugged me tightly, "Thanks, big brother."

The rest of the day passed without incident. I stayed with Savannah while the court went to the Opera, and then met up with the guys when the thing was over. Hana took Myers to a library -- Myers was practically jumping -- and Liam, Maxwell and I went to get dinner.
"Drake, use your talents." Liam grinned at me, but it didn't reach his eyes.

I nodded, and we walked around the city for a bit, before I picked out a small bistro and we went inside. The place was almost full, but we were able to find a table and a waiter came over to take our orders.

As we waited, I noticed Liam kept fidgeting with a fork, twirling around in his hand.

"Hey," I nudged him, "you okay?"

He sighed, his eyes going from me to Maxwell. "I talked to Lady Camilla at the Opera today…" He hesitated.

Maxwell and I nodded. "Yeah…?" I prompted.

"She talked to Regina, and she came to the conclusion that she wasn't behind the scandal. Regina has never been particularly close to Bastien, and would have used her own guards to carry out her orders. So that just leaves…" He shook his head, like he was still trying to wrap him head around it.

"Your dad." Maxwell finished his sentence.

"Yes… that just leaves my father. King Father Constantine." He practically spat out the name.

"Liam… you don't kno--"

"But I should've!" Liam slammed his fist against the table. His eyes widened as he realized what he'd done, and he closed his eyes, trying to compose himself. He took a deep breath, and exhaled. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay."

"I just… I should have seen it coming. My father was insistent on my picking Madeleine all throughout the season. He pushed me towards her, always reminding me this marriage, this… this choice, wasn't about love, it was about duty. Duty to my country, to Cordonia. And he belittled Lady Camilla every chance he got, always going on about how she had no political education, of how she wasn't ready, how she was 'just a waitress'." Liam practically spat out those last words.

I felt myself tense, my hands fisting involuntarily.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Maxwell was scowling next to me. "Milla may not have had the privilege of having political science professors homeschool her, but she's smart and savvy! A-and she's extremely hard working and a very fast learner, so you can bet your ass that she'd have worked her ass off to learn whatever she needed to learn to be a good queen as fast as possible!" Maxwell's chest was practically heaving as he finished his speech.

"And let's not forget Myers was a commoner," I added, "which means she knows what people want and what they need, in a way that -- I'm sorry, buddy -- you and the King Father never could…"

"I know!" Liam yelled, rubbing his forehead. "I know… and I tried to tell him. Everytime he belittled her, I stood up for her. I just never thought… I never thought he would resort to this. A setup? Blackmail?"

"Sexual harassment…?" I added, not trying to add fuel to the fire, but it was the truth.

Liam groaned. "Please don't remind me about that. I'm still thankful you arrived in time to stop
"Me too." Maxwell told me, staring at his drink with a grim expression on his face.

"He knew how I felt about her…" Liam continued, "how could he do this to her, and to me?"

Maxwell and I looked at each other.

"Because…" Maxwell began, hesitating.

"Because he knew you would pick her, unless… he made her ineligible." I finished. I always said I might be omitting some things, but I'd never flat out lie to Liam, and I wouldn't coddle him either.

Liam looked at me, so much sadness and disappointment in his eyes. At that moment his phone rang. His eyes quirked in a small smile, before picking up. "Hello, Leo."

He waited as his brother answered, asking about his wife and her pregnancy, before telling him all about our investigation. His expression grew more and more dire the longer he stayed on the phone, before saying his goodbyes and hanging up.

"So…?" I asked, "What does he think?"

Liam sighed. "He thinks it 'does sound like something Father would do'... Leo wouldn't put it past Father to have done such a thing."

Now it was my turn to sigh. "I'm sorry, Liam. I can only imagine how awful you must be feeling."

"Thank you, Drake."

"Listen, I know it's looking bad, but… don't get ahead of yourself, okay? Wait to actually confront Constantine, before coming to any conclusions… okay?"

"I… I'll try." He looked down, before meeting our eyes. "Will you both… promise me you'll take care of Lady Camilla? She seemed… frightened. Even though she was trying to be strong, I could see she was scared."

She is scared, I thought.

"I promise." Maxwell told him, and they both looked to me.

"Uh… yeah, I promise. Don't worry about Myers; we'll look out for her."

"I worry about her, Drake… I worry, because I know my father would never harm me… but if he could do this… resort to such low, underhanded tactics… he could very well harm Camilla."

I tried to shrug off the very real chill that crawled its way down my spine. "I know. We've got her back, and yours."

"Thank you, both of you."

Maxwell and I nodded, and soon, our food arrived. We tried to distract Liam, talking about the upcoming trip to China, or about pretty much anything else. We asked about Leo's wife's pregnancy, and tried to plan a visit when we went to the States.

After dinner, both Liam and Maxwell decided to turn in early, but I was too restless to sleep. And so, I decided to go shoot some pool. I was making my way off the train when I ran into Myers again.
My heart immediately began beating faster when she beamed at me.

*Play it cool.* "Hey, Myers." Good! I mentally patted myself on the back. My tone was the perfect combination of friendly and aloof.

"Where are you going? It's nearly midnight."

"Eh, I couldn't sleep when I got back to my room. Though I might as well have some fun."

"As in have a drink?"

I rolled my eyes. "I do have other hobbies besides whiskey, you know. Like pool."

Myers' eyes widened. "There's a pool room on this train? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Heh. As if anyone would want to play on a moving vehicle. I've been frequenting this hotel a few blocks from here, and it has a private game room. It's quiet. It's open late, and nobody bothers me."

"That must be your idea of paradise… Solitude, a few drinks, a manly game of billiards…"

"Heh. It's close. Although, to be honest, playing solo gets a little boring after a while. Do you want to come play a game or two? Some competition would make things more interesting."

Myers cocked her hip to one side, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "Oh, I see. You're looking for a rematch after our last game night."

The corner of my mouth quirked up. "... Maybe."

Myers raised an eyebrow. "You're on."

"Alright, but be warned. I won't go easy on you."

"If you did, I'd be disappointed."

I grinned and just led her out of the train. We stepped into the cool night air, and made our way to the small hotel. The guard nodded at me and led us into the game room.

"Wow, you must be a regular." Myers commented.

"Well… when I told Liam about finding this place, he spoke with the owner to make sure I'd be taken care of."

"That's very thoughtful of him."

"Yeah, that's Liam for you. Always thinking of everyone else." I moved to the table and began setting up the game, while Myers walked around the room.

"So, have you been coming here every single night?"

I shrugged. "Only a few times. Whenever I can't sleep."

"What's keeping you awake? Is it…" Her grin was wicked, but there was genuine concern in her eyes, "scandalous thoughts about me?"

I met her eyes, almost challenging her, before looking away, trying to hide my smirk. "I didn't come here to talk about my sleeping habits, Myers. I came here to show you up at pool."
"Bold words, Mr. Walker."

I finished racking up the balls, and we both grabbed cue sticks.

"Are you up for some house rules?"

"That depends on the rules."

I explained the rules and she nodded. "Then go ahead and break." Myers hit the balls just hard enough to scatter them, and I studied the layout. "Good break." I told her, landing a ball into a corner pocket. "That's one."

"Smooth! Where did you learn to shoot like that?"

"From my mom. She taught me and Savannah all the tricks she knew."

"Aww… all those lessons must have been adorable! Baby Drake trying to hold a cue stick…"

"Eh… "Adorable probably isn't the word my mom would use. I was a handful."

"And teaching you to play a game with giant sticks made that… better?"

"Eh, it kept me occupied. And it made me pretty damn good at pool."

"That remains to be seen." She walked around the table slowly, swaying her hips, before stopping in front of me to study the table. Then she flipped her hair, and batting her eyelashes innocently, she asked, "Do you mind giving me a hand with this?"

I raised an eyebrow. I knew exactly what she was doing, but I'd be damned if I made it easy for her.

"You want me to help you win?"

"Just give me a few pointers?" Oh, god… not the puppy eyes…

I really did try to fight it, but… "... Oh, fine."

I moved behind her, and she draped her hair over to the other side of her neck, giving me a clear view of the soft skin and gentle curves of her neck and shoulders. The smell of her perfume invaded my nostrils, tempting me to do so much more than simply teaching her to shoot. Okay… get it together, this is exactly what she wants.

I shook my head and I gently wrapped my arms around her, placing my hands over hers, moving them to properly grasp her cue stick. "You'll want to hold it here and here." Myers turned her head slightly to meet my eyes, our lips inches from one another. I saw the hungry gleam in her eyes as they strayed to my mouth, and I lingered for just a moment, before pulling back. "There."

Myers pursed her lips, frustrated, before hitting her cue ball and sending the ball she was aiming for into a corner pocket with ease. "Yes!"

"There you go." I stepped up, leaning on my cue stick and began aiming.

"You know…" Myers walked behind me, running a single finger over my shoulders. It sent chills down my back. "You get this wrinkle in the middle of your forehead when you concentrate. It's cute."

"Wha…?" I lost my aim and the cue ball went wild, not hitting any balls. "I…" Myers grinned proudly. "That was a freebie for you, Myers."
Her index finger ran from my shoulder down my arm. "I thought you weren't going to go easy on me."

I followed its trail with my eyes, before meeting hers. "Maybe I'm feeling charitable."

"Hmm, there's that wrinkle again…"

I looked away, consciously rubbing my forehead. "You're up."

She took her position confidently and effortlessly knocked a ball into a corner pocket. "Piece of cake."

"Not bad. I mean, it wasn't anything fancy, but not bad."

"I'm not playing for style, I'm playing to win! Let's see you do that well on your last shot."

"Challenge accepted." I already had something in mind, so I began lining up the shot, when from the corner of my eye, I caught Myers turn around. With one hand, she held her hair up, and with the other, she slowly unzipped her dress, the smooth expanse of her back coming into view ever so slowly… and let it fall, pooling at her feet. Then, she let go of her hair, and those long brown locks cascaded down her back like a waterfall. I couldn't help my eyes going wide, my jaw nearly on the floor. I swallowed, my mouth going dry. "Myers, what… what are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?" She asked, disinterestedly looking at her nails, though her lips quirked into a small smirk. After a moment, Myers leveled me with a cocky stare. "Tick tock, Walker."

I shook my head, trying to snap out of my stupor. Come on, man! I mean, it's not the first time I've seen her in her underwear!

But… my eyes couldn't help but wandering over to her, it is the first time I've seen her in this lingerie … did it have to be red lace this time? God… I ran my eyes over the lacy red bra, the light skin under it, the gentle curves and swell of her breasts imagining what it would be like to touch her skin, run my fingers and my tongue over it… and I ended up fumbling with my cue stick. "Damn."

"You're supposed to watch the ball, Drake. Isn't that like billiards 101?" That grin on her face was absolutely sinful.

"Maybe I was distracted." Two can play at this game. "Last shot, Myers."

I waited until she was ready to line up her shot, and I tossed my shirt off, my pants quickly following. Then I dropped to the floor and began doing push ups.

Manly pride surged through me when I saw her jaw literally drop. "Uh, Drake… what are you doing?"

"Oh, nothing. Don't mind me. Just gotta get the rest of my nightly workout in."

"Shirtless?"

"Just borrowing a page from your playbook." I grinned.

Myers turned back to the table, and as she leaned in to aim, I switched to one handed push ups.

She missed her shot. Ha!
"No fair, I was trying to concentrate over here."

"Sorry. Couldn't skip the nightly workout." I stood up and made my way over to her.

"I guess that's the game. Which means…" She counted the points on her fingers, "I won!"

I rolled my eyes. "Beginner's luck."

"Are you saying a beginner could've beaten you?"

"... Make that 'congratulations'."

"Thanks. What about my prize?"

*Oh, no… here we go again. "Prize? This is starting to sound familiar…"

"Drinking game, pool game? What's the fun without any stakes? Now, I say the prize is…" She stepped closer, "a kiss."

I groaned, looking at her in red lace, the little she devil. "Are you trying to torture me, Myers?"

"Is kissing me torture?"

I brushed my thumb over her lips, but before she could bite it like last night, I leaned in for the kiss. She moaned against my mouth as I pulled her closer, bringing her flush against me. My tongue danced with hers, and she ran her fingernails through my hair, the small pressure points sending heat flushing through me. When we finally pulled away, we were both breathless. "The kind I'd been hoping for all night." I told her, answering her question.

"Then why didn't you kiss me sooner?"

"You know why, Myers."

"We're alone, Drake. How often does that happen?"

I looked around, realizing that unlike last night and almost all the other nights before that, we really were alone. Really alone; the whole of court blocks away. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying you could… kiss me again. If you want to."

I hesitated for one split second, before giving in. I pulled her closer to me roughly, which caused her to let out a delighted "Oh!", before my lips found hers. I tangled my fingers through her hair, the taste and smell and look of her driving me wild. "Myers…" my lips left hers for a split second, "I always want to." *And I'd do a whole lot more if I could.*

Myers cupped the back of my neck and pulled my mouth to her again. The kiss was electric, and she pressed her body against mine, causing me to brush up against the pool table. I shivered as she began running her hands down my chest, my waist, my hips, my thighs… Then her lips left mine to nibble my neck and my collarbone, her hands wandering closer to the waistband of my underpants, and to the hard bulge beneath, but never quite touching it.

She was driving me absolutely crazy, so I turned her around, and picked her up by her thighs, setting her down on the pool table. Myers wrapped her legs around my waist, pressing me to her so much so I could feel the heat of her against me. I ran my hands up from her thighs to her taut stomach to her breasts, causing her to shiver. Instinctively, I bucked my hips as I pulled her hair back, exposing her neck, and was rewarded with a wanton moan. "Drake…"
Her hands dipped below my underwear, finding their mark, and I groaned as she stroked me, laying my head on her shoulder. Myers threw her head back, and I sucked, licked and bit the side of her neck.

"Drake… I-I want you so badly."

Her words burned through any and all of my resolve, and I brought her lips back to mine. My hands dipped between her thighs, feeling the heat and the wetness of her. Myers gasped against my mouth, before melting into the kiss, increasing the pace of her strokes.

"Myers…" I mumbled against her mouth, as she took my lip between her teeth, and--

There was a sharp knock on the door, that caused Myers to jump, letting go of me and wrap her arms around my chest. We froze in place -- both of us in our underwear, her legs still wrapped around me -- and relaxed when it became clear that whoever knocked wasn't going to come in. I breathed a sigh of relief as Myers let out a growl of frustration.

"That'll be the staff letting us know it's closing time." I said, still breathing heavily. "We should… head back."

Myers made no effort to move. "Are you sure you want to?" She leaned in to press fluttering kisses to my neck.

I groaned. "No. But I'd rather end tonight on a high note, and getting tossed out by the closing security shift would be a low."

Myer sighed, and rested her head on my shoulder. "Right… not exactly the ending I had in mind."

I laughed. "Yeah, me neither. Hey…" I cupped her neck, turning her face upwards, and pressed a final lingering kiss on her lips. "We'll get there… soon."

I stepped back and she hopped off the table. "I'll hold you to that."

I chuckled at her frustration, and we picked up our clothes off the floor, getting dressed quickly. As we stepped out, the guard bowed and we left. Myers shivered as the cold air hit her skin. It was late and dark, so I dared to pull her closer to me, wrapping one arm over her shoulders. We separated a block from the train station, and I walked Myers to her cabin. She opened her door and stepped across the precipice, but I didn't dare go in. Myers turned to look at me, the question clear in her eyes.

I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly awkward. "I had a good time tonight."

Hey eyes seemed to soften. "Me too. Next time, we should go on a real date."

"That wasn't… I mean, not that I wouldn't, but…" I flushed for a moment, before she burst out laughing. "You're teasing me, aren't you."

"Only a little. Be honest. If we'd called it a date, would you have taken me anywhere else?"

"Tonight? No."

"How about on another night?"

I smirked. "We'll have to see. Good night, Myers."

"Good night, Drake."
And with that, I turned and walked back to my bunk, knowing I was in for yet another sleepless night.

Maxwell’s alarm woke me up next morning at 6 am, so you can imagine my oh-so-sunny mood when I woke up. We were supposed to be at the airport at 7, for our 11 hour flight to China… Yay! I sighed. Oh, well, at least I wouldn't be flying with Maxwell, I thought, feeling kinda sorry for Myers.

I grabbed my duffel bag and made my way to Liam's cabin. He came out with his bags in hand and we made our way over to the car. Before long, we were at the airport.

"Liam, darling." The Wicked Witch of the West called as soon as we stepped out of the car, with her mother tailing her.

Liam tensed next to me, before bowing his head to both of them. "Madeleine. Your Grace."

"Good morning, Your Majesty." Adelaide curtsied at him.

The Wicked Witch of the West raised an elegant brow at me. "I was unaware Drake would be joining us."

Liam scowled. "Is that a problem, Countess Madeleine?"

"Not at all. I only hope that your friend won't distract you until after we're able to discuss our itinerary for China."

Now it was my turn to scowl. "Don't worry, Countess Madeleine. I'll make sure not to distract Liam until after your bloody schedule is discussed."

Madeline's lips quirked into just a hint of a smile. "Good." And with that, she turned on her heel and walked away, Adelaide giving us an apologetic look before following.

Liam visibly relaxed after they left, shooting me an apologetic look before grabbing his bags and climbing on board. I followed, and after handing my bag to a steward, I took a seat next to him. We ate breakfast and talked, before he went to talk to Madeleine and I fell asleep. I woke up again for lunch, and Liam and I talked quietly, with him shooting furtive glances at his father. After a while, Liam began reviewing some relief reports from Cordonia, as well as his itinerary for this visit to Hana's family. I took the time to catch up on Myers' book, and Liam grinned when he saw it.

"You're reading Camilla's book?" He asked.

"Yeah, she lent it to me."

"What part are you at?"

"Um… Jesse found Kate, Walsh arrested her and the Sterlings' are having their fourth of July party even though their eldest son had just died."

Liam's eyes widened and a wicked grin crossed his face. "Oh, you'll like this next part, believe me."

"You've read it?"

"Of course."

Of course, I mimicked in my head, trying not to roll my eyes.
"She lent it to me during our visit to Lythikos. I read it every night before bed to unwind. What do you think of it so far?"

"Honestly… it surprised me. I honestly don't know what I expected… but it's actually pretty good."

"Right? I honestly don't know how it didn't make the best seller list."

"Probably because it's not about vampires… or teenagers trying to overthrow a corrupt government… or a guy who likes to practice BDSM…" I joked.

Liam chuckled. "Well, be that as it may, it's still a pretty good book. I'm glad you like it."

I nodded, and we slipped into silence for a moment.

"Myers is writing."

Liam looked up from his reports. "Wha-- You… asked her?"

"I saw her, the other day on the train. I just… I know you've been worried about her."

Liam nodded and clapped my shoulder. "Thank you, Drake."

I nodded, giving him a small smile, and got back to the book… where the Sterlings' younger son got blown up… Wow, Myers definitely didn't take any prisoners… She was killing off characters left and right, George R.R. Martin style. I couldn't help but grin. Liam was right, I did like this part.

Finally, after 6 hours and 7 chapters later, I finished the book as we touched down on Chinese soil. I was honestly ready for dinner and some sleep, but because of the time difference, it was actually noon here. Hana's father had sent a limo to pick us up, and he and Hana personally greeted us at the hotel. Hana showed us to our rooms, and I found out I was once again rooming with Maxwell, who wasn't here yet.

"I'm sorry, Drake… I made the arrangements before I found out about what happened between you two."

I sighed, reassuring her it was okay, that I could deal with it. Hana kept apologizing, before leaving me to rest. I plopped down on the bed and fell asleep -- only to wake up a few hours later and find Maxwell snoring on the bed next to mine. I quietly made my way to the bathroom for a quick shower, and then left the room to find Liam.

He was already in the lobby with the Wicked Witch of the West, and despite her scowling, he let me catch a ride to the reserve with them. Once there, though, they went on ahead, and I decided to wait by the entrance for Myers and Hana. They finally showed up, Myers wearing a stunning blue dress, and I couldn't help but grin.

Myers saw me and smiled, while a pretty blush colored her cheeks. She looked down at the floor, before staring back at me from underneath long lashes. I had no doubt she was remembering our last… encounter. Hell, even I couldn’t contain my blush from spreading as I remembered it. And so, I vaguely shook my head, trying to get back to the here and now. "I was wondering when you'd make it, Myers."

Myers rolled her eyes, but gave me a bright smile. "Looks like we're just in time!"

We crossed the precipice together, and I whispered, "I finished your book, by the way."
"Already?"

I nodded. "Congratulations, Myers. It was really good."

I looked at her, only to find Myers staring down at the ground, blushing even harder. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Aww… thank you, Drake. That means… you have no idea what that means to me…"

"You're welcome. You're very talented." I told her.

"Well… thanks." Myers finally met my eyes, but the moment was broken when Liam called for everyone's attention.

We stepped apart as Liam thanked Hana's dad for hosting us, and we began the tour through the reserve. It was all bamboo stalks as far as the eye could see. After Maxwell's comment of how "this place could make even Bertrand feel chill" Hana asked about him. Maxwell answered that the last time he'd been him had been at the bachelor party and how he'd texted to let him know he'd go talk to my sister. I tensed up, until Myers subtly squeezed my shoulder.

"I'm proud of him." She said, "It must have been hard hearing all of that at once. They probably have a lot to talk about."

"If he hurts her again…"

"I don't think he will." Maxwell told me. "I think he went there to apologize."

"Right. Because you're such a great judge of--"

"Dad!" Hana's yell cut me off.

Mr. Lee made his way over to us for introductions, and I could tell that, despite his initial reservations, Myers managed to charm him. Then, Maxwell saw the pandas and we were all goners. Mr. Lee managed to convince the staff to let us into the panda enclosure, and we spent a few minutes in there with the fluffy bears.

Even I had to admit… they were cute.

Hell, I even held one. And despite my warning, Myers managed to get a picture of me holding it anyway. She grinned gleefully, dangling her phone in my face, then pulling it out of my reach when I tried to grasp it. Finally, the staff shooed us out and we made our way to the restaurant for dinner.

We sat down at our table, Myers' eyes glued to Liam's table. "I can't let Constantine out of my sight tonight. If any of you see him getting up to leave…"

"Don't worry, Milla. We'll help you keep an eye on him." Hana reassured her.

"You know what they say! Four pairs of eyes are better than one!" Maxwell added.

I rolled my eyes. "Nobody says that."

Maxwell shrugged. "It could catch on."

A waiter approached our table and pulled out one last chair, before Olivia Nevrakis sat down. "I should've guessed Madeleine would seat with all of you."

"Olivia…" Myers smirked, "That's because we're friends!"
"Excuse me?" The Ice Queen flinched. She visibly flinched.

"You've helped us a lot with this investigation. We have a common goal. Besides, haven't you heard 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend'? Let's just enjoy dinner together."

"I…" Olivia's mouth opened and closed, like a fish, before finally composing herself. "I suppose I've endured worse."

"That'll do." Myers said happily.

At that moment, Maxwell asked about the food, and Myers poured us drinks. As we teased Olivia for the fact she totally liked the panda cubs, the first course arrived. It was a weird looking, massive tower of food, carefully arranged so as to please the eye as well as the taste buds.

"Hana… you promised me down-to-earth food." I groaned.

They all began teasing me and trying to convince me to try it. After Myers took a bite, her eyelids fluttering with delight, I was convinced to give it a shot. I took a small bite, and immediately it was like different flavors began exploding in my mouth. It was actually pretty good.

Suddenly, Myers' eyes widened, and she stood. "I need you all to hold down the fort. I'm going to follow Liam and the King Father."

"What? Why?" Olivia exclaimed.

"Maxwell can explain. Just stay here and act like everything's normal."

Olivia frowned and opened her mouth to respond, but I swiftly cut her off. "You've got it, Myers. We'll head off anyone who tries to follow you."

"Be careful, Milla." Hana told her.

Myers nodded, and locked her eyes on mine for a second, before walking away. We all kept eating quietly, all of us sharply looking around the room, but no one followed Myers as she slipped into the hallway.

"Is anyone going to tell me what the hell is going on?" Olivia hissed.

"Oh, right!" Maxwell said. "Well, remember during Madeleine's bachelorette party, Milla was trying to look at everyone's credit cards to see who paid off the photographer?"

Olivia hummed. "Mm-hmm."

"Well, it turned out to be Penelope's."

"Penelope?!!"

"Yes, Penelope's." Hana told her. "Milla and I confronted her during the fashion show, and she confessed to the set up."

"She couldn't have possibly planned that on her own, though."

"Exactly. She was told to do so by Bastien, in exchange for a position as one of Madeleine's ladies-in-waiting." Hana finished.

"And so, Myers and I confronted Bastien at Liam's bachelor party, and he refused to talk.
Specifically said he couldn't talk…" I continued.

"And so, you came to the conclusion that he was following orders. The King Father's orders."
Olivia nodded, turning her calculating gaze on me.

"Exactly."

"And Camilla plans to confront him right now?"

"Yes." Hana said, looking anxiously towards the door.

Suddenly, the Queen Mother stood, knocking over her chair, and she rushed out the door with Bastien and the rest of the King's Guard.

We all stood -- and by all I mean the whole court -- but two guards blocked the door, and asked us to remain calm and return to our dinners. Some nobles shrugged it off and sat back down, but we all looked at each other with wide eyes. Maxwell and Hana immediately took out their phones -- my own phone vibrating with every text on the group chat -- while I headed up to the guards, with Olivia behind me.

"Let me through." I told them.

"We have strict orders not to let anyone pass yet. Please sit down and finish your dinner, sir."

"I am the Duchess of Lythikos, and you'll let me through if you know what's best for you!" Olivia scowled.

"I'm sorry, Your Grace, " the guard practically spat her title, "but we have strict orders from the Queen Mother not to let anyone through yet."

I took a moment to check my phone, noticing the flood of group texts.

"Milla!" Maxwell had written. "Are you okay?!"

"Milla, what's going on?!" Hana wrote.

"Myers, are you safe? Is Liam with you?" I wrote.

Myers is typing...

Myers is typing...

I could feel my heart beating in my ear for those few seconds, until finally…

"I'm okay. I'm with Liam. Meet me at the hotel later."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Olivia," I called her. She was still harassing the guard. "Let's go."

After dinner, the whole court was escorted back to the hotel. Our little group waited for Myers in the lobby, and a couple hours later, she came back, alone, looking exhausted and troubled.

"Myers!" I called out to her.

I watched as her eyes widened, and began glistening with relief. She practically ran towards me and
pressed herself against my chest, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"Myers, what's wrong? Are you okay?" She shook her head against my chest.

"Milla!" I heard Hana and Maxwell run towards us.

As soon as they reached us, Myers let me go, and went to hug Maxwell and Hana. I turned back, noticing Olivia was watching our whole exchange intensely.

"Myers, are you okay?"

Myers finally pulled back from Maxwell, and wiped a tear from her cheek. "Fine. Just got a little overwhelmed with everything." She shook her head. "What are you all doing up?"

"First you and Liam disappeared from dinner, then the Queen Mother ran off… we didn't know what was happening." Hana told her, rubbing her shoulder.

"We were worried about you!" Maxwell pulled her into a hug once more.

"Speak for yourselves." Olivia stepped closer to us. "I'm just here to see if you accomplished anything useful."

_Seriously?_ I rolled my eyes.

"Did you talk to Constantine?" I asked her.

Myers shook her head. "Not here."

We led her back to the small lounge we'd been waiting in, and closed the door. Myers sat next to me, leaning a little bit on me. "I _did_ talk to Constantine, once the doctors at the hospital managed to stabilize him."

"What?" My jaw dropped.

"I… Liam and I were about to confront him, when he began having this coughing fit. It was bad, really bad. He couldn't breathe and then he collapsed. Bastien and the King's Guard called an ambulance and escorted us all to the hospital. Once there, he was with the doctors for a long time before we were allowed to see him…" Myers paused, breathing deeply, steeling herself. "It turns out he has lung cancer. A very aggressive form of lung cancer. He's dying."

There was an immediate silence over the room. None of us knew what to say, we were all processing this information.

Olivia broke first. "He may be dying, but what I want to know is did he set both of us up or not."

"Olivia!" Hana chided.

Olivia clicked her tongue, eyes glued to Myers. "Yes." She said simply. "He admitted to the set-up, and to your blackmailing."

"Son of a--"

"He wanted Liam to pick Madeleine, because he thought she would be the best chance to protect Liam, and Cordonia, from their enemies. He thought he was protecting his son's life, and his throne, and his country."
Olivia was practically seething with anger. "How dare him. If it weren't for him, I could have… I could have…" Her facade broke through, revealing genuine sadness. "I guess it doesn't matter now. He's dying. Liam must be heartbroken."

"That's…" I sighed, "that's a lot to take in, Myers."

"Yeah. At least you finally know why Constantine did this to you." Hana's lips curved downwards.

"To both of us." Olivia corrected her with a glare.

"Honestly, I feel kind of sorry for him." I turned my head to look at her, appalled. "It doesn't excuse what he's done, but he's really going through a lot. So is Liam."

"It must be hard on him and Regina, keeping Constantine's health a secret."

*I'll bet… Liam hadn't said a word to me about it. Me! His best friend!*

*And yet...* "You seriously have sympathy for him? He put you through hell!" I told her.

Myers sighed. "I can't help it… I feel bad for him, and I can see why he did it… doesn't mean I agree with him, nor that I've forgiven him… yet."

I sighed. *Okay, maybe I shouldn't be surprised. She'd felt sorry for and had forgiven Penelope and Bertrand, both of whom had betrayed her. Maybe, like Liam, she was too empathetic.*

"At least I know the truth now. That's better than wondering if half the court has it in for me." Myers finished. "Now, we just have to find Tariq. Constantine can't come forward himself to clear my name, because he said people would lose faith in their rulers, meaning himself and Liam."

"That's true." Hana commented.

"But since he said he'd back off… for the first time, I don't have to be afraid anymore…" Myers let that realization linger, like it was the first chance she'd had to actually process it.

"Well, since we're not going to find Tariq tonight, and we're all up late…" Hana clapped her hands on her knees and stood. "We might as well make the most of Milla's new freedom!"

"And what, exactly, does that mean?" I asked, unconvinced. Myers looked like she needed to get some sleep, to relax and have a bit of time to process everything.

"I want to take you all to the market! Some of the best food in the city is sold at these little outdoor markets, and my favorite one isn't far from here."

"Hmm." *Actually, on second thought, Myers might appreciate that. And…* "I won't turn down more food."

Myers snickered next to me.

"My stomach agrees with Drake. Besides…" Maxwell bumped Myers' shoulder gently with his fist, "when's the next time we're going to be in Shanghai? We've gotta make the most of it."

"If you're all heading off to do… whatever it is you're doing, I can finally get some sleep."

"You're invited too, Olivia." Hana told her with a small smile.

"She is?" I asked.
Hana shook her head slightly at me, with a small smile on her face. "We couldn't have unraveled this mystery without her. Olivia, you're a part of the team, like it or not."

"I think it's clear I do not ..." Olivia's words died on her mouth when her stomach grumbled loudly. "Still... I am a bit hungry. I suppose we could head in the same direction... at the same time... to the same place..."

"What do you say, Camilla? After the day you've had you deserve a treat!" Hana pleaded

"And a chance to hangout with your favorite people in the world." Maxwell added enthusiastically.

Myers looked from me, to Hana to Maxwell to Olivia. She was wearing a small smile on her face, but she still looked tired. And yet, Hana whispered something into her ear and she got up immediately.

"Okay. Let's go."

We cheered, and Maxwell took off, running out of the hotel. We had to track him down, before Hana could lead us to the market. When we got there, we all went on how great the place was, except for Olivia.

"You expect me to eat food that's been prepared on the street ?!"

"What did you expect when we said we were going to an outdoor market?"

Myers: 1, Ice Queen: 0 .

"... Not this." Olivia sighed. "Though, I suppose in times of war and conquest, Nevrakis rulers have eaten in dire conditions."

We perused the food stalls, Hana helping us order different types of food.

"Hey guys, look at this!" Maxwell was balancing a bowl on his head, weaving back and forth to keep it upright. What the idiot didn't see was that he was headed straight for a stall selling bowls of boiling hot soup! As in could get third degree burns sort of hot.

"Watch out!" I dove to catch him from falling over the stall, yanking him back quickly.

The bowl fell, but Maxwell burst out laughing. "Gotcha!"

"What?"

"It was all a clever ruse! I wanted to make sure you still care about what happens to me, and you do!"

Seriously, Maxwell?! "Maybe I should've let you fall into a batch of soup." I told him, scowling.

"His foolishness would've made for pungent seasoning." Olivia commented.

"I object to that statement."

"I don't know, she's got a good point."

"Maxwell!" Myers smacked Maxwell on the top of his head, "you scared us!"

Maxwell rolled his eyes good naturedly, before turning to me. "Drake, it's touching that you'd come
"Sometimes I don't even know why I bother." I rolled my eyes.

"Because I'm precious!" He turned to Hana. "Hana can you help me pick out some more food?"

"Only if you promise not to put it on your head."

"I'll try."

"I suppose that is good enough. Come along." Hana led him away to another stall.

"I don't know how you put up with him." Olivia told us.

"It takes a lot of effort sometimes. Not too different from putting up with you." I told her.

Olivia rolled her eyes.

"Olivia, why did you come with us tonight?" Myers asked softly.

"Playing such a minor role here made me realize…" For one split second, I thought she was going to say something heartfelt about relying on people or having friends, but… "just how much I miss antagonizing people at court."

*There she is!*

"You secretly love us." Myers told her, smirking. "Say it with me… friends." She drew the last word out.

"You look like an idiot when you do that."

"Drake, join me." She bumped my shoulder. "Frieeeeends."

"Gonna have to take a hard pass on that, Myers."

"No, go ahead, Drake. You're always welcome to make a fool of yourself in front of me." Olivia said.

"Then you can make yourself look like a fool too, Olivia." Myers told her, "Then we'd all look like fools together. That's the true meaning of friendship."

"You'll have to keep waiting. Forever."

At that moment, Maxwell and Hana came back with a small basket.

"Hey, Drake…" Maxwell called me, "I got this for you. It's called xiao long bao. Hana says it's great and I trust that food recommendations are another one of her talents." He offered me the basket.

I took it. "Oh… thanks."

Hana offered Myers and Olivia another basket, and Maxwell lingered next to me. "Can we talk?"

I sighed. *I did promise Savannah... and I have to admit... a part of me missed my friend.* "I suppose I've got time while I eat this."

Maxwell nodded. "I never fully apologized for everything that's happened. I wish I could've told you about Savannah. I should have figured something out."
"Oh…" I could see he really was sorry…

"Maxwell knew where Drake's sister was this whole time?" I heard Olivia whisper to the girls. "This day keeps getting better."

"You don't know the whole story." Myers whispered harshly back.

"Oh, but I'd love to. It sounds so juicy."

I rolled my eyes at Olivia's comment. I turned back to my conversation with Maxwell. *I guess… if he was apologizing, I should too… I mean, I'm not entirely blameless here. I'm the one who should apologize for getting out of hand at the bachelor party. I saw Bertrand and all I could think about was my sister crying.*

"Yeah… that was bad."

"I still don't know why you defend him. I know he's your brother, but still…"

"People only see glimpses of Bertrand, but I know what he's going through. It's not something I can share, even with Camilla, but he's sincere that it's for House Beaumont."

"That phrase will be the death of him."

"That's what I'm afraid of too."

We looked away from each other then, both of us lost in our thoughts. Memories of the past few days washed over me.

"Maxwell's being modest… this apartment, all our food and clothes…"

"He came with me to every doctor's appointment. The doctor thought he was the father…"

"He wanted to tell you. I begged him not to…"

"Hey, Maxwell… thanks."

"For what?"

"For looking out for my sister. I should've done more to make her feel like she could trust me."

"I don't know if I deserve any thanks. I kept her hidden from you."

"Because she asked you to. You were supporting and protecting a friend. Look, you had to make some tough choices. Even I'm not sure what I would've done in your place. But at least someone good was there for Savannah when I couldn't be."

Maxwell's lips quirked into a soft smile. "Anything for my friends."

"You're unlike any noble I've ever met. Or any person, for that matter." I told him. "But I'm glad to call you my friend." I offered him my hand.

"Awwwwwwww!" We heard, and turned to look at the girls.

"You guys should hug it out!" Myers said excitedly.

"That's not really ne--"
"Put'er there!" Maxwell put his hand in mine and pulled me in for a hug.

Slowly, I returned it. "Alright, we're huggin' this one out."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a great hugger?"

"Alright. Moment over." You just had to make it weird, didn't you?

We broke apart and turned back to our food. Olivia teased us for our "display of affection" and we decided it was time to get going. Maxwell shoved his food in his mouth, running after Olivia, with Hana tailing after them.

I walked back, slowly, still working on my food. Myers slowly walked in step with me. "Hey, Drake."

"Hey, Myers."

"You know you've got a bit of sauce on your face, right?"

"I do?" I began wiping at my face. "Where?"

Myers pressed her lips to my cheeks softly. "There."

I rubbed my cheek, her lips leaving the spot warm and tingly, trying my best not to grin. "Thanks, Myers. What would I do without you?"

"Spend less time blushing, probably."

"Who's blushing?" I'm not blushing!

"It's okay. It's cute." Myers grinned at me, taking my hand and giving it a quick squeeze. I laced our fingers together for a little while, feeling happier than I had in a long time.

We were able to walk back to the hotel alone, thanks to Maxwell, who had done a great job at chasing Olivia away. A block away, we let go of each other's hands, as all of our friends were waiting to say goodnight before we all headed to our rooms.

I walked with Maxwell back to our room, only to find Bastien waiting outside. "Lord Maxwell." He bowed his head. "Drake. Can we talk?"

This was long overdue. "Yeah. We can."

"I'll, uh… make sure Milla remembers our appointment at the boutique tomorrow morning." Maxwell said awkwardly, before turning on his heel and walking away.

I sighed, opening my door. "Come on in."

Bastien stepped in cautiously, looking around. "You've spoken to Lady Camilla, I assume?"

"Yeah. She told me everything."

Bastien nodded somberly, taking this in. "I'm sorry, Drake. I knew this would hurt you and someone you care for, but… my king gave me an order, and I had to follow it."

I sighed. What is it about today that has me in a forgiving mood? "I know. We actually figured it out after talking to you. I knew you wouldn't do something like that, unless someone ordered you to."
"Thank you, Drake."

"You're welcome."

"For what it's worth… I will speak to Lady Camilla tomorrow and offer my apologies in person. And I will also be taking over this investigation, using all of the resources at my disposal to find Tariq."

"Good." Myers will forgive you. She forgives everyone. "I'm glad you're willing to make it up to her. She's… been through enough."

Bastien nodded once more. "She has. I'm very sorry for the part I played in all of it." He began to walk to the door, but I stopped him.

"Bastien… I forgive you… and so will Myers."

Bastien turned. "Thank you, Drake."

I walked over and gave him a hug. Bastien squeezed me tightly, patting my back, before stepping back. "She's lucky to have you." He said simply, and walked away, leaving me to gape after him.

I woke up late the next morning, and Maxwell was already gone from our room. I figured everybody would be busy getting ready for the tea tasting, so I made my was down to the hotel gym for a workout and then showered and went to get breakfast.

After that, I made my way to the tea house, choosing to walk instead of calling a cab. I'd never been to Shanghai before, so it felt good to do some solitary exploration. It almost felt like second nature… almost. I had to admit that every single time I saw something cool or interesting, I'd think of Myers, and of how it would be to explore the city with her.

It just wasn't the same doing it by myself anymore …

I sighed, shaking my head, and kept walking. I arrived at the tea house before long, taking in the sweet smells of the cherry blossoms. An attendant greeted me and I gave him my name, and he led me to a small table with a clear view of the entrance.

I felt my eyes widen as I spotted Myers and Hana come in. Myers was wearing this red dress that hugged every curve just so… I shook my head, trying to snap out of it. Hana left to greet her father, and I raised my hand. "Myers! Over here." She turned and walked towards me with a beaming smile. "I thought I'd be stuck drinking tea alone."

"Sadly for all of us, that's not the case." Olivia sat in the seat next to mine. She eyed Myers critically. "That's… a very lovely bracelet, Camilla. I'm surprised you'd be able to afford something like that."

I raised my eyebrows, just noticing the unmistakably expensive pearl bracelet dangling from her wrist.

"Myers' lips quirked into an amused crooked smile. "Normally, I couldn't. This was a gift."

"Oh? From who?" Olivia asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Liam, actually." Myers said calmly.

"Ah." Olivia said simply, looking quickly away.
Of course he did, I thought, trying to fight off the very real insecurities that came crawling from the back of my mind. I could never give her something like that, could never shower her in presents and jewelry... God, what was she doing with me? Why wasn't she with Liam? He could, quite literally, give her a country. What could I give her? Some of my break-in-case-of-emergency whiskey and a couple sarcastic retorts?

Myers squeezed my thigh under the table. I drew my eyes to hers, noticing the concern in her eyes. The servants came out with all the bells and whistles -- or teapots and teacups, in this case -- and the ceremony commenced.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, and I took it out to find a message from Myers. "Please, don't worry. It's only a present. And I only accepted it to be polite. I don't actually wear this kind of stuff..."

I sighed, and looked up to find her staring at me with wide eyes. "You don't have to explain anything to me, Myers."

She pursed her lips. "I want to… I can see those wheels turning in that beautiful head of yours."

I chuckled at that. "Don't worry about it. And my head is not beautiful."

Now it was her turn to laugh.

"It looks good on you." I wrote.

Her eyes softened. "Thank you Drake. You know I care about you, right?"

"Right... still don't understand why, but okay."

"If I had known the two of you were going to be glued to your phones, I would have sat somewhere else." Olivia's voice nearly made me jump, and I felt like a kid who'd been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Hmph. Did Madeleine send you so sit with us exiles?" I turned to Olivia.

"Not as such, but there was only one other table available." She looked pointedly at Kiara and Poodlelope's table. "Your company seemed... marginally preferable."

"Olivia... it's okay. You can admit that we're friends." Myers teased her... although, knowing Myers I was sure that despite the teasing tone, she actually meant it.

Olivia's eyebrows shot up to her forehead. "I... I just find you less insufferable than Penelope."

Sure you do. "Coming from you, that's like a confession of love." I told her.

"We're basically besties." Myers elbowed me, grinning.

Finally, a server came to our table and we watched the tea service.

"No! Not my tea!" We heard Maxwell yell, racing over to us.

"Relax, Maxwell. It's part of the service."

"Oh, good. I thought my tea privileges were being revoked."
"Not unless you've committed tea crimes you haven't told us about."

"I wouldn't hurt a leaf! Except by drinking it."

"Where on Earth have you been?" I asked him.

"Looking into Tariq's whereabouts! We got a tip that he's somewhere in Los Angeles… hiding deep undercover."

I raised an eyebrow at Myers, wondering who gave them this tip, and she explained. "Bastien came to my room this morning, and after apologizing, he offered to help in this investigation. He's the one who tracked Tariq to L.A."

Myers gave me a soft smile, and I felt a small weight lift from my shoulders. I could tell by her eyes that she'd forgiven him.

"That figures." I frowned, getting worked up again. "He's off living it up in Hollywood while you're here cleaning up his mess."

"I've started calling any menswear store whose price tags start at three figures, but since we're on opposite sides of the Pacific… they're all closed right now."

"Oh, thanks timezones." Myers quipped.

"Don't worry, I left them a bunch of voicemails. I told every store that if they don't call back as soon as they're open, they'll face the wrath of House Beaumont's lawyers. I think Bertrand would be impressed."

"We have lawyers now?"

"The stores I called think we do!"

I rolled my eyes. "How are you holding up, Myers? Now that we're finally getting to the bottom of this whole mess?"

Myers pressed her lips together, thinking carefully about what she was going to say. "I… just want Tariq to face what he did to me…"

I squeezed her hand under the table. "After everything he's put you through, he deserves whatever's coming to him." Myers shot me a grateful look and squeezed right back.

"People say that vengeance is a dish best served cold, but trust me, Camilla. It's a delicacy at any temperature." Olivia gave her one of her signature cat-like smirks.

"How can you be so scary, but so cool at the same time?" Maxwell asked her.

"It's a gift." She told him.

"Or a curse." I told her.

The server finally finished the service and poured our tea. I took my cup, taking a tentative sip, and was pleasantly surprised at the taste. Myers closed her eyes, looking like she had just had a taste of heaven. Olivia teased her with a comment about mesh bags, and Myers actually took offense. I tried not to laugh. She could handle anything that Olivia threw at her, but not any tea related insults. Then, Maxwell wanted seconds, but was too afraid to ask, so I offered him my cup, and Myers began teasing us about getting along like old times.
After spotting Neville leaving Hana's table, we all looked and it was clear that Hana and her dad were arguing. Myers got up to help, and Olivia decided that she was the de facto commander of our table. We argued for a while, when Myers came back looking dejected.

"Well… that could've gone better."

"What happened? We saw Hana leave." I told her.

"She and her dad for into a fight. She actually told him she wasn't interested in Neville. I'm not sure if me being there made things better or worse."

Myers slumped into her chair, covering her face with her hand.

I placed a hand on her shoulder and shook her slightly. "Well, good for her. It's about time she told her parents to lay off."

"Interesting. It seems she's discovering a backbone." Olivia commented.

Finally, it was time to leave. Olivia, Maxwell and Myers left to pay their respects to Liam, and I went ahead to the limo to wait for them. A couple minutes later, only Maxwell came back.

"Where's Myers?"

Maxwell looked away awkwardly. "Um…"

"She went to meet up with Liam, didn't she?"

"How'd you know?"

I shrugged. "By the look on your face, and by your hesitation to tell me."

"Oh," Maxwell rubbed the back of his neck and sat next to me, as the limo began moving. "From what Hana's told me, nothing ever happens when they go out. They hang out as friends."

I sighed, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees. "I know… Wait, what has Hana told you?"

He shrugged. "Well… some of the things Milla tells her… about… you guys…"

"Okay, two things: one, has Myers ever actually told you anything about us? And two, do you just sit around gossiping with Hana about us?"

Maxwell blushed. "Uh… okay. Apart from Milla telling me during the hunt that she was falling for someone else, and then repeating it at the airport, she hasn't mentioned it again in front of me and Bertrand. I figured out it was you all by myself." He looked very proud about that fact. "And by you confirming it. And two… once I figured out Hana knew something, and she figured out I also knew something, we started to talk about it… and now it's pretty much all we talk about." He gave me a toothy grin.

I ran a hand over my hair. "Oh, God… Maxwell!"

"What? If you think about it, I'm like a double agent. I could tell you anything you need to know! And that's how I know you also have nothing to worry about right now." His eyes softened. "She… really cares about you, you know… I don't think she'd ever do anything to hurt you."

"No, I know." I told him, trying to convince him as much as myself. "And she and Liam are friends. Why shouldn't they hang out?"
"Right… yeah, exactly." Maxwell slowly slumped lower in his seat.

I warred with myself, my old insecurities battling with my feelings for Myers. I did trust her, but it's just… I honestly didn't know how she could ever pick me over Liam. A part of myself still refused to believe it.

"I want you, and I'll keep saying it until you believe me."

"I care about you…"

"Love you…"

All these memories, all her words, all her furtive looks and her kisses whirled inside my head, going toe to toe with all the memories from when we were younger, from when all the girls chased after Liam, completely ignoring me.

I sighed.

Maxwell opened one eye, giving me this pointed look. "Drake… you're worrying. And you really don't have any reason to worry."

"I know…"

"What do you mean 'you know'?

Maybe… I could tell him. Maybe it would be good to tell someone… to talk about it.

"What exactly do you know?" Maxwell kept prodding.

"Maxwell…"

"Hmm…?"

"I… no, nevermind."

"Oh, come on! You always do this! Just tell me!"

"No, you just want more juicy gossip to tell Hana."

"That's beside the point. Come on, tell me. Tell…" He began chanting, "Tell! Tell! Tell!"

"Okay! Okay! Just… stop!"

"Okay, but tell me."

"Okay… I brought my hand to my mouth, trying to figure out how to say this. "Okay. Remember when we went camping a couple days ago?"

"Yeah."

"Myers… sneaked into my tent."

"Okay…"

"And we slept together." His eyes widened. "Only slept! Nothing… else happened."

"Dude, that's between you and Milla! I don't want to know!"
I narrowed my eyes at him. *Well, good to know you have some boundaries regarding my personal life.* "Anyways, as Myers was drifting off to sleep… she said 'love you'…"

Maxwell nodded, looking as though he expected something more, something… juicier. "Yeah… and…?"

"That's it."

"Oh…" Wow, he honestly looked disappointed. "That's it?"

"Uh, yeah!" I facepalmed myself. "She actually said… you know …"

"Yeah, she's been using *that* word since last season! I told you that!"

"I know, but this time she let it slip in front of me! And… she said it…"

Maxwell simply shrugged, looking unimpressed. "Yeah, it's how she feels."

I groaned. "Ugh! Why aren't you more surprised? Or excited, or something."

"Because I already knew that. How do *you* feel about it?"

Uh… "I don't know." I answered honestly.

"I bet you've even avoided thinking about it, knowing you…"

"Hey!" I was about to protest, but he shot me this look like ' *really?*' and any protest I had died on my tongue. "Fine. Yeah, I haven't thought about it."

He nodded knowingly. "Ok, well… just figure out how you feel about it and talk to her. Or just simply wait for her to say it again when she's conscious."

That was actually pretty sound advice, coming from Maxwell of all people. "Okay… yeah, you're right. I'll do… that."

He nodded, relaxing back down on his seat. "Let me know how it goes."

The rest of the ride was spent in silence, until we got to the hotel. We went to get dinner and then Maxwell shooed me straight to our room. He wanted to get some rest before tomorrow, when we would be flying to New York.

We were going back to where it all began: the Big Apple.
"In New Yooooooork!" Myers, Hana Maxwell sang at the top of their lungs. "Concrete jungle where dreams are made of! There's nothing you can't dooooo!"

I groaned. I'd decided to fly out on the Beaumonts' jet with Myers, Maxwell and Hana, instead of with Liam, and now… Well, let's just say Myers was really pumped about returning home, and the whole flight had basically turned into a mini Beaumont Bash. I mean, Maxwell had actually made a 'New York playlist'.

"Come, Drake! Dance with us!" Hana yelled.

"Uh, I'm good here, thanks." I honestly didn't know how I would endure 14 hours of this.

Myers danced over to me, with a tumbler of whiskey in hand. She offered it to me. "Trade? A glass for a dance?"

I rolled my eyes. It really wasn't fair how I couldn't deny this woman anything, especially now, that she was so… excited and bright-eyed. "Ugh… fine."

Myers grinned excitedly at me, and I downed the glass before standing up. She took my hand and led me to the makeshift 'dance floor', while Maxwell and Hana whooped and cheered. Myers twirled under my hand, and then pulled me closer. She seemed happier and more at ease than I'd seen her in a long time. And so, we drank and danced for like half the plane ride.

Hana was the first to break, saying she was going to lay down, and fell asleep despite the music. Maxwell turned it down, went to the bathroom, and then also collapsed in his chair. After they had both passed out, Myers turned the music off, and covered them both with blankets. I slumped in my seat, and Myers boldly sat on my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"Umm... hello."

"Hello, kind sir. How are you faring on this fine evening?"

"I..." I blanked. "I got nothing." Myers giggled. "Ms. Myers are you... are you drunk?"

"Nope..." She shook her head. "No, n-not at all." Myers burst into a fit of giggles again.

"Uh huh. I'm really convinced."

"I'm not! I mean, I'm not exactly sober either... but I'm not, like, drunk -drunk. I'm... tipsy, if you will." She began running her fingers through my hair. I closed my eyes for a second, enjoying the feeling of her hands on me. She hummed contentedly. "You have such soft hair."

"Uh huh. Are you trying to seduce me, Myers? 'Cause, uh... our friends are right there... "

"They're asleep." As if to accentuate her point, Maxwell snored loudly, the sound reverberating throughout the whole cabin.

“Yeah, but...”
“But what? Don’t you… want me?”

I groaned. “You know very well that I do.”

“Then come on.” She took my hand and led me to the back of the jet, where a screen separated the main cabin from the bathroom. We ducked behind the screen, and Myers pressed me against the wall. My hands grasped her waist, and she raised herself on her toes, linking her fingers behind my neck. Her mouth hovered a breath away from mine, and she let the moment linger. I couldn’t take it much longer, and leaned in to press my lips against hers.

The kiss started out soft, both of us content to explore each other lazily, but with every stroke of my tongue on hers, every time our hands roamed each other’s body, it soon became a desperate battle of tongues, teeth and lips. I ran my hands through Myers’ hair, and she rewarded me with a delicious shiver. Her hands slipped under my shirt, tearing a hiss out of me, and she caressed the planes of my chest and abs. My own hands wandered down her back, and I cupped her ass, lifting her so she could wrap her legs around my waist, and turned her around so she was now against the wall. She began fumbling with the hem of my shirt, trying desperately to pull it up and get it off me.

I broke the kiss. Set her back down. Stepped back.

“Drake?” Myers tilted her head to the side inquisitively. “What’s wrong?”

Nothing was wrong, per se. It’s just that, since that night at the pool hall… It was leading somewhere, and every encounter we would have since would lead somewhere. And I realized… I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt guilty about it. Now that I thought about it, it had been a really long time since I’d heard from that annoying voice in my head I called a conscience. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I want to feel crushing guilt every time I looked at the woman I… care for. But at some point, being with her, even in secret, had become… normal. I guess it didn’t help that our friends knew, and approved, and supported us — minus Liam, of course. It didn’t help that me and Myers were me and Myers to them. We were already like a couple to them, and they talked about us as if we were really together.

But all of this didn’t change the fact that it was — at least on some level — wrong… Wrong in the sense that my best friend in the whole world still had feelings for this woman, and that he thought that after she cleared her name, she would be free to be with him… Wrong in the sense that I’d broken the promise I’d made to myself, that I wouldn’t do this, I wouldn’t go behind his back…

And just like that, a tidal wave of self crushing guilt came crashing back.

Well, you asked for it… Hello again, by the way! I’m back!

I groaned inwardly.

“Drake… you’re scaring me. What’s wrong?” Myers was almost glued to the spot, unsure of whether to come closer to me, reach out or just stay where she was.

“Come here.” She stepped closer and I wrapped her in a hug. She relaxed in my arms, wrapping her arms around my waist. “Myers… we need to talk.”

“Okay…” She seemed to sober up, and we moved to sit down on the floor, up against the wall.

The engine hummed in the silence of the night, the only noise in the now silent plane.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going through your mind?” Myers pressed. I could see she was nervous, probably because I’d used the words that were typically used before every breakup or
“Yeah.” Just say it, I steeled myself. “Here’s the thing, Myers. I want you. Want you bad.”

“Yeah. I do too.”

“But I told you our first night in Applewood, I want to do this right… and I feel I haven’t been doing it right.”

“What do you mean?”

I sighed. “I mean… we’ve been sneaking around, behind Liam’s back… She opened her mouth to retort, and I knew what she was going to say, so I held up a finger. “Wait, let me finish.”

“Fine.”

“I… I still feel like it’s wrong, Myers. And the other night, at the pool hall…” A small, catlike grin slowly spread over her face, and she looked down at the ground, tucking a strand of hair behind her air. It was dark, but I knew she was blushing. “Myers, if the guard hadn’t knocked on the door, I would’ve… we would’ve…”

She took my hand. “I know.”

“Anyway, my point is… I don’t want us to be together that way… until you clear your name, and you’re free to choose. And if, for some insane reason you’re still bent on choosing me, I want us to tell Liam before we go any further.”


I squeezed her hand. “Thanks, Myers. For understanding.”

“You don’t have to thank me for that. And I want you to know… I’ve really tried my hardest to not do anything that would lead Liam on…”

I sighed. “I know, Myers.”

“And sometimes, I feel like… he doesn’t love me… I get the feeling he loves the idea of me.” She admitted quietly. “He doesn’t see me… not like you do.”

My heart warmed a little at that.

“But that’s beside the point.” She said quickly, shaking her head. “Anyway, I have one final question.”

“Shoot.”

“Can we still make out?”

I chuckled, giving her a wry grin.

“I’ll be good, I promise.” She leveled her best innocent stare at me.

“We’ll have to see, Ms. Myers. We’ll see.”

Myers groaned. “You, Drake Walker, are such a tease.”
We laughed, and she rested her head on my shoulders. “Come on, Myers. Let’s go to sleep.”

I took her hand and led her back to the central cabin. She sat beside me, rested her head on my shoulder, and was asleep in a matter of minutes. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head, and slept.

The next morning we touched down at JFK Airport at around 8 am, New York time. Myers was buzzing with excitement, glued to her phone, probably texting her dad or her friends. “We’re staying at the Plaza?!” She asked, barely believing it. “I bet our rooms are bigger than my apartment!”

“I’d love to see your apartment!” Hana commented.

“Me too.” Maxwell nodded.

“Me three, actually.”

Myers laughed. “Maybe, if we have time. And if my roommate Hailey is okay with it.”

“You had a roommate?!” Maxwell’s jaw dropped.

“Yeah, did you really think I could afford living by myself?”

We continued to chat while the limo took us to the hotel. Once inside, we all separated to go find our rooms. Hana was once more rooming with Olivia, and I was rooming with Maxwell, so I offered to take Maxwell’s bag to our room, and walked Hana to hers, while he walked Myers to her room.

After dropping Hana off in her room, and dropping mine and Maxwell’s bags at our room, I decided to go out. I still had to get Liam a wedding gift, just in case, and I had no idea what to get him. I walked around Fifth Avenue, going into a menswear store, a department store, and finally, a jewelry store.

I browsed around when suddenly…

“... Yeah, I just got in this morning... Well, I have a UN party tonight— shut up, I’m serious!”

Myers laughed, talking on the phone. “Anyway, I have this party tonight and I have to meet my press secretary a couple hours before, to get ready. But I really want to see you guys, so maybe we could meet up at my old bar around 5 for drinks?” She nodded silently as the other person answered. Then, she lifted her gaze and met mine. “Drake? Hang on a second, Hailey. Yes, Drake Drake. I have to go. Text me back, I love you, bye!” Myers hung up the phone.

“Oh, hey Myers.” Was the universe conspiring to make me run into this woman everywhere? I thought.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s a store. Anyone can go into a store.”

“Sure, but you’re the last person I expected to see looking around at necklaces that require a down payment.”

I sighed. “Alright, you caught me. I’m looking for a wedding gift for Liam.”

“In a jewelry store?”

“What? You don’t think he’d want one of those?” I pointed to a medallion that had a million gemstones on it.
“Hey… would Liam want you to break the bank?” She steper closer to me, her eyes sympathetic.

“No, you’re right… So, did you come down here to shoot down my gift ideas, or are you looking for something?”

“I’m supposed to pick up Madeleine’s wedding ring.”

_Ouch._ “Wow. That’s cold, even for her.”

Myers shrugged. “I find it amusing she thinks she could break me with that. It’s too bad for her I have my eyes on someone else, so this doesn’t really get to me.” She winked at me.

I rubbed the back of my neck, chuckling nervously, looking down at the ground. “Well, let’s go get it then.”

We walked to the counter, and Myers smiled politely at the jeweler. "Good morning. I'm here to pick up a package for Countess Madeleine Richards of Fydelia?"

The jeweler's eyes widened just a tad before nodding. "Ah, yes, the Countess called to say someone would be by this morning to pick up her wedding ring. You are…” he turned, reaching for a small note underneath the counter, "Lady Camilla Myers?"

"That's me."

"May I see some identification, please?"

"Of course." Myers reached into her bag and pulled her driver's license from her wallet. I leaned in, trying to get a glimpse of her picture.

The jeweler nodded, and handed Myers her license back. "Thank you, Ms. Myers. I'll be back in just a minute." He went to the back for a brief moment.

While we waited, I asked her, “So, who were you talking to?”

“My roommate, Hailey. I told her I was back in town for a few days and she wants to meet up.”

The jeweler came back before I could answer, with a small box in his hand. He opened it, revealing a simple gold band with small diamonds encrusted on it. “That’s it?” I blurted out, the jeweler shooting me a dirty look, “I was expecting something more…”

“Elaborate?”

“I was going to say pretentious.”

“I think it’s lovely, actually. Simple, yet elegant. You’ve got to hand it to Madeleine. She’s always stylish.”

The jeweler smiled approvingly at her.

“Shouldn’t it be covered in more… I don’t know… diamonds?”

“You’re thinking of engagement rings. Those are usually the sparkly ones.”

“…Right.” I looked back at the ring, and it hit me. Unless Myers found Tariq… Liam would marry the Wicked Witch of the West in a matter of days. “I guess their wedding’s coming up pretty fast.”
“Yeah…” Myers looked back to the jeweler and thanked him, closing the little blue box that contained the ring and tucking it into her purse.

“We’ll find Tariq soon, Myers. We have to.” I told her, as we began walking out.

“If we do… what will that mean for… us?” I looked at her, wondering if maybe she didn’t remember our conversation last night, and she quickly added. “I know we talked about holding off doing anything until we did, but… I want to know what happens next.”

I looked away, trying to gather my thoughts. On one hand, I didn’t know what would happen between us once her name was cleared, because that was her choice to make. On the other hand, I knew that as soon as her name was cleared, Liam would break off his engagement with Madeleine. So… “It’ll be good news for you and Liam. You’ve had to live with this hanging over you long enough.”

Myers rolled her eyes, obviously not thrilled with my answer. “That’s not what I asked, Drake. Once my name is cleared… I can be with whoever I want.” She let that sentence linger, drawing circles on the back of my hand with her finger.

“I… I guess that depends on what you want then, Myers.” Before she could say anything else, I asked her, “If you’re done here, do you want to give me a hand with Liam’s gift? He’s my best friend. I want to get him something good, but I think I’m in over my head here.”

She smiled tenderly, before said smile turned teasing. “Drake… are you inviting me on a shopping trip?”

“Don’t make me regret it, Myers.” I mock scowled at her.

We burst into laughter, before she said, “What I mean is, I would be honored to accompany you.”

“Come on then.”

We walked out the store side by side, perusing the different shops. I had the idea to try the pet store. I walked in and this beautiful golden lab puppy caught my eye. One of the employees saw us and offered to let me hold the puppy.

“I… I don’t know…” Myers said.

I held out the puppy towards her, and her facade melted. She cooed it and scratched behind his eyes.

“Come on, Myers. Liam has always loved dogs.”

She snuggled the puppy in her arms for one moment, and handed him back to me. “Do you really want to make this cutie live with Madeleine?”

“Awww… I slowly lowered the puppy back to it’s pen, shaking my head at the saleskid. “You’re safer here, pal.” I patted the lab’s head once more, before leaving with Myers.

We kept walking around, and somehow wound up at a high end furniture store. I was actually surprised to find that high end furniture existed… Anyway, we looked around once more, and I spotted this recliner… black, buttery leather, massage setting, cupholders, a stereo on the headrest… I sat down and groaned in delight. “This is it, Myers. A deluxe recliner, dual cup holders, over fifty massage settings…”

Myers shook her head indulgently. “Really? I’m sure Liam owns plenty of chairs.”
“You’ve clearly never sat on the Cordonian Throne. Let’s just say Liam’s going to need back support after sitting on that thing.”

Myers chuckled. “I’m not even going to ask how you know that… and I think we can do better that a dad’s dream chair. And I say this with authority, since my dad owns two of those.”

I sighed, and got up.

“Unless you want it…”

“Nah, I’m not shipping that thing back to Cordonia.”

We walked out, when I saw it: *Home Depot*. I took Myers hand without even thinking about it, and dragged her inside the store.

“The hardware store? Seriously?” Judging by her face, I figured she was either on the verge of laughter or annoyance.

And then I saw it. The Hypertherm Powermax 30 XP. I had to literally contain a sigh.

Myers caught me staring and rolled her eyes. “What would you even use that for? What would Liam use that for?”

“Engraving… medals? Come on, it’s a tool. Every guy appreciates a handy power tool…”

“At least I know what to get you for your next birthday…” Myers muttered under her breath. She sighed and shook her head, looking back at me with a grin. “Drake, it’s adorable how bad you are at this.”

“I don’t know if I should take that as a compliment.”

“I’m just glad I was here to witness this.”

“That makes one of us.”

Myers reached for my hand, lacing our fingers. “Come on. You look like you need a break.”

She began leading outside, through the maze-like streets, until she found a small plaza with a couple benches on it. We both sat down, exhausted.

I ran my fingers through my hair, frustrated. “Trying to find a present for this wedding is like torture.”

“I take it you’re not a fan of the usual wedding traditions.”

“I’ve got nothing against tradition. But there are nice, simple ceremonies, and then there are international engagement tours.”

“So what would your ‘simple’ wedding look like?”

I looked at her then. “Should I ask why you’re asking?”

“Let’s just say I’m curious.”

I sighed. “I guess it’d be something small. A short reception and a ceremony, just a few friends and family…”
“Luckily, you only have a few friends and family.” Myers teased.

“Ha ha, Myers.”

“Let me guess. Your ring bearer would be little Bartie.”

I pictured Bartie in a suit, and I swear my heart melted. “Huh. I hadn’t really thought about it, but you know… That’d be great.”

“Imagine him in a tiny suit!” Myers squealed.

“Yeah, Savannah would be over the moon.”

“What about best man? I vote for Liam. I bet he’d throw you the perfect bachelor party. Barbecue and stiff drinks galore. And! He’s good at speeches. He’d never embarrass you.”

“Hm… Liam is a strong contender.”

“That only leaves one question. Who are you marrying in this scenario? Me?”

“I…” I looked away, feeling the blood rush all the way up to my ears. “Are you proposing to me, Myers?”

She grinned impishly. “Trust me, if I were, you’d know.”

“Oh, yeah? Are you the ‘big gesture’ type of girl.”

She nodded exaggeratedly. “Mm-hmm. Yes. Absolutely. I’d surprise you with skywriting on a private beach, or a fireworks show, or… 1000 bottles of whiskey arranged just so that they spell ‘Will you marry me?’” Myers chuckled, and I couldn’t help but grin.

I shook my head. “Well… Maybe that’s a question for another time. Enough daydreaming for now. I still need a present for Liam. Liam has always been there for me, and… well, you know him. He always gives the perfect gifts.” I glanced down at Myers’ wrist, but she wasn’t wearing his bracelet.

“It’s like his superpower.” She agreed.

“I just wanted to return the favor for once. But I’m stumped.”

“Relax, Drake.” Myers rubbed my shoulder. “You just need to remember the secret to finding a good present: picking something unique to you.”

“If I get him whiskey, he’d probably laugh. Hell, I’d have to laugh at myself.”

“No, no. What I mean is, you know Liam better than anyone. You’ve been through thick and thin together. Anyone can get him something he’d enjoy, but what’s something you know he’d really appreciate?”

What can you get for the man who has everything? “I don’t know wh—” A golden gleam caught my eye a couple feet away. I looked closer and realized it was a compass. And everything just clicked. “Wait. I’ve got it.”

I ran to the store, almost startling the elderly shop owner when I opened the door a bit harsher than I intended. I asked him for the compass, only to find it at an extremely reasonable price, so I bought it on the spot. I paid the man, and thanked him before walking out. Myers was still sitting on the bench, her lips quirked in the smallest of smiles.
“This is what I’m giving Liam.” I told her, and pulled out the compass.

“It’s beautiful.” She touched it almost reverently. “I knew you could do it. Care to tell me its meaning?”

“He’s always had guards and royal staff around, so he’s never needed a compass. But they can’t always be there for him. Even I can’t always be there for him. If he’s ever out on his own, or if he feels he’s losing his way, I thought it might be a nice reminder.”

“I get the feeling you’re talking about more than just cardinal directions.”

“Constantine was a decent king for years, but by the time he retired, he’d lost sight of what really mattered. Look at everything he put you and Liam through. I don’t ever want that to happen to Liam. So I thought he could use a compass to follow. Something to remind him to stay true to what he believes in.” I met Myers’ eyes, that were glistening with emotion. “What do you think? Too cheesy?”

She reached out and pulled me into a hug. “That’s literally the perfect gift. You’re a thoughtful guy under that gruff exterior.”

“I’m just trying to look out for Liam.”

“I know, Drake. That’s what people who care about their friends do. Liam will love it.” She let me go.

“I hope so.” I put the compass away. “Thank god that’s over with.” I breathed a sigh of relief.

Myers groaned. “Now we just have to get through this United Nations party.”

Before I could respond, her phone pinged. She unlocked it and smiled at the screen, before turning back to me. “My friends and I are going to get together at my old bar for a couple of drinks… want to come?” She asked hopefully.

I sighed… Sometimes I forgot Myers had a whole life here before Cordonia… And she wanted me to meet her friends… I got really nervous all of a sudden, but she was staring at me with this pleading look in those puppy dog eyes… “Hell, why not? I mean, we just endured an eternity of shopping. We deserve to unwind for a bit.”

“Great! Thank you!”

“Let’s go.” I stood, and noticed something caught Myers eyes in a store window. I followed her gaze to a mannequin wearing a tight shirt and some gray jeans.

“Oh. My. God. I promise I’ll buy you a drink right after we try one more store.”

Nope. No way, nu-uh. “That is not happening.” I told her.

“All you have to do is try it on. Please!”

I rolled my eyes. “The things I do for your amusement…”

She smiled gleefully and practically dragged me inside. Myers talked to one of the attendants and they pointed her to the clothes in my size. After browsing for a while, she handed me a shirt, and some jeans. “Your shoes will do for this look.”

“Yay.” I said sarcastically, and she pushed me towards the fitting room. I came out a few moments
later and her jaw literally fell.

“Drake… you’ve never looked hotter.”

“You like this sort of thing?”

“I’m just saying it’s pretty flattering.”

I stretched, flexing a bit for her benefit. “It’s… comfy. I’ll give it that. Fine. I’ll buy this getup if you make good on that drink you promised me.”

“Deal. Let’s go.”

I paid for the clothes, and we left for the bar. We walked inside, both of us looking around.

"I remember this place…"

"Wow… I haven't been here since that night at Liam's bachelor party. My old bar… It's good to be back."

I looked at her, and she was looking around with a wistful expression on her face. I took her hand. "Glad to be home?"

Myers looked at our hands, then met my eyes. "I… I'm not sure New York is really home anymore… but I had some good times here. It's nice to visit."

I grinned at her, the unexpected nerves slowly dissipating. Suddenly a waiter approached us, stopping in his tracks as he stared at Myers.

"Oh my God! Milla?!"

"Daniel!" Myers squealed, moving to hug him.

"But… what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in Cordonia?"

"It's a long story… but we're just visiting."

"Well, you could've called! Or texted!"

"I know! I've just been so busy, and I know that's no excuse, but hey! I'm here now!"

"Well, I'm glad you're doing okay." He pulled her in for another hug, before pushing her back, holding her by her shoulders. "You look gorgeous. Courtly life had done wonders for you."

Myers rolled her eyes. "Ugh… you have no idea."

"Well, I definitely want to hear more on that later." He looked at me. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Daniel, by the way."

He held his hand to me and I shook it.

"This is Drake, my hot date."

"Uh…"

"You always did have good taste." Daniel commented.
"We're not… I mean, I would… Nevermind." I shook my head. "It's nice to meet you."

"Nice meeting you too. Now please follow me to the most romantic spot in the house."

Myers laughed, as Daniel led us to a booth that was no different than the others, except for the fact that someone had carved a crooked heart on the table.

"Daniel, what are you doing out there?!" We heard someone call from the bar. Myers tensed. "I've got a sink full of dirty dishes that aren't going to wash themselves!"

Daniel, however, didn't seem to mind at all. He simply rolled his eyes and turned around with his best smile. "We've got customers, boss. Look who just stopped by!"

The guy walked over and scowled at Myers. "You." His eyes and nostrils widened lividly. "I hope you're not here to collect a paycheck. You walked out on me with only a day's notice, on a Saturday!

"Hey, watch your tone. That's no way to talk to a customer." I said, getting up.

The guy stepped up to me. "She used to work for me. I'll talk to her however I like."

I raised an eyebrow, regarding him coldly. "Really? You want to mess with a member of the Corodonian Royal Court?"

"She's… what?"

"It's okay, Drake. We just got off on the wrong foot. We're just here to get a drink, that's all."

_You may have infinite patience, Myers, but I don't._

"Fine." The manager growled. "But don't expect any kind of employee discount on your tab." He turned to go, and bumped into a group of people. "Hi, what can I get you?"

A short girl with small eyes and curly hair stepped up. "We're with them actually."

His demeanor immediately changed, and he rolled his eyes. "Very well. Daniel will take your order."

He walked away briskly, and the curly haired girl cringed at Myers, before breaking out into a smile. "Milla!"

"Hailey!" Myers got up and hugged the tiny girl. Then she turned, hugging a burly guy, a thin wispy girl, and… was that the bouncer from the club?

"Aww, it's so good to see you!"

"You too!"

"I leave for one tour and when I come back I find you're galavanting in a foreign country?" The burly guy asked.

Myers shrugged. "Your fault for not being here to stop me. Come on."

She led them all to our booth, and I stood self consciously. Myers walked up to me and took my hand, giving it an encouraging squeeze. "Guys, this is Drake." They all nodded, the girls grinning. "Drake, these are my best friends Hayley--"
The short girl with curly hair stepped up for a hand shake. "Hiya." I shook her hand. "Ooh, good shake."

"Uh… thanks."

"María José…"

The thin wispy girl gave me a Pocahontas like wave. "Nice to meet you. Mari Jo is fine."

"Nice to meet you." I said.

"Jaime…"

The burly guy stepped up, offering his hand. "Hey, what's up, man? Nice to meet you."

"Hey, you too." He squeezed my hand a little tighter than necessary.

"And you might remember Jacob from that night at Kismet."

"Uh… yeah, hi."

"Hey, man, nice to see you again."

Myers took my hand and we all slid into the booth. Daniel stepped up to us, "Anyway, sorry about the boss. I wish I could say he's having a bad day… but he's just like that. Now, what can I get everyone?"

"One whisky. Neat."

"Make that two." Myers told him.

"Three." Jacob added.

"I'll just have a beer." Jaime said.

"I'll have a strawberry daiquiri." Mary Jo ordered.

"And I'll have a mojito." Hailey finished.

Daniel jotted everything down, and walked over to the bar.

While everyone started talking, Myers bumped my shoulder. "What happened back there, Drake?" She said quietly. "I never thought I'd see you play the noble card."

I shrugged. "Yeah, well, after everything the court has put you through, I figure you might as well get some use out of it. Courtly privilege is good at keeping jerks away. Unless those jerks are also nobles."

"I'll remember that loophole." She grinned at me.

Daniel came back with all of our drinks.

"So, Drake… that was really great what you did back there, with Milla's old boss." Hailey said.

"Uh… thanks."

"It's about time someone stood up to that jerk." Jaime commented, before turning to me. "So, what
do you do, Drake?"

"Uh…" I looked to Myers, who nodded encouragingly. "Well, I grew up at the palace, and I work odd jobs there every now and then."

"Right, Milla told us you were the King's best friend?" Mari Jo asked, sipping her drink.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Jaime is a marine, fresh off his second tour, and Mari Jo is a preschool teacher." Myers told me. "And Jacob, over here, is going to veterinary school. He only moonlights as a bouncer."

"Wow… that's great. And what do you do, Hailey?" I turned to Hailey.

"I just started my last year of pharmacy school."

"Wait, I'm confused… I thought Drake was that blond guy, the one you left with that night." Jacob furrowed his brows, confused.

Hailey slapped the back of his head. "Keep up, Jacob, that was Liam! This is Drake."

Myers laughed. "Exactly."

"Oh… Oh!" Jacob's eyes widened, looking at me in an entirely new light. "Yeah, he looks more like your type."

I blushed.

"Yes, I know, Jacob." Myers told him.

"And you're… the guy that punched the other one that snuck into her room? The guy from the tabloids." He asked me.

"Um… yeah, that's me."

"How are you doing with all that, anyway?" Jaime asked Myers.

She hesitated, trying to find the right words. "It's… slow progress, but we'll find him." Myers told him.

"Good." He turned to me. "I hope you gave that sonuvabitch a good beating."

On that we agree. I nodded. "I did."

"Okay, enough." Myers said, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, come on, Milla! We were just starting to get along!" Jaime joked.

"I know I usually say violence isn't the answer," Mari Jo chimed in, "but in this case, it really was. What a douche."

"Okay, can we talk about literally anything else?" Myers pleaded.

"Yes, please." I decided to take the reigns and ask, "So, how do you all know each other?"

"Milla and I were roommates in college, and we decided to keep living together after graduating." Hailey told me.
"And I met Mari Jo at one of my psych classes." Myers told me.

"I met Milla through Hailey." Jacob told me.

"And I've known her since high school." Jaime finished.

"So you're also from Jersey?"

"Nah, I was a military brat. We moved around a lot, but I got finish high school there. Got the hell out of there as quickly as I could, though."

"Thank God." Myers said, and they high fived.

"I graduated and enlisted right away. It's… sort of a family tradition. All the men in my family are career military men."

"That's great." I understood that better than anyone. "My dad was Captain of the King's Guard."

"Yeah, Milla mentioned something. So you get it."

"Yeah."

"You didn't wanna enlist after you turned 18?"

I took a sip of my whiskey. "I did, but… I figured if I wanted to risk my life for anyone, it should be for someone I actually care about."

"Right. And for a rookie kid just staring out, they would've sent you to protect any other noble instead of letting you stay with your best friend."

"Exactly!" This guy got me.

"Yeah, you were better off staying put. That way you could stay close to your friend, and still act as his honorary bodyguard. You train?"

I nodded. "I do."

"What discipline?"

"My dad trained me in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Taekwondo, and I know a little bit of Krav Maga."

"Wait, you know Krav Maga?" Hailey asked excitedly.

"Only a little bit."

"Why am I just learning this about you?" Myers asked me.

I shrugged. "You never asked."

"You shoot?" Jaime asked me.

I hesitated. "I… know my way around a gun, yeah." That didn't mean I liked to use them. Liam and I were taught to use one, but only as a last resort.

"I could give you some pointers if you'd like. How long are you guys in town?"

"For a week."
"Think you could make some time to go to a shooting range?"

I looked at Myers, both of us skeptical. "No, I don't think so, Jaime." Myers told him.

"Rain check?" I asked.

"I'll hold you to that."

The conversation turned to lighter things, and I was able to relax as the ice was broken. Her friends asked us all about Cordonia, and they told me snippets of Myers' life in New York. Myers leaned against me, and I placed my arm around her shoulders as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

My mind wandered a little, thinking of how, in an alternate universe, this could've been our life. We would hang out with friends on a Friday night, and then we'd head home to our crappy, shoe-box apartment, and we would've been happy… I looked down at Myers -- who was content leaning into me, animatedly telling a story -- and I couldn't help but smile at her.

"... really sweet, Drake." I looked up to find Hailey looking at me.

"Uh… sorry, what?"

"I'm telling them about the tour in Rome." Myers said.

"And I was just saying Milla's want to go to Rome since… I've known her. I think it's really sweet how you organized the entire tour for her."

"Oh… thanks. It's really not a big deal."

"'Not a big deal' the man says, putting all the rest of us to shame." Jacob scoffed good naturedly. He turned to Jaime. "Am I right?"

"You're right." The marine agreed. "Hey, man, you should give me your number. I'd love to pick your brain around… Valentine's Day, take my wife out some place nice."

"You're married?"

"Going on two years now." He lifted his hand to show me the band on his finger.

"He was the first one of our little group to tie the knot. Guess how long they dated before they got married!" Myers told me.

"Uh… a year?"

Jaime laughed and shook his head. "Since tenth grade. We're real high school sweethearts."

"Wow! Congratulations!" I told him awkwardly.

"Hey, why didn't Karen come? Didn't she miss me?" Myers pouted.

"She wanted to, but she had to drive back to Jersey yesterday… Her dad got in a car crash yesterday and she wanted to go see him."

"Oh no! I'm so sorry."

"No, it's fine. He wasn't injured, thankfully. But she still wanted to go check on him, that's all."
"Oh, good." Myers nodded. "So what's new with you guys? Tell me everything."

"I think Hailey has the biggest news…" Mari Jo said.

"Hailey?" Myers prompted.

"Umm… well… do you know how long you'll be in Cordonia? Like, are you officially moving there or are you planning to come back at some point?"

"Um…" Myers looked at me. "I don't know… I haven't thought about it, but… I think there's a good chance I might stay…"

Myers looked at me affectionately, and I blushed just a little bit. It eased something in me to know she was considering staying in Cordonia after all this was over. Myers pressed a small kiss on my cheek. I looked to her friends, who were staring at each other knowingly.

"Anyway, why are you asking?" Myers turned back to Hailey.

"Um… Bryan asked me to move in with him…"

"Aww, Hailey… that's great! Congratulations!"

"So…?"

"I officially release you as my roommate! Go forth and conquer, my son." We all laughed. "What about the rest of you guys?"

“Well… I was offered a permanent position at the Montclare Children’s School!” Mari Jo said, grinning.

“Aww, Mari Jo! That’s awesome!”

“It’s a beautiful school! And my kids are so great! I just wish I didn’t have to deal with the parents, though.”

“Well, you have infinite patience. I’m sure you’ll do great.”

“Is that a good school?” I asked.

“It’s one of the best schools on the Upper East Side. It was practically my dream to work there. I can really do some good with those kids, you know? The alumni actually invest in preschool education, so we have tons more resources than in other schools.” Mari Jo explained.

“Congratulations.” I told her.

“Thank you, Drake.”

“What about you, Jacob? You’ve been pretty quiet…” Myers told him.

He sighed, rubbing his hands together. “I honestly haven’t been doing much. Between school and work, I’m honestly just trying to find time to sleep.”

“Aww… that sucks.”

“Thankfully, this is my last semester, and I’ll start my residency next year.”
“What field are you going to specialize in? I asked him.

“You know, I was thinking about zoological medicine. I would love to work at the Brooklyn Zoo.”

“If you specialize in equine medicine, I’ll fly you to Cordonia so you can take care of Midnight Rose.” Myers told him.

“Wow, Milla, I forgot you have a horse now…” Hailey said.

Myers fiddled with her phone, searching for a picture. “Isn’t she gorgeous?!” She passed her phone around. They all murmured their agreements.

“Drake, Milla told me you were pretty good with horses.” Jacob commented.

“Oh, yeah. I worked at the palace stables, and before that, my mom’s family actually owns a ranch in Texas, so I kind of grew up around horses.”

“That’s awesome. I love horses, but I feel like you have to have a special touch with them.” Jacob commented.

“Drake is awesome with Midnight Rose. She loves him.” Myers looked at me with an adoring grin.

“She’s a good horse.” I told them.

“And you, Jaime? How long are you in town for?”

“Two more weeks.”

“It was lucky we caught you, then. Where’s your next tour?”

“You know I can’t say, Milla…”

“I know, but if it’s somewhere near Cordonia, you could stop by for a visit…” She gave him a toothy grin.

He smiled and shook his head. “We’ll see.”

"Hey, why don't we all go to Kismet?" Jacob suggested. "It's my night off, but I can still get us all in!"

"Ugh, I would love to! But we have that UN party…"

"Damn, that sucks…"

"And on that note…” I told her, "we should get going. I remember you saying that you have to meet Justin."

"Right."

We all got up, Myers and the gang leaving Daniel generous tips, and said our goodbyes. Myers hugged them all, holding on to each of them for five minutes each. I shook Jacob's hand, while Hailey and Jaime both pulled me into a hug, and Mari Jo gave me another Pocahontas wave.

"... Okay, bye, guys! It was really great to see you all…” Myers had tears in her eyes. “I really missed you.”
“Yeah, we missed you too, kid.” Jaime hugged her again, then pointed a finger at me. “Take care of our girl over there.”

I nodded, grinning. “With my life if I have to.”

“Good.” He pulled me in for a hug, clapping me on my back. “And if something happens to her… just know I have sniper training.” We both laughed, but then he turned serious. “No, dude, I’m serious. I have sniper training.”

“Oh…”

Myers smacked his shoulder. “Oh, stop, Jaime. Okay, we really have to go now. Bye, guys!”

“Bye!” They all shouted.

“It was really nice to meet you, Drake!” Hailey said.

“Yeah, you too. It was great to meet you all.” I waved goodbye.

Myers looked like she was on the verge of tears, so I took her hand and we made our way out of the bar. She squeezed it like her life depended on it, and I looked at her to see a single tear slipping down her cheek. “Aww, Myers. Come here.” I pulled her closer and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. She wrapped her arm around my waist, and sighed.

We walked quietly for a few moments, before Myers spoke. “So, what did you think of the guys?”

“They were pretty cool, actually. I had fun. Thanks for inviting me, Myers.”

She hummed in agreement. “Thanks for coming to meet them. They’re… really important to me. And I can tell they liked you.”

“Yeah?”

She squeezed me for a moment. “Yeah.”

Warmth crawled up my chest, this fuzzy feeling getting ahold of me. I… I kind of felt closer to her after meeting her friends, seeing snippets of her life before me, and Cordonia. It was amazing how far we’d come… "Heh.”

“What?”

“You know, the last time we were at your old bar, I thought you were just another waitress at another bar.”

She laughed. "I thought you all were my last chance at a Saturday night tip."

"I guess we've come a long way."

"From strangers to… lovers?"

"We haven't…"

"No. But am I just a friend to you?"

I fought against the grin that threatened to spread over my face. “Touche, Myers. So what was it like working there? Your old boss almost makes Olivia seem warm and fuzzy.”
"Honestly, it was a good time. You never knew who was going to walk through that door, or what kind of crazy thing they were going to order. What about you? I've never heard any classic Drake work stories."

"I don't have a lot of them."

"Then just give me the highlights. Best and worst jobs you've ever had."

"Hmm… Best job was probably the summer I spent working in the royal stables."

"I knew you were going to say that. You know, now that I picture you there… it sounds like something out of a steamy romance novel. The handsome commoner with a heart of gold, mucking out the stables at the royal castle…"

"You have a very vivid imagination."

"I am a writer."

I shook my head. "And my heart is made of… whatever hearts are made of, thank you very much."

"That’s exactly what the handsome commoner would say."

"Sure, Myers."

"So what was your worst job?"

"Oh, that’s easy. The time Maxwell paid me to DJ one of his dance parties."

"He had to pay you to DJ a party?"

"A Maxwell party. I sure as hell wasn’t going to do it for free. It took me days to get all the glitter off of me. And the music out of my head."

"Too much fun for you to handle?"

"Glitter doesn’t belong on drinks, Myers. That’s a hill I’m willing to die on."

Myers laughed. She led me along the waterfront, the cool autumn breeze blowing gently around us, and the city lights twinkling on the water.

"Myers, you sure this is a shortcut?"

"Shortcuts are allowed to be scenic."

"Heh. There’s more to this place than I thought."

"What do you mean?"

"Liam’s bachelor party… I mean, his original one… was my first time in New York City. The movies don’t really do it justice. I mean, it’s big and noisy, but I like that people aren’t afraid to tell you what they think."

"It’s all part of our New Yorker charm."

"Thanks for taking me out here, Myers. I really needed a breather."

"Of course. I wanted to show you the most romantic view in the city.” We stopped along a railing,
where we had a clear view of the Brooklyn Bridge. The sun had already set, the last streaks of dusk coloring the sky in orange, pink and purple hues.

“This place? Not, I don’t know… the top of the Empire State building?” That old movie my mom and Savannah loved popped into my head, and I shook it away.

“A romantic view isn’t about where you’re standing. It’s about who you’re with.”

I looked at her then, a small smile playing on my face. Her hair was a bit wind tousled, and her eyes were shiny, but I still thought she looked so beautiful. “Not a bad view.” I sighed. “Wish we could stay here instead of hanging out with a bunch of politicians.”

“Well, we still have a few minutes before I have to meet Justin at the boutique.”

“What were you thinking?”

She looked at me then, biting her lower lip. “I was thinking about kissing you.”

“Myers…” My eyes strayed from her eyes to that lip caught between her teeth.

“Is that a no?”

“No, just… I don’t know what the hell you see in a guy like me.” She frowned. “But I don’t want to question my luck.”

I pulled her closer, my arms around her waist, and met her lips with mine. She tasted of whiskey, and I savored her lips on mine, as she ran her hands down my back. Finally, I pulled back, and she pressed her forehead against mine.

“Drake… Anyone would be lucky to be with you. But I’m especially lucky.” She pressed another soft kiss to my lips.

“I… I don’t know about that, Myers. But I’m glad you think so.” I caught her mouth again, Myers moaning softly. I kissed her deeply, her tongue dancing with mine in a slow rhythm, as I cupped the back of her neck. She wrapped her arms around my waist, pressing herself closer to me. Finally I stepped back, sighing. “If someone sees us like this, that could really complicate things for you, Myers. I don’t want to get you into another mess when you’re close to clearing your name.”

“Drake… I don’t care what people think.”

“Yeah, but I do. I could never forgive myself if I mess things up for you, Myers.”

“When this is over, then?”

I paced over to the railing, leaning against it. “I guess when this is over, you’ll finally be free to choose, Myers. And maybe some part of me is scared of that.”

“Why? Drake, you know… I made my choice a long time ago…”

“I can’t offer you half as much Liam could. Hell, I don’t know what I can offer you. But when the time comes… when those photos aren’t hanging over your head anymore… I’ll still be here.”

Myers sighed. “So we’ll talk then?”

I turned back to her with a smile. “I’d like that.” I pulled her closer and she gave me a kiss on the cheek. “But right now, we’re going to be late to this party.”
Myers shook herself, almost like she was trying to get pumped up for it. We began walking back to the hotel. “Okay. You going to be okay in there?”

“Afar staring at gifts all afternoon, I didn’t think I could make it through another highbrow get-together, but now… I guess some, err, time with you was all I needed.”

“I wouldn’t say no to more time alone with you.”

I chuckled. “Maybe another night.”

Myers grinned at me. “You know where to find me.”

We let go of each other, walking side by side as we neared the hotel. “I’ll see you at the party, Myers. I don’t want to risk showing up at the United Nations in… this.”

“Good idea. I wouldn’t want your death on my conscience.”

We parted ways in the lobby, where she went to the boutique and I headed off to my room. As I pulled on my tux, I couldn’t help but smile. It had been a pretty good day, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, two things:
1. I added the conversation in the beginning almost to explain from Drake's POV is the reason we have to wait almost TWO WHOLE books before that amazing, first 30 diamonds scene. You all know what I'm talking about *wink, wink*. But I also added it because I realized that things got a little bit steamier in my last chapter than in the original book, so I felt this this was a conversation Drake needed to have with Milla.
2. I added a few OC's to the bar scene, because in order to make my MC more real, she had to have a life before Cordonia. In the original book she mentions a college roommate, some family and friends, but we never see any of that, so I really wanted to show it here. And I thought it'd be a really fun couple milestone for Drake and Milla -- meeting her friends -- and it's something that would make them closer.
Hey everyone! As you've probably figured from the title of this chapter, you know what's coming in this update and the next one. I want to thank everyone who's read so far, everyone who commented or gave kudos to the story (100 kudos?! You guys rock!), and everyone who's followed me through this crazy journey through Drake's mind. You've all filled my heart with joy and motivate me to keep writing every single day.
With all that said, on with the chapter! I hope you enjoy!

After the most horribly boring U.N party, I was in my room, in the middle of hanging my tux, when my phone beeped. I looked it over to find a text from Myers on the group chat: "911! SOS! Meeting in my room stat!"

I put on my shirt and shut the door to my room and jogging down the hall to take the elevator up to Myers' floor. I knocked on her door, and she opened it, giving me a quick one armed hug. Maxwell and Hana were already inside.

"Thanks for coming, guys." Myers ushered me into her room. "Maxwell?"

"Right! So, tomorrow night is Liam and Madeleine's wedding shower, but I think I have enough information to narrow down Tariq's whereabouts."

Hana and I looked at each other, mouths slightly open.

Myers stepped up. "We're taking the red eye to LA tomorrow morning, at 4 a.m. to be exact. But… I want you guys with me on this. I… really need my friends with me tomorrow." Myers' looked at us with a pleading look in her eyes.

"Oh, Milla, of course we'll go with you!" Hanna stepped up to hug, and Myers breathed a sigh of relief. "After everything you've done for us, we won't leave to do this on your own."

"Yeah, we got your back, Myers. 100%." I told her.

"Thanks, guys! You're the best." Myers opened her arms, and Maxwell wrapped both of his arms around her and Hana. I rubbed the back of my neck, until… "Drake, get in here!"

I rolled my eyes. "Fine." I moved to hug them all, before stepping back. "Ok… we should go. Get some sleep while we can."

"Yes, you should. We meet at the lobby at 3:30 tomorrow."

The next morning, my alarm woke me and Maxwell up at 3 am. After quickly getting dressed, Maxwell went to get Bertrand and Hana, while I went to get Myers. She opened the door, wearing a comfy looking grey sweater and some torn jeans, and smiled nervously at me. We both knew this was it… After this… well, we'll see.
"Hey. Ready to go?"

She nodded resolutely. "So ready."

"Let's go, then."

"Wait!" Myers looked at me with uncertainty, cupping my neck and before pulling in, assaulting my mouth with hers. I answered her desperate kiss immediately, pushing her up against her door, before we both pulled apart, breathless. Myers grinned at me, pressing her forehead against mine. "I needed a kiss for good luck."

I shook my head, grinning. "You'll be the death of me, Myers. Come on, let's go."

We met up with Maxwell and Hana in the lobby, as Bertrand arranged a car to take us to the airport at the concierge’s desk. I tensed immediately, but Myers gripped my hand. I looked down to find her eyes pleading with me. Please… not now…

I nodded once, and she visibly relaxed, squeezing my hand gratefully before letting go.

Bertrand walked towards us, his eyes widening as he saw me, before grimacing and looking down at the floor. He took a deep breath, stood tall and walked towards us. “Very well. King Liam will not be accompanying you, but he has facilitated the use of the royal jet. It will be waiting for you as you reach the airport. The car is waiting outfront, and you should be at the airport in 20 minutes.”

“Thank you, Bertrand.” Myers moved to hug him, and he returned the hug warmly.

“I wish you luck, Lady Camilla, though I know well enough you won’t need it.”

“Wait, you’re not coming with us?”

Bertrand looked at me for a brief moment. “No, I am needed here. Someone has to represent House Beaumont while you go.”

Myers nodded.

“Just know…” Bertrand continued, “I have complete and utter faith in you, and in you, Maxwell.”

“Huh?” Maxwell’s eyes widened.

“I know you have been working incessantly these last few days, and I know all your hard work will bear fruit. I trust you, Maxwell.”

Maxwell moved to hug his brother with tears in his eyes, and Bertrand clapped him on the back briefly, before grasping him by the shoulders.

“Alright, you need to go, now. Good luck.”

“Thanks, Bertrand… for everything.” Myers pulled both Beaumonts in for a brief group hug, before stepping apart.

We made our way into the car and, just like Bertrand had said, we arrived at JFK in twenty minutes. After going through security, we made our way to the jet, Myers sitting next to me and grasping my hand as we took off.

“So this is it. All that time searching for Tariq and now we’re on our way to find him.”
“Maybe I should’ve asked Bastien to help out, come with us or something.” Maxwell commented, fidgeting nervously with his fingers.

“No. I wanted people I trust here for this.” Myers looked at each and everyone of us. “And that’s all of you.”

“I just hope we can get to Tariq quickly enough. There’s not a lot of time for us to fly back to New York before the wedding shower...” Hana was also visibly nervous.

“Never fear!” Maxwell was ever the optimist. “We’re gonna crack this case wide open!”

“And then I can give Tariq a piece of my mind.” I practically spat out his name.

Myers squeezed my hand. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but I think it’s best if I talk to him. I have to convince him that making a statement to the press and setting the record straight is the only way to make things right.”

I sighed. So I couldn't kill him or beat him up just yet, I thought wryly. “You will, Myers. You will.”

The rest of the flight was spent in silence, the tension palpable. I thought about our flight to New York, that was filled with music and dancing and excitement, whereas this flight... this flight was all business and nervous energy. I was able to get some sleep, only to wake up a couple hours to find Myers awake and staring out the window.

“Myers,” I whispered, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, “you should get some sleep.”

“Can’t… I’m too wound up.”

“Myers… we have a lot of walking to do when we get to L.A. and we can’t do that if you’re asleep on your feet.”

“I’ll get some tea when we get to L.A. I’ll be fine, don’t worry. This isn’t my first all-nighter.”

“Myers…”

“Drake... I literally can’t sleep...” She sighed, “I can’t turn my mind off...”

“Aw, Myers...” I place my arm over her shoulder and pulled her closer to me.

Myers rested her head on my chest. “What if we don’t find Tariq?”

“You can’t think like that, Myers.”

“I have to. I have to consider every option.”

I sighed. “If we don’t find Tariq... Liam will marry Madeleine. We have to find Tariq not just for you, but for him too.”

“I... I’d feel terrible for Liam, because I know he doesn’t love her, but... I think she would be a good Queen.”

“Wait, what?”

“I’ve talked to her a little bit, and yes, she’s cold and can be a horrible person sometimes... but when it comes down to it, she works really hard -- almost incessantly -- for the people of Cordonia... I think she’d make a good Queen.”
Okay… if you say so…

“But, from a more selfish angle, what I meant was… what happens to me if we don’t find Tariq?”

I hesitated, not really wanting to go down this road. “I guess… that would be up to you, Myers.”

She bit her lip, and then looked up at me. “What if I wanted to leave Cordonia? Leave behind the court and all its games and politics?” A sudden, sharp pain hit my chest. It felt as if someone had pushed a small, yet very sharp pin prick directly to my heart. “Would you come back with me to New York?”

It felt like someone had thrown a bucket of ice cold water at me. “W-what?”

Myers sat up, sitting ramrod straight on her knees, looking at me. I sat up as well. “Would you come with me to New York?” She repeated.

“I, uh…” I didn’t know what to say… was this really happening? If we didn’t find Tariq… she wanted me to come with her to New York…

Myers pressed her lips in a thin line, and nodded disappointedly, looking at the floor. “I know it’s asking a lot of you… to leave your home and your friends for a girl you’ve only known for a few months… Nevermind, let’s just… hope we find Tariq today.” She relaxed into her chair once more and resumed her staring out into space.

The pain in my chest tightened a little bit as I saw how dejected she looked. Now, I really did hope we found Tariq, so that she could stay in Cordonia and Liam wouldn’t have to marry the Wicked Witch of the West. But if we didn’t… could I really watch her leave and not follow? Could I really let her go, and go back to court as if nothing had happened? The answer came to me easily, as my eyes began to itch and water just at the thought of watching her walk away.

“Myers…”

“Hmm?” She didn’t turn her head to look at me.

“If we don’t find Tariq…” My heart beat thunderously in my chest. “We can figure out our next move… together.”

She whipped her head around to look at me. “W-what?”

I grinned, my nerves and fears easing slightly. “I don’t know about New York… but we can talk about our options. You might like my family’s ranch in Texas, or Paris, where we’d be close to Savannah and Bartie… or, hey… maybe I might like New York, too.”

In a flash, Myers wrapped her arms around my neck, and I found my face buried in her hair. I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her closer, breathing in the sweet scent of her hair.

“Thank you, Drake.” Myers whispered. She sat back down, leaning on my chest again.

I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Sleep.”

Myers laughed ruefully. "I… I'll try…"

"That's good enough for me."

I laid my head on hers, my eyelids slowly drooping. I tried my hardest to stay awake, but I couldn’t… the last thing I saw before my eyes closed was Myers, still looking out the window at the
endless sky.

A couple hours, I woke up to the pilot’s voice booming over the speakerphones, announcing the plane’s descent. Myers sat up next to me, wide awake and alert. Maxwell yawned and stretched in his seat, and Hana rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“Camilla…” she turned to Myers, “Are you ready for this? To face Tariq?”

Myers nodded once, resolute. “I’m ready for this to be over. I just want to put this chapter behind me so I can get on with my life.”

“I know Liam couldn’t make it, but just remember that you can lean on us. We’ll be there the whole time.”

“No way we’re leaving you to face him alone, Myers.”

“Yeah! Go, Team Camilla!”

Myers let out a breath, grinning. “Thanks, guys. You’re the best team anyone could ask for.”

We buckled our seat belt and soon, we touched down on the tarmac. Before getting off, Myers fished out a pair of sunglasses from her purse.

“Milla, I’m loving your incognito mode look.” Maxwell commented. “Nice touch with the sunglasses. Wouldn’t want the court or the press to know we’re here.”

Myers shrugged, grinning. “What can I say? This looks is comfy and stealthy.”

Hana also put on some sunglasses, and just so we’d match, Maxwell bought two pairs for me and him at the airport. “We can’t be spotted by paparazzi, Drake!” He said, practically throwing a pair of Ray Bans at me.

An hour and a long car ride through L.A. traffic — how was there so much traffic at only 7 a.m.?! — we arrived at Westwood. Maxwell’s list of addresses was so long, but then Myers remembered the tip from Adelaide about the brand of shoes Tariq used, and Maxwell was able to cross out a bunch of addresses from his list, leaving only three!

Our first stop was a small place at an apartment complex. Maxwell knocked on the door, and a thin wispy guy came out. “Hello?”

“Hi!” Maxwell stepped up. “Any chance that you’re hiding a fugitive nobleman? About this tall,” Maxwell raised his hand a little bit over his head, “wears really minty cologne…”

The guy looked at all of us, stunned. “What is this? A cross between ‘Princess Diaries’ and ‘Dog: the Bounty Hunter’? I’ve never met a noble in my life.”

You just did, buddy. And yes, they’re always this annoying.

“You’re sure?” Maxwell pulled out his phone. “I could show you a picture of him. Or find a sample of his cologne!”

The poor guy shook his head, and began walking back slowly. “N-no, thanks. I’m good.” He said nervously, before closing the door in our faces.

I groaned, facepalming myself.
“Off to a great start…”

We began walking away to the next address, and a couple of blocks down, we spotted a bunch of paparazzi. Myers fidgeted nervously, looping her arm through Hana’s and they began walking a little faster. Maxwell and I also picked up our pace, and when we turned a corner, Maxwell ran to high five Myers. She only sighed in relief.

“It’s like we were invisible!” He said, “See, Drake? I told you those sunglasses would come in handy!”

“Right…”

We got in a cab and headed down to Venice Beach. We walked along the boardwalk until we arrived at a condo.

Maxwell stepped up, but I placed a hand on his shoulder. I didn’t want to let him scare whoever lived here with his… eccentricity. “Step aside, Maxwell. Let me handle this.” I climbed the porch steps and rapped on the door with my knuckles. No answer. I knocked a little harder. “Hey! Anyone home?” I caught movement from the corner of my eyes, as an elderly man peeked out the window. I began knocking harder. “Open the door! We need to ask you some questions!”

I heard delicate heels on the porch steps, and felt a small hand on my shoulder. “Drake,” Hana said, “you’re coming on too strong.” She pushed me back down the porch steps, and knocked politely on the door.

The elderly man opened the door, and Hana offered him a polite smile. He smiled kindly and ushered her in. Myers looked at me with laughter in her eyes, and a few moments later, Hana walked out, waving to the elderly man, a paper plate of homemade cookies in her hand. “The bad news is, no Tariq. The tenants said their son bought a bunch of suits for his job interviews.” She grinned, “The good news is, they gave me cookies!”

Myers laughed. “Only you could walk away from a stranger’s doorstep with a plate full of baked goods.” Myers reached for a chocolate chip cookie.

“I have good news. We’ve only got one address left!” Maxwell cheered.

“Who knew gossip from Adelaide could come in handy?” Hana mused.

“Not me.” I shrugged. “Nice work, Myers.”

We all hurried down the pier, and Myers hailed a cab. Maxwell gave the driver the address and Myers told him to step on it. She was radiating nervous energy, fiddling with her fingers. As the driver pulled up to another building, Myers paid the driver and practically jumped out of the car before it stopped completely. We had to run to keep up with her. She ran inside, ignoring the building concierge completely.

“Miss! Miss! Who are you here to see? Miss! You can’t go up there!” He called, as Myers pushed the elevator button repeatedly. It began making its slow descent from the 22nd floor.

“Hello, sir. Good morning to you.” Hana stepped up to his desk. “We’re on important Cordonian business.” She told him. “We are looking for a missing person, and we’d appreciate your cooperation.” Hana beamed at the concierge, and he nodded and let us go, without threatening to call the police.

Near the elevator, however, Myers grew frustrated and decided to take the stairs. “Maxwell, what
floor is it?"

“Uh… the eighteenth.”

“Come on, let’s go.” She turned, running up the stairs of the fire escape.

“Myers,” I called. “Myers, wait!”

“What?!” She was already halfway up the stairs to the second floor.

I ran up to her and grabbed her arm. “Myers, slow down!” I pulled her closer and wrapped her in a hug. I could feel her heart beating against my chest, through our clothing. I ran my hands down her back soothingly, as her breathing calmed. “Easy… breathe.”

“We’re so close, Drake.”

“I know, Myers… but you need to stay calm… okay?”

Myers breathed deeply. “Okay…”

“Elevator’s here!” Maxwell shouted.

I took Myers’ hand and led her down the stairs and onto the elevator. Maxwell pressed the button for the 18th floor, and Myers held onto my hand with a vice grip.

The elevator pinged, and the doors opened to a long, well lit hallway. “Maxwell… what apartment is it?”

“1807.”

Myers walked purposely to the apartment door, and stopped in front of it. She raised her hand, poised to knock… and froze. “The point of no return…” She whispered.

Hana stepped up and squeezed her shoulder.

She knocked.

We all waited with bated breath for the door to open, the seconds ticking by painfully slow. Time seemed to slow, as the door was opened and…

“Lady Camilla…” Tariq was standing in front of us, in the flesh, gaping at us with his mouth open.

Myers took off her sunglasses, placing them over her head. Her jaw dropped slightly and her chest was heaving with emotion. For a second they just stared at each other, until… In a blur, Myers’ palm connected with the side of Tariq’s face, too fast for us to see. The very audible smack made us jump, reverberating through the silent hallway.

“Aah!” Tariq yelped, as Myers gasped and covered her mouth with her hands.

“I’m sorry! Tariq, I’m sorry! I don’t know what came over me!”

“Myers! You’re apologizing to him?” I walked to stand next to her. Seriously?

Tariq rubbed his jaw gingerly. “Drake is right, Lady Camilla. Don’t apologize. I… I fear I deserved that.” He stepped aside. “Please come in.”
We all walked inside the apartment, and Tariq closed the door. “Well, um… May I offer you anything? My accommodations are a bit paltry, but I can grab us refreshments or—”

“Cut the chit-chat.” I told him. “We’re only here for one thing.” I glowered at him, barely able to contain the urge to beat his ass up.

I felt Myers’ hand on my shoulder. “That’s right. We’re here for an apology.”

Tariq sighed, looking at the floor dejectedly. “I certainly owe you one, Lady Camilla. Many, in fact. Although I admit that I’m startled you would even deign to look at me after…” His eyes flitted to me, “after what my actions have put you through.”

“Tariq… why did you run away?” Myers asked.

“I believed my flight from court was necessary, to protect both you and Cordonia from the repercussions of my shameful choices.”

Oh, really? To protect Myers from the repercussions of your actions? I started getting worked up. Myers has been dealing with those repercussions with her head held high, while you were out here hiding like a rat! She’s been chewed up and spit out by the international press, her name dragged through the mud, while you were here, busy shopping for expensive suits.

“I… I can see now that I was wrong in doing so. But I swear that my intention was only to spare you any further harm.” He stepped closer to her.

How dare he step closer to her?! How can he even look her in the eye right now?! I stepped next to Myers, leveling him with a glare. Don’t you dare come any closer.

“Lady Camilla, I would never have left, had I known what it would mean for you. I assumed you would be taken care of… That you wouldn’t be hurt. It seemed best to just… disappear.”

“You’re a coward.” Myers told him. I was happy to see she wasn’t going to be so forgiving this time. About time…

Tariq looked down at the floor shamefully. “I… I wish I could protest, but you’re right. Everything that I have done with respect to you and your circumstances has been cowardly.”

Myers sighed. “Tariq… I came here today to ask you to undo the damage that you had a hand in causing.” His eyes widened. “Make a statement to the press… Tell the truth about what happened that night at Applewood Manor.”

“It’s the least you can do to make up for all of this.” Hana added.

“Lady Camilla, there is nothing I desire more than to atone for what I’ve done, but… I wonder if this is the best path forward…”

Seriously? Ugh, I wanted to kill him! After everything, he was still too scared to face everything, to face the consequences of his actions. “Are you questioning Myers’ judgement? That’s pretty rich coming from you.”

“Yeah, you should probably defer to Camilla on this one.” Maxwell said, frowning. I could tell this was probably hard for him. I know at some point, he had considered Tariq to be his friend.

“Tariq… It’s time to tell the truth.” Myers told him. “You owe me that, at least.”
“The very least.” I told him. If we were anywhere else, she could’ve easily pressed assault and diffamation charges. And in other countries what he owed her were 2 - 5 years in prison.

“I… You’re right. This calamity has gone unaddressed for far too long.”

“So you’ll do it? You’ll make the statement?” Hana asked him wide eyed.

“I will.” He nodded. “I’ll need some time to prepare my finest clothes, but—”

“No time. You have to come with us now.” Myers ordered.

“What? B-but I need to look my best for a public appearance.”

I rolled my eyes. *You don’t get it, do you? This is not up for discussion.*

“Madeleine and Liam’s wedding shower is tonight. If we wait too long, there’ll be no stopping the wedding.”

“I… I see.” He sighed. “I suppose there’s no time like the present. I’ll follow your lead, Lady Camilla.” He nodded decisively, straightening his suit.

Myers nodded once, and turned to us. “Let’s go.”

After a very long ride back to LAX, we were finally all settled on the jet, back to New York. If I thought last night’s flight was tense… this one definitely took the cake. After about half an hour of silence, and scrutiny — and me glaring at him — Tariq asked if he could freshen up. Myers nodded, and he practically ran to the back of the jet.

As soon as he was gone, Maxwell beat his fists on the armrest of his seat excitedly. “You did it, Milla! You found him!”

Myers gave him a small, indulgent smile. “We found him.” She sighed. “Though we’re not out of the woods just yet. We still have to get his statement out there.”

“Still, this is worth celebrating.” Hana told her. “How do you feel?”

“I feel…” Myers bit her lip, her lips quirking into a smile she failed to stop. “Liberated. I’m finally going to be free from this plot… free to live my life again.” Her eyes met mine, an undercurrent of electricity between us, as if we were the only people in the room. Her smile softened, and she shook her head, as if to get out of a daze. “But most of all, I feel thankful for all of you… for my friends. I could never have done this alone.”

“It was nothing, Myers.” I told her.

“You would have done the same for any of us.” Hana added.

“Besides, I have to put my master detective skills to work somehow.” Maxwell grinned. “Use ’em or lose ’em, you know?”

“Of course.” Myers nodded, winking at him.

Tariq came back out, and gingerly sat in his seat. The tension in the atmosphere seemed to spike up again, and everyone settled in for the rest of the flight. Maxwell and Hana tried to catch up on some sleep, while Tariq alternated between tapping his foot nervously on the floor and shooting Myers nervous looks.
I turned to Myers, whose eyes were becoming red rimmed as exhaustion began to catch up with her. “Myers… try to get some sleep.”

She chuckled ruefully. “Drake… Then, she shook her head. “Okay. I’ll try.”

I got the feeling she’d only said that so that I would stop fussing over her, but after I returned to my seat, I caught her actually closing her eyes and relaxing in her chair. With that sight in mind, I turned to do the same in my seat, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t sleep if Tariq was in the same room, in the same space as her. And so, I just… waited for the time to go by, until we finally touched down in New York.

Maxwell had called Bertrand before we got on the flight back, so by the time we arrived at the airport, Bertrand had already sent a car for us. We climbed in and in a matter of minutes, we were back at the hotel. Myers led us all to her room, where Bertrand and her press secretary were waiting for us.

Tariq shuffled nervously inside, his eyes darting to every corner of the room. He reminded me of a deer in the headlights. Bertrand stood stoically in front of us, looking down at Tariq, while Myers’ press secretary looked at him curiously.

“So, you’re the reason I have a job.” Justin commented.

Tariq looked at all of us. “Err… who is this man?”

“I’m Lady Camilla’s damage control. In other words, her press secretary.”

“Oh.”

“Now, I just made a deal with the devil to get us half an hour with a sound stage and some cameras on such short notice.” He turned to brief Myers and Bertrand. “If we hurry, I can get a rebate on my soul, and we can get this statement out before the end of the wedding shower.”

“Wait.” Bertrand said, looking a little appalled. “You can’t simply release it to the press. The court must hear Tariq’s statement, of course, but consider how it will look for the royal family if this goes public in the middle of the wedding shower.”

“King Liam and Madeleine throw a party to celebrate their wedding with the whole court there, and then…” Hana looked at me, both of us thinking the same thing.

“When the statement drops, the press and the court will run with it. They’ll assume the wedding’s not happening.” Because they all know that the only reason Liam picked Madeline is because Lady Camilla became… ineligible.

“And that’s a good thing.” Justin told us, his eyes widening slightly and his eyebrows shooting up, looking at us all as if we were stupid. “If we want to restore Camilla’s reputation, we need to make a bigger splash than those photos did at the Coronation Ball.” He scowled suddenly. “This is our chance to send a message so powerful that no one can question Camilla’s innocence.”

Either he’s really passionate about this, or… I don’t know. There was something about this guy that didn’t sit right with me. And knowing Myers… Myers was actually a decent person… she wouldn’t want to hurt anyone, even if it would benefit her in the end. “Hold up.” I told him. “I think this is Myers’ call to make.”

We all turned to Myers, whose eyes were narrowed as she weighed her options. “Justin, once you record the statement… send it to me. I want to talk to Liam and Madeleine before it goes public.”
I knew it. I honestly wasn’t surprised at all. She would never humiliate another person like she was humiliated — even if said person was the Wicked Witch of the West.

“I think that’s a good call.” Maxwell supported her.

Justin’s eyebrows shot up to his forehead, looking at her as if to say ‘how dare you disagree with me?’ “As your resident PR expert, I have to disagree. The sooner we get the word out, the better. Don’t give Madeleine a chance to spin this.” He pressed.

“Even she won’t be able to do much about a public statement from Tariq.” Hana told him.

“I really—”

“Enough.” Bertrand said quietly, but his tone was so commanding, so in charge, that even I found myself standing a little straighter. “I hired you to assist Camilla, and she has made her preference quite clear.”

Justin bit his lip, and we could all see how frustrated he was, but in just one second, he smiled and turned back to his easy going attitude. The sudden change made me uneasy. “Understood. You’re the boss, boss.” He said good naturedly, before turning to Tariq. “Tariq, follow me. We’ve got an appointment to keep.”

He began shuffling Tariq out of the room, and I looked at them and shook my head. As they walked away, all the day’s — and night’s — exhaustion seemed to envelop me, creeping up on my bones. I yawned. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I need some sleep before we go to this shower.”

“Yeah. My eyelids feel like they weigh a hundred pounds.”

“While these two cope with their lack of sleep, I must make a few phone calls.” Bertrand said, excusing himself.

“Will you be okay, Myers?” I asked.

Myers smiled at me tenderly. “I’ll be fine. Go get some sleep.”

I nodded at him and we said our goodbyes to the girls, before walking to our room. As soon as Maxwell opened our door, we both collapsed on our beds. My eyelids fluttered shut and soon, I was fast asleep.

I woke up hours later, with Maxwell shoving me awake. He was already dressed for the party, but his hair was still wet. “Drake. Wake up.”

I sat up. “I’m up. I’m up.” I couldn’t hold back a yawn. “What time is it?”

“Five thirty. You have half an hour to shower and get dressed, and we’ll go down together.”

“You’re not going to get Myers?”

“She’s out with Hana. I texted her and she said she’d meet us there.”

“Okay. Where is it, anyway?”

“Right here in the hotel. In the Grand Ballroom.” He told me.

“Oh. That’s convenient.”
“Yeah, so…” He gave me a pointed look. “Go!”

“Oh, right.” I jumped off the bed, and went to the bathroom. After a lightspeed shower, I donned the tux Maxwell got me, and we made our way downstairs.

Both our jaws fell open at the sight of the opulent ballroom. Everything was decorated to perfection, elegant crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling, sheer veils draped on the walls, massive bouquets in every table. There was a giant portrait of Liam and Madeleine near a table on the entryway, over a giant table where guests were expected to drop off gifts for the ‘happy’ couple. Almost all of the court was already there, but as I looked around, I didn’t see Myers anywhere.

“What do we do?” I asked Maxwell.

He shrugged. “We can’t really do anything until Milla and Hana get here. Let’s just… try to blend in.” He whispered, leading me to the bar. I ordered a glass of whiskey, while Maxwell ordered a cocktail. We kept an eye out for Myers, and Maxwell leaned in to whisper, “Hey, Drake… I just realized this is all going to be over today.”

“You just realized that?”

“Yeah! And I’m thinking we should do something to celebrate! We all have a free day tomorrow! We could go to Coney Island!” He grinned excitedly.

I remembered Myers hated roller coasters. “Is this for you or for Myers?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“For Milla, duh!” He hesitated, “And for all of us! We can’t come to the States and not go! I wanted to go there since I was a kid and I read the adventures of Tom Sawyer!”

“W asn’t it Huckleberry Finn?” I asked.

“Whatever! We should go!”

“We’ll see.” I told him, nodding to Hana, who was making her way over to us.

“Hey, Hana. Where’s Milla?” Maxwell asked her.

“I thought she’d be here by now. We got here about twenty minutes ago. I did her makeup and then went to my room to get changed.”

I kept looking around the room, when I spotted her having a quiet, but heated, discussion with Madeleine. “There she is. She’s talking to Madeleine.” I watched as Myers pulled her phone out of her clutch and showed it to Madeleine. It was probably Tariq’s statement. It should be done by now.

We all watched as Madeleine’s eyes widened, her face visibly softening as Myers put her phone away. They exchanged a few more words, before Madeleine made her way to the stage. She tapped a spoon against her champagne flute.

“Ladies and gentlemen! If I may have your attention, please…” The murmurs and conversation in the room slowly quieted, as every person turned to look at her. “I’m afraid we’ll have to—”

Maxwell’s phone buzzed. Then mine, Hana’s… and as I looked around I noticed a lot of other nobles turning or reaching to take out their phones. After what happened at the Coronation, a deep sense of dread settled at the pit of my stomach, even though I knew it was probably the statement from Tariq. We all looked at each other, and at Myers panicked expression, and we made our way
over to her.

“No… Is that—” She looked at us frantically.

“You told Justin not to release Tariq’s statement to the press… right?”

“Yeah…”

“Weeeeeeell, I don’t know what happened, but…” Maxwell winced, showing us his phone. The article read ‘Flirtatious Photos or Midnight Mix-up?’, and Maxwell pressed the video embedded into it.

As Tariq came on screen, a tidal wave of murmurs and whispers grew in the ballroom. He fumbled with his notecard, and after dropping it, he just stepped up to the podium and cleared his throat. I rolled my eyes.

He stuttered as he introduced himself, obviously nervous, before taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders, trying to project pure confidence. He frowned at the cameras. “I am here to make a statement regarding the photos of myself and Lady Camilla Myers.” He paused for effect, “Many rumors have circulated about her since those photos came to light. I regret not coming forward sooner to corroborate the truth of what happened. And I regret, even more deeply, intruding upon Lady Camilla in the first place.”

He crossed his arms behind his back, jutting his chest out. “It was a misunderstanding that led me to her room that night, mistaking it for my own. The photos that were taken of us reveal only this: a breach of privacy that I alone was responsible for…” His face contorted with shame, “And an arrogant and unwanted advance on my part.”

Murmurs once again arose from the crowd, gasps of shock and whispers of conversation.

“Nothing untoward ever happened between us… at least, nothing on Lady Camilla’s part. Lady Camilla, I offer my sincerest apologies for what I did that night. I hope this message begins to make amends for the harm I have done. As for the members of the Cordonian court, I hope this will put an end to any unkind speculation about Lady Camilla on your part. Thank you for your time.” He nodded and stepped back as reporters shouted a flurry of questions, and the video cut there.

There was a second of silence, before the whole room erupted into excited chatter. Nobles looked to Camilla, nodding their respect, and she merely met their eyes and nodded back.

Up on stage, Madeleine cleared her throat.”That was… quite illuminating. As I’ve said before, the press has treated Lady Camilla incredibly unfairly since this whole business began. On behalf of myself and King Liam, I would like to congratulate her on clearing her name.” She smiled sweetly at Myers, whose face was carefully neutral.

Liam stepped up on stage, and she moved to take his hand, but he merely shot her an apologetic look and stepped up to the mic. “Countess Madeleine is right. I believe apologies are in order from all those who have been anything less than welcoming to Lady Camilla since the Coronation Ball. I propose a toast…” He raised his glass, giving Myers a beaming smile, “to Lady Camilla Myers.”

“To Lady Camilla.” I toasted, even though Myers looked absolutely mortified.

She smiled slightly and nodded her thanks.

“As for the rest of this evening… I hope you all enjoy the food and drink we have provided.” Liam and Madeleine stepped off the stage, as the crowd clapped.
Out of nowhere, Justin came running to Myers. “Camilla! I got here as fast as I could.”

Myers took a deep breath, gathering her patience. “I told you not to release Tariq’s statement…” She pursed her lips as Justin lowered his head. “I’m waiting for an explanation…”

“Yeah, I’d want one too if I were you. Some wannabe reporter spotted Tariq when I was getting him to the soundstage. She followed us inside and got footage of the whole thing. I’m sorry. I should’ve been more careful.”

Myers shook her head and sighed. “Well… There’s nothing we can do about it now. It’s on the internet forever.”

“I’ll take extra precautions next time you give me a sensitive job. I swear. I better, umm… leave you to your company.”

Myers nodded, and Justin left, walking away with his head down and shoulders slumped. Poor Myers barely had a chance to breathe before the Wicked Witch of the West stomped her way over to us. Her eyes were livid, and she whispered furiously. “What was the meaning of that? Did you warn me just so you could dash my hopes of preserving some dignity?”

I almost stepped up, but Hana stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“The video wasn’t supposed to go public yet.” Myers told her, “I was just as surprised as you.”

“You’ll forgive me if I find that hard to believe.” Madeleine laughed ruefully. “I suppose I should’ve known you wouldn’t give up until you had what you wanted. Enjoy the satisfaction while it lasts, Camilla.” She turned on her heel and walked away, with two royal guards following her.

Myers let out a sigh, closing her eyes. “Well, at least that’s over with… Can we… can we get out of here?” She looked at us sadly.

I nodded. “Yeah. Come on, Myers. Let’s get out of here before the press shows up to ask questions.”

“Please.”

We walked her back upstairs, and she opened her door. We all went inside her room, and Myers collapsed on her couch. Her phone buzzed nonstop. “Wanna get that?” I asked her.

Myers looked at the screen, smirking. “It’s just texts from the guys. They saw the video too.”

“Whoa, what guys? Milla, do you have friends besides us?” Maxwell collapsed next to her, clutching his chest in a look of faux hurt.

Myers and I rolled our eyes.

Hana smiled at him tenderly, as if he were a toddler, and said, “Maxwell, you really didn’t think Milla had no other friends before us did you?”

Myers’ phone began to buzz faster. She looked at the screen and picked it up. It was a video call and after a few moments, a middle aged man with graying hair and a blond woman appeared on the screen. “Dad! Wendy!”

“Hi, honey! Oh, we just saw that statement from that Tariq fellow in the news!” Wendy said.

“How are you doing, sweetie? Are you okay?” Her dad asked, clear concern in his voice.
Myers sighed, blinking back tears -- though I couldn't tell if they were from emotion or exhaustion. “I’m okay. I’m just glad it’s all finally over.”

Her dad sighed.

“Oh, honey, it is…” Wendy told her tenderly, “and now you’re free to decide what you’ll do next.”

“I really hope you’re considering staying, honey. I don’t want you going back to that place. Nothing good ever happened to you there.” Her dad told her sternly.

Hana, Maxwell and I looked at each other.

“Victor!” We heard a slap. I held my chuckle as I realized Wendy had probably smacked Myers’ dad on the shoulder or something. “It’s Milla’s choice. She’s a grown woman, and you have to remember that!”

“Dad, I’m still thinking about it. Can we not talk about this now? I’m here with my friends.”

Wendy shrieked. “Well, honey, say no more! Now don’t be rude and introduce us! Where’s Drake, is he there with you hon’? I want to meet him face to face.”

I could feel the blood rushing to my face and up to my ears, flushing my face scarlett. Maxwell and Hana looked at me with a question in their eyes. Myers merely laughed. “Yeah, Wendy, he’s here.” She gestured with her hand for us to sit next to her. Maxwell and Hana stood up and moved behind the couch, leaving the space next to Myers for me. I shook my head — very subtle, guys — and sat down.

I saw as Wendy squealed, and Myers’ dad stared at us patiently. “Dad, Wendy, this is—”

“No, let me guess. That beautiful young lady behind you is Hana, and big blue eyes over there is Maxwell.”

“That’s right!” Myers told her.

Hana nodded, a pretty blush on her cheeks. “Hello, Mr. Myers, Mrs. Myers.”

“Just Wendy, dear.”

“Hello, Hana. Nice to meet you.” Myers’ dad nodded.

“It’s so nice to meet you! Camilla doesn’t shut up about you. I think you just about beat Hailey for the BBF title.” Wendy commented.

“Oh, thank you, Wendy.”

Myers rolled her eyes. “Wendy! I can have two BFFs!”

“Of course, honey. Hailey in New York and Hana in Cordonia.”

“What about me?” Maxwell asked eagerly.

“Oh, now you, Maxwell! Camilla has told me so much about you! She says your parties are legendary.”

“Aww, Milla!” Maxwell hugged her briefly from behind the couch.
“Honey, I expect a full blown Beaumont Bash if you ever visit us here in Jersey.”

“I’ll fly you out to Cordonia for the next one.” Maxwell winked at her.

“Oh, I like you.” Wendy laughed, a deep rich laugh, before finally turning to me. Her eyes softened slightly as she looked at me, and she grinned like the cat who swallowed the canary. “And you must be the famous Drake Walker.”

“H-hello again, Wendy, Mr. Myers.” I nodded nervously.

Her dad started at me, his gaze almost scrutinizing, but I didn’t know if it was just me or if he really was sizing me up. “Drake.” He said simply.

“Oh, honey, he’s so handsome!” Wendy exclaimed.

I heard Maxwell guffaw behind me, and Hana laugh lightly. Myers eyes widened, flushing. “Wendy!” She yelled, mortified.

I couldn’t help but blush.

“What?” Wendy rolled her eyes, as Myers’ dad shot her a pointed look. “Oh, don’t you look at me like that. I’m just stating the facts. Anyway, Drake, it’s very nice to finally meet you face to face.”

“Uh, yeah. You too, Wendy.”

“Milla told us what you did that night when the pictures were taken. I just wanted to say thank you, from the bottom of our hearts.” Wendy looked at me tenderly.

“Oh, really, it was nothing.” I said nervously.

“No, it wasn’t. Thank you, Drake, for being there for Milla.” Her father spoke up again, a world of meaning in his gaze.

I nodded. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat, sir.”

He nodded, satisfied, and I felt warmth flood my chest. I felt like I’d passed some kind of test, and was able to relax a little bit.

“That’s Drake! He’s like the superman of our group.” Maxwell clapped me on the back, grinning at the camera.

“Yeah… I’m just glad that whole mess with the pictures is over now.” Myers shook her head.

“It is. You have some big decisions to make, kiddo.” Wendy gave her a pointed look. “Just let us know whatever it is you decide. You know we’ll support you no matter what.”

“I know.” Myers gave her a soft smile.

“And if you decide to go back to Cordonia… well, I’m very glad you have such good friends over there to take care of you.”

“Don’t worry, Wendy, we’ll take good care of her.” Maxwell beamed at her. “My brother and I consider Camilla an honorary Beaumont, like our little sister.”

“That’s sweet of you, honey.”
“As long as you don’t make her change her last name…” Her dad muttered.

“I’ll let you know what I decide.” Myers told them.

“Alright baby. We should let you guys rest…” Her dad began.

“Or celebrate! Milla, you should take your friends out on the town! Celebrate your new freedom.”

Myers sighed. “I would, Wendy, but… I haven’t slept since yesterday, and I’m sure we’re all pretty tired from all the flying and walking today.”

Wendy shook her head. “Alright, baby. We’ll let you rest. Good night, honey. Good night, kids!”

“Bye! Nice to meet you!” Maxwell yelled loud enough to hurt my ears.

“Good night, Mr. Myers, Mrs— I mean, Wendy!” Hana waved at the camera.

“Good night!” I said.

“It was great to meet all of you! Bye!”

“Bye, everyone. I love you, Milla.” Her dad said.

“Love you too, Dad, Wendy. Bye!” Myers said, before hanging up.

We relaxed immediately, as Hana and Maxwell moved to sit back down.

“So, those are your parents, huh?” Maxwell asked her.

Myers nodded, lips pressed together. “Yup. That’s Dad and Wendy.”

“They were very nice.” Hana commented.

“Oh, yeah, they’re a hoot.” Myers smiled, rolling her eyes, before turning to me. “Hey, I’m sorry if Wendy made you uncomfortable. She has a habit of just… blurtting out the first thing that pops into her head.”

I shook my head, my lips twitching into a small smile. “Don’t worry about it, Myers.”

“Hey, how did your parents know Drake?” Maxwell asked.

“Oh, Drake had actually talked to them once before.” Myers told him. “He walked in on me talking to them in the kitchen once on speaker, and Wendy, being Wendy, asked to talk to him.”

“Oh…”

“What a night.” Hana commented, smiling as she sat in one of the sofas in Myers’ room. Someone knocked on the door and I stood to get it.

Myers brought a hand to her face, rubbing the exhaustion from it, “I can’t believe it’s finally over.”

“Nor can I.” Liam told her from the doorway.

“Liam!” Myers grinned and stood to hug him. He wrapped her in her arms, before letting her go. I tried very hard to fight the small, teeny tiny twinge of jealousy.

“I had a feeling you all would come here. I came to see you as soon as I could.”
“You literally just missed a video call with Milla’s parents.” Maxwell told him.

“Oh, well… maybe some other time.” He turned back to Myers. “You’ve done it, Camilla. My father put you through so much, and now, after so long… you’re finally free of what he did. And what Tariq did. I can only imagine how you’re feeling.”

Myers sighed, leading us all back to the couch. “More than anything, I feel relieved. I’ve spent so long with plots and schemes hanging over my head that a part of me can’t believe it’s finally over. It feels good to be done with it all.”

“I knew you would find your way through, Camilla. I’m only sorry you had to endure so much to get there.” He gave her this look that was pure longing.

“Now that you’re in the clear, this calls for a celebration!” Maxwell was practically jumping.

“Tomorrow?” Myers asked wearily.

“Tomorrow.” He nodded.

“What did you have in mind?”

“What has amazing fried foods, carnival games, and crazy rides?”

“It’s Coney Island. He wants to go to Coney Island.” I told them, rolling my eyes.

“I see…” Myers smirked at Maxwell.

“Yep! You. Us. Tomorrow afternoon. Liam can come too if he wants.”

“An excellent idea.” Liam told him. “I might have more to deal with tonight, but I believe I could get away tomorrow… I’ve heard the view from the top of the Ferris wheel is not to be missed.” He gave Myers a pointed look, to which she fidgeted, laughing uncomfortably.

“Right…” Her eyes darted to me, before turning back to Maxwell. “I’ll be there.”

“3 o’clock tomorrow, then. Don’t be late!”

I rolled my eyes. “She’s the whole reason we’re going there, Maxwell. We’re not going to leave without her.”

“Don’t worry. I wouldn’t miss a second of it.”

“Great!”

Myers tried to cover a huge yawn with her hand, but we still saw it.

“You must be tired.” Liam said, standing. “We’ll let you rest.” He moved to take her head in his hands and pressed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

The corner of Myers’ lips twitched in an awkward smile and she stood up. “Thanks.” Her eyes darted to me, trying to gauge my reaction. I shook my head, trying not to let it bother me.

“Night, Milla.” Maxwell pulled her into a hug.

“Night, Maxwell. Thanks for everything.” She told him, letting him go.
“Don’t mention it.”

Hana also moved to hug her. Myers groaned as she pulled her tight. “Good night, BFF!”

Myers laughed. “You can just say bestie, Hana.”

“Ok, good night, bestie!”

“Night.”

Myers finally turned to me, and I nodded. “Night, Myers.”

Despite everyone watching, Myers pulled me into a hug. “Good night, Drake. Thanks for coming with me today.”

I rolled my eyes, as I awkwardly patted her back. “Yeah… no problem.” The hug would have probably been less awkward if everyone else wasn’t staring at us. She let me go and stepped back, as I went to the door, where all of our friends were waiting. I closed the door as everyone yelled “good night!” once more, so Myers could finally get to sleep.

As we turned the hallway, we all said our good nights and separated to our rooms. As soon as Maxwell opened the door, we both collapsed on the bed, and the last thing I remember was Maxwell already snoring.

The next morning I groaned awake as Maxwell gently prodded my shoulder. "Psst. Drake…” He whispered. I opened one eye, realizing it was light out, before closing it and covering my face with a pillow.

"What time is it?"

"Past noon."

I jolted awake. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah." Maxwell showed me his phone, where the time was displayed on the screen. 12:23.

**Wow, okay… change previous statement to "I woke up the next afternoon."**

Anyway, Maxwell was already bouncing with excitement. He kept shooting text on the group chat and I read as Liam and the girls answered. Liam was stuck in a meeting, and the girls both wanted to shower and get ready, so we made plans to meet downstairs for brunch. Happy with the arrangement, Maxwell began shooing me up and into the shower.

"Maxwell! Stop! I can shower by myself! Don't come in here!” I told him, as he pushed me with surprising strength to the bathroom. As I stepped across the threshold, I slammed the door in his face and stepped into the shower. After a quick scrub, I got dressed, deciding to wear the outfit Myers' picked out for me. I'd only worn it once, and… well, to be honest, I knew she liked it. Not that I wanted to impress her or anything…Okay, maybe a little.

"Whoa, look at you!” Maxwell commented. "Where'd you get the Henley shirt?"

"I bought it the other day when I went out with Myers." I said distractedly.

"Oh…”
"What?"

"Nothing…"

"Okay… let's go."

I shrugged and we took the elevator downstairs. We arrived at the hotel lobby, where the girls were already waiting for us. Myers was wearing a loose, simple black and gray striped halter top, some jeans and sneakers, and Hana… wow… Hana was actually wearing a pineapple crop top, and white, torn jeans. She’d done her hair up in a braided bun, and she looked… so pretty, but in like a normal way! She looked like a regular girl!

"Hana?" Maxwell was staring at her with his jaw hanging wide open.

"Yes?" She asked. "Hi, guys!"

"Doesn't she look gorgeous?" Myers grinned at us.

"Uh… yeah!" Maxwell told her.


"Hey! You're wearing the shirt!" Milla told me, doing a happy dance in place.

"Uh, yeah… I figured I didn't buy it just so it'd look pretty in my closet, you know?"

"Right…" She told me.

"You look great too, Drake." Hana told me.

"Thanks, Hana." I told her, looking around. The restaurant looked extremely fancy, and neither one of us was exactly dressed in black tie. "Where are we going to eat?"

"I was thinking we'd get to Coney Island and eat there." Myers looked around self consciously, obviously arriving at the same conclusion I had.

"Yeah, okay." I told her.

"So, right now, we're just waiting for Liam, and then we'll go." Hana said.

"I'm right here, Lady Hana." Liam walked up to us, wearing a black shirt with all our names written on it, and a pair of burgundy slacks.

"Whaaaaat?!" Maxwell looked at him, his jaw once again hanging open.

"Hey! You're also wearing the outfit I got you!" Myers grinned at him.

"Also?" He looked at all of us, noting my outfit and Hana's. "Ah. I see you have given all of us New York makeovers."

"No! Not all of us! I want in on the fun!" Maxwell complained.

"Aww, Maxwell…" Myers looked at him tenderly, "hey, how about we do this? There's plenty of stores in Coney Island… how about we pick something out for you when we get there?"
"Okay…"

"I promise I'll pick out something great for you, for a change."

Maxwell laughed, "Okay."

Liam's phone buzzed, and he looked down at the screen. "Our car is outside. Shall we go?"

"Yeah, let's go."

After about 30 minutes, we arrived at Coney Island, where we split up: Liam, Hana and I to get some food, and Myers and Maxwell to buy some clothes. We got some corn dogs, popcorn and nachos, and went to meet up with them. Maxwell came out of the store grinning from ear to ear, having changed his clothes to a muscle tee and some grey jeans.

"Where did you find a kraken necklace?" I asked, actually surprised.

Maxwell shrugged. "There were a whole bunch of animal necklaces inside."

"Maxwell, this is the coolest you've ever been." Myers high fived him. "And that's saying something."

"My arms feel so free. I think I've achieved peak fashion potential."

"You really can't do better than this." Myers nodded her agreement.

"Let's get this party started!" Maxwell clapped his hands together, and began leading us through the park.

Myers walked in step with me, reaching for the box of nachos in my hands. "Hey come on, Drake! You've gotta share!"

I tried to pull the box away playfully. "I bought these for me, Myers." I said, trying to hide them under my arm, lowering the box down to my hips. Myers playfully tried to tackle me, her arms coming around me to try to get to the nachos. It had been a long time since I heard her laugh so freely, and I couldn't help but join her. Her laughter was contagious. She climbed on my back, her arms desperately reaching for the nachos, and I held them just over her reach, until…

"I think you could let Camilla have some nachos, Drake. We are here to celebrate her, after all." Liam's tone was amused, but his face… his eyes were curious, almost studious, as he observed us. And I didn't miss that hint of annoyance in his eyes, and in the undercurrent of his voice.

Myers jumped back to the ground, giving me a triumphant look as I finally shared some of my nachos, but as soon as Liam turned around, her expression changed to worry. I shrugged, thinking maybe we shouldn't have been so obvious… but… were we obvious? We were just playing around… and not necessarily in a couple sort of way. Maybe we were too touchy feely? I shot Myers a questioning look, and she also shrugged, her eyes darting to Liam's back, before meeting mine again, one corner of her mouth downturned. Without a word, we both upped our pace to keep up with the gang.

"Foods, rides, games… is there anything you can't do in this place?" Hana asked.

"Nothing worth doing." I told her.

Myers smirked at me. "I should've known you'd like it here."
I rolled my eyes affectionately. "There's wholesome, greasy food in every corner, and nobody gives a damn about courtly etiquette. This place is a breath of fresh air."

"I must admit, this is all a new experience for me. I dreamed of sneaking off to visit a carnival or circus when I was young, but… I never had the opportunity." Liam told us.

"My parents didn't exactly make time for trips like this either." Hana added.

Myers moved to place an arm over each of their shoulders. "Well, we've got all day to give you the signature Coney Island experience!"

"Guys! We have to do this!" We all turned to find Maxwell yelling from a fortune teller's booth.

I scoffed. "Don't tell me you believe in that stuff." I told the guys as we walked to the booth. "No one can predict the future."

"Sounds like someone's afraid of what the future might have in store." Hana teased, meaning more than she let on.

I rolled my eyes, and the woman at the booth smiled sweetly as Myers, placing a single palm face up as a silent offering.

"She wants to read your palm!" Maxwell jumped on one foot to the other excitedly. "Tell her what you want to know!"

Myers' eyes met with the supposed psychic, before handing the woman her hand. "I want you to read my love line, please."

The woman nodded once, before bowing her head, tracing Myers' hand with her finger. She pursed her lips, eyes narrowed down on a particular line, before letting Myers go and scribble something on a note card. With pursed lips, she handed the note to Myers, before looking pointedly at me, for just one split second. I swear I felt chills…

"What does it say?" Liam asked eagerly.

"You will know true love, but only you can decide which path may follow. And before you and your lover are united, you will face many trials and tribulations." Myers groaned, and Hana actually shot me a worried look. So did Maxwell. My eyes widened, exasperated, before slightly shaking my head. "More of them? Seriously?" Myers complained.

"You've faced your share of tribulations already…" Liam told her worriedly.

"Me next!" Hana raised her hand in the air, as she stepped up to the booth.

Hana came back, happily believing whatever it was the woman had said -- or written. I told her these people just tell you what they think you want to hear, but…

"Then I think you should give it a try, Mr. Skeptic." Myers dared me.

I shrugged, and marched up to the booth. I held out my hand to her, and she barely looked at it, before scribbling down a note. *Your troubles hang over you like a cloud. You must let them go if you wish to see the sun.*

*What a load of bullshit.*

Myers was waiting to pounce on me when I walked back, and managed to sneak a peek of my note
before I was able to crumple it up.

"That's what I'm talking about. Generic advice. She could've said that to anyone!"

Myers shook her head indulgently. "And yet, it fits you to a T."

After me, Liam gave it a try, his note just an elaborate play on words that could have infinite meanings. And finally, Maxwell, who according to this woman, should be dead. That… I could believe.

The psychic woman soon waved us away -- after we paid her, of course -- and we spent the rest of the afternoon touring the theme park. We raised bets on the high striker, tried all sort of different carnival foods, played against each other in a whole bunch of games… It was actually a very fun afternoon.

"Oh! If we hurry, we can watch the sun set from the top of the Ferris wheel!" Hana pointed to the gigantic wheel excitedly. She began dragging us to the Ferris wheel, and was very excited to see that the line for it was… very short.

"Drake, look!" Myers suddenly squealed, pointing to an arcade crane. "We should get a present for Bartie!" She turned back to the guys. "You guys go ahead, we'll catch up!"

"Are you sure?" Liam asked her, clearly wanting to ride the Ferris wheel with her.

Myers smiled innocently. "Of course. We'll catch up in a minute. I just want to see if I can get him that blue dragon."

"You are aware those machines are rigged, right?" He insisted.

"Oh, don't worry. My dad taught me a special trick to beat them. Go! Go!"

Liam smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Okay. We'll see you in a bit."

Myers began leading me to the claw oh so nonchalantly.

"What was that all about?" I asked, once we were a safe distance away.

Myers shrugged, not meeting my eyes. "I… didn't want to ride the Ferris wheel with him. And…" She sighed, meeting my eyes this time, "I don't know, I feel like he expected me to ride with him. And any other day, I would've, but…" she bit her lip.

I couldn't help my lips twitching upwards. "I wanted to ride with you too, Myers." I rubbed the back of my neck. "I… was actually kind of bummed -- I mean… I felt that he sort of claimed you for the Ferris wheel last night, with that comment on the view."

Myers sighed. "I felt it too. It was pretty uncomfortable. Anyway, I hate lying to him, but… we're going back to Cordonia soon, and who knows when we'll come back to Coney Island again, so--"

"Wait, so… you've thought about going back to Cordonia?" I had to stop myself from literally jumping with glee.

"Oh! Uh… yeah… I, uh… still haven't completely decided."

Oh… I swallowed a twinge of disappointment. "Well, it's nice to hear you're still considering it anyway."
We stopped before the claw, and Myers stuck a dollar in the slot. She confidently grabbed the handle, directing the claw just above a blue dragon plushie. She began making the tiny crane swing back and forth rapidly, before pushing the button for its descent. The crane began its way down slowly… before wrapping its claws around the plushie!

"And that is how it's done!" Myers told me, a cocky grin on her face. She bent down to pull out the plushie, dusted it off and handed it to me. "A present for Bartie and a convenient excuse for us to linger back long enough to catch a ride together." She giggled mischievously.

"You… must be some sort of evil genius." I told her, staring down at the plushie.

"Come on, let's go for a ride."

I chuckled. "Wouldn't miss it, Myers. But I call dibs on one of the cars that swings."

"Deal."

We walked back to the Ferris wheel, and paid the guy operating it, before climbing inside a car. The engine hummed as we began to move, ever so slowly making our way up. The sun had already begun to set, coloring the sky in different hues of orange, violet and blue. The view from up here was breathtaking.

"Wow. This is one hell of a view."

"Why am I not surprised you're into carnival rides?"

"You calling me predictable, Myers?"

"Yes, adorably so."

I felt the flush slowly coloring my cheeks. "… I'm choosing to take that as a compliment."

"You should."

I looked down, the view from here making the people on the ground seem like ants. "I think we're high enough to make things interesting. Let's give this car a shake."

"Ready if you are. One… two… three."

We moved, and the car shook a little too fast, jolting Myers into me. I wrapped my arms around her to steady her, and at that moment, I realized how close we were. I swallowed as my eyes darted to her lips, only a breath away.

*Snap out of it!*

"Easy there! You okay?"

Myers bit her lip, innocently batting her eyelashes. "I could be better… if you want to kiss me."

I brushed an errant strand of brown hair from her face, moving to cup her jaw. "I suppose while we're alone up here… I'd hate to miss my chance."

I felt Myers grin as our lips met in a hungry, almost desperate kiss. The cool ocean air combined with the smell of her hair, the combination heady and intoxicating, until all I could smell, taste and feel was Myers. I cupped the back of her neck and she moaned into my mouth, fisting her hands into the collar of my shirt. We finally broke apart, breathless. I chuckled. "I don't suppose we could stay up
here forever?"

"If only…" Myers moved to sit next to me, resting her head on my shoulder. "But it looks like our
time is up."

We looked to the horizon, the orange tinges almost completely overcome by the violet and dark blue
hues. A second later, the wheel began moving again, making its way back down, where the guys
were waiting for us.

"You got him the dragon!" Maxwell yelled excitedly when he saw it in my hands. "How'd you do
it?"

"I told you, I know a little trick." Myers winked at him.

"Show me your ways, oh wise one!" Maxwell raised his arms over his head and bowed low before
her. As he stood up, he looked around sadly. "I guess we should get going…"

We began walking back, and I couldn't stop myself from grinning, absently patting the stuffed
dragon's head. This afternoon had been really fun, and I had to admit… I was pretty happy. After
toasting the day with some cotton candy, we got into the limo and made our way back to the hotel.

I fell asleep as soon as I hit the pillow, never in a thousand years imagining all that would happen the
next day.
Chapter Notes

Hey guys! My hands are literally shaking as I write this, since I've been super nervous about posting this chapter... but I hope you like it nonetheless. I tried my very best to be true to all the characters involved in this monumental chapter, especially Drake of course, and Liam.
I also wanted to thank everyone who's read, kudoed and commented. This is the first story I've written that has over a hundred kudos and a thousand hits and I have you all to thank for that, so really thanks so much for giving this story a chance and for taking the time to read it!
And so, without further ado, let's get to the chapter, "before I turn into a giant ball of mush" like Drake says.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Tell me that you turned down the man
Who asks for your hand
'cause you're waiting for me" ~ Ed Sheeran

Last day in New York

9:58 a.m.

I woke up the next morning with my phone vibrating incessantly. As I moved to pick it up from my night stand, with my eyes still closed, it stopped suddenly. I groaned, and opened my eyes, my vision slowly adjusting to daylight. I rubbed my face before reaching again for my phone.

"The number you have dialed is not available. Please leave a message."

I hung up, and decided to send her a text. "Hey, Myers. Everything okay?" I waited for her reply, then I realized… there was only one little, gray check under my message. That meant the message was sent, but she hadn't received it…

I got up and pulled my clothes on, stepping out of my room. I pressed the button for the elevator a couple of times, groaning as the elevator took its sweet time in getting to my floor. Finally, the gleaming doors opened, I stepped inside and pressed the button for Myers' floor.

What I didn't know was that, five seconds later, Myers stepped out of the adjacent elevator, on her way to my room.

10:07

I stepped out on Myers' floor and made my way to her room. I knocked on her door, but there was no answer. I knocked again, starting to get worried. Still nothing. I took out my phone and dialed her again. "The number you have dialed is not--" I hung up, a sense of dread crawling through me. There
was something going on here… something big, I felt it… I just didn't know what. I turned back to
the elevator.

As I began walking away, Maxwell had found Myers in the halls, and had whisked her away to an
expensive boutique in New York.

10:12

I stepped out of the elevator and into the hall, making my way to Hana's room. I knocked desperately
until she opened the door. Her eyebrows shot up to her forehead when she saw me. "Drake! Good
morning. What are you doing here?"

"Morning, Hana. I'm looking for Myers. Have you seen her?"

Hana grimaced, and Olivia stepped behind her, a catty smirk on her face. "Well, well, well. Look
what the cat dragged in…"

I rolled my eyes. "Olivia." I said curtly.

"I'm surprised you're looking for Camilla here. By all accounts, she should be with the Beaumonts,
getting ready for tonight."

"Getting ready for what?" From what I knew, there was nothing on her schedule for tonight.

"Drake, maybe we should loo--"

"Why, didn't Hana here tell you?" Olivia rudely cut her off. "Liam broke off his engagement with
Madeleine last night."

"What?" He didn't say a word to me about it…

"And what do you know… First thing this morning he went to Camilla's room to invite her out later
today. Convenient, don't you think?" The Ice Queen stared me down with that awful smirk, though I
could see in her eyes, deep down, that she was also hurting.

I could hear my heart thudding in my ears, as a deep sense of dread settled down at the pit of my
stomach. I realized… Liam is going to propose tonight. That's why Myers was calling me so early…

"Come on, Drake. I'll help you look in the boutique downstairs." Hana glared at Olivia, before
walking me out.

10:22 a.m.

Hana and I walked downstairs, with her shooting worried glances at me every few minutes. "I'm
fine, Hana." I told her.

"Are you sure?"

I shrugged, trying to act like I wasn't worried, even though I was somewhat nauseous -- my stomach
doing nervous flips. "We always knew this would happen."

"Yes, but Milla--"

"Myers…" I cut her off gently, "has a choice to make. Many, in fact. And only she can make them."
"What I was going to say…" Hana frowned at me, a little annoyed, "is that I know Milla really cares about you. I… honestly don't think you have cause to worry."

"Well, you wouldn't, would you?" I mumbled under my breath. Hana wouldn't know how I'm feeling… because even though she's Myers' friend and she knows about us, she still nobility. She doesn't get it! She doesn't know what it's like to always come second, or to be invisible… she doesn't know what it's like competing for someone, when the other person has the power to snap his fingers and, quite literally, give her everything!

"Excuse me?" Her eyes darkened, as she furrowed her brows.

"I said you wouldn't think I have anything to worry about, because you obviously have no idea what it's like to have nothing. You grew up with everything you could ever want! And you have no idea what it's like having nothing to offer, and have to compete with someone who has everything to offer!" I snapped at her.

Hana's eyes were livid, with fire in them, and she glared daggers at me. "Drake Walker!" She stopped me dead in my tracks. "First of all, I do know how you feel! In case you don't remember, I spent last season competing for the hand of a prince against ladies who were much better suited than I to be queen, including Milla. And as if that wasn't enough, I have spent my entire life trying to please other people with infinitely high standards." She pointed a finger to my chest. "I, of all people, know what it's like to feel like you're not, and never will be, good enough!" Her chest heaved with effort and indignation, and her eyes were glistening with… emotion? Or maybe tears of impotence...

I sighed, my anger quickly ebbing away. "You're right… Hana… I'm really sorry." Her face softened. "I'm just…"

"On edge." She finished for me.

"Yeah."

"I know… but I'm your friend, Drake… You can't take your frustrations out on me, especially when I'm trying to help you…"

"I know, Hana. I'm sorry. I fucked up."

Hana moved to wrap her arms around me in a hug. "I know. And I forgive you."

"Thank you." I hugged her back, before we parted.

"Now…" Hana stepped back, before taking out her phone. "Before we continue wandering around aimlessly, I'm going to call Maxwell to see if he's seen Milla."

I nodded, and she began dialing, putting her phone on speaker. After the fourth ring, Maxwell picked up, his voice was frantic. "Hello?!"

"Hello, Maxwell?!

"Hana! Hey, I can't talk right now." There was a lot of noise around him, lots of murmuring and chatting.

"Okay, I'll make this quick! Have you seen Milla?"

"Yeah! We're here at Diane Von Furstenberg looking for a dr--"
"Maxwell! What is taking so long?!” We heard Bertrand's booming voice. "We still need a dress and then get Camilla to a decent hair salon!"

"Hana, I gotta go! 'kay, bye!" Maxwell quickly hung up, Hana looking at me worriedly.

I very visibly deflated. She was already with Bertrand and Maxwell getting ready for her date tonight, and she wasn't picking up her phone…

"Drake…"

"Don't worry about it, Hana."

"Hey… come on. Don't shut me out, Drake." I sighed, and she took my arm. "Have you eaten anything?"

I shook my head.

"Come on then."

Hana began leading me through the lobby and out of the hotel, which was a little surprising. I thought we would eat in one of the restaurants. And then, she led me through the streets until we stopped and went inside a McDonald's … Now that was very surprising. My jaw dropped as Hana got in line, waving for me to follow.

"Uh… Hana?"

"Yes?"

"When…? How…? McDonald's?"

"Oh, Milla brought me here the other day!" She said cheerfully, before cringing and carefully checking her expression back onto something more neutral. "I thought… you could use some comfort food."

I couldn't help my lips twitching in a smile. I honestly didn't know what I did to deserve a friend like Hana. "Yeah… thanks, Hana."

We stepped up to the counter and ordered from the breakfast menu. After getting our drinks and finding a booth, we dug in. My stomach rumbled loudly, and my egg McMuffin was really good. I guess this really was comfort food at its best.

"How're your hotcakes?"

Hana hummed appreciatively, wiping her mouth with a napkin. "Very good. The salty sweet combination with the sausage adds just the right touch." She told me.

Eww… I thought. Sausages were good. Pancakes were good… but them both together… not really my thing. I shook my head. "To each their own, I guess."

Hana giggled.

"Hey, Hana… thanks for bringing me here…"

"You're welcome. Are you… do you want to talk now?"

"Hmm… not really, but… I don't know. Maybe it'll be good for me."
"I think so too."

I sighed.

"Drake, for what it's worth, I know Milla really cares about you."

"Yeah, so you've said."

"Well, I mean it. Now, I can't tell you anything, because I can't violate my best friend's trust, but… what I can say… is that I know everything will be alright."

"How can you be so sure, Hana? I mean, realistically, if Liam were to propose tonight, how could Myers say no? She could be Queen… she could have everything she's ever wanted with just the snap of her fingers… I can't give her that… I can't give her anything…"

I looked down.

"Honestly Drake, I'm surprised at you!" I looked back up to find Hana scowling again. "It's as if you do not know Milla at all!"

"What?"

"Milla would never agree to marry anyone, much less someone she actually considers a friend, for money or for a title! Milla would never do that!"

I cringed, a little ashamed of myself. I knew Myers wasn't like that. From day one. She never was a crown chaser. But still… a part of me couldn't help it. It was almost second nature… to feel this insecure, to feel like I wasn't good enough. I sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Hana's eyes softened. "Drake… I know you're nervous and maybe even a little scared. But I think you need to trust everything you and Milla have been through these last months, and how far your relationship has come."

"Yeah… you're right."

"Now…" Hana got up resolutely. "There isn't anything either of us can do now but wait. So I say we make the most of our last day in New York."

I smiled tenderly, touched at how hard she was trying to cheer me up. But… "Hana… I really appreciate what you're trying to do, but I think I'm just going to go back to my room."

"Drake…" She pouted.

"I just… don't really feel like doing much, you know?"

"Okay…"

____________________________________

12:36

It was noon when we got back to the hotel. Hana and I said goodbye at the lobby, and I headed straight to my room, tumbling on the bed.

*At least today I would be alone… I can actually get some peace and quiet without Maxwell here.*
Maxwell… who at this very moment was helping Myers pick out the perfect dress. The dress you get proposed in…

My best friend was going to propose to the girl I'd… fallen in love with. I realized.

No. I'm not just realizing it. I'm just finally admitting it. Why did it have to come to this for me to admit it to myself? Why did I have to spend so much time trying to deny it? I should have told her. That night, in our tent, I should've woken her up and I should've told her.

And I should've told Liam. I winced, trying to imagine his face. His sad, dejected face… but I still should've been honest with him. And it's not like I haven't gotten the chance… I've had multiple chances to tell him. After the Coronation, at Applewood, in Italy, in Paris… I should have told him.

Myers wanted to tell him… she wanted to tell him since before the Coronation. She'd been honest with herself, with her feelings, and she wanted to tell him. If I'd listened… if I hadn't been so stubborn… none of this would have happened! She would have dropped out of the running for Queen, her name never would've been smeared in the first place… and we would be together… who knows where we would be… Cordonia or New York… but we'd be together.

I rolled over on the bed, burying my face on my pillows. I was such an idiot. That MasterChef meme popped into my head, for some reason. What am I? And idiot sandwich. I could almost laugh at how ridiculous it was.

My phone rang. It was a video call from Savannah.

"Hey sis."

"Hey, big brother!" Savannah smiled at me until she saw my face. "What's wrong?"

"What? Nothing's wrong!" I tried to smile what turned out to be the most awkward cringe in history.

"Drake? What's wrong?" She pressed.

"N-nothing!"

"Drake!"

I looked down, taking a deep breath. With a tight stomach, I told her everything. Absolutely everything. Everything from Lythikos to New York. Everything from lying in the snow watching the stars, pancakes in the kitchen and talking in the ruins to toasting marshmallows in Fydelia, touring through Rome, camping in a forest outside Paris and meeting her friends in New York. I told her how difficult it was for me, how I tried to push Myers away at first, and how resolved I was to not betray Liam. I told her how, little by little, Myers tore through every single wall I'd built, how she'd seen past my snark and my sarcasm, and how she never gave up on me, until she got me.

Because she got me.

Savannah listened attentively, simply nodding and asking an occasional question. And she never once said "I knew it" or "I told you".

"And now… Liam is going to propose to her tonight."

"How can you be sure?"

"He broke off the engagement with Madeleine. And he cleared his afternoon to take her out."
"Yeah, but--"

"Savannah. He already proposed to her the night of the Coronation, in the hedge maze, before everything with the pictures went down."

Savannah grimaced. "And what did she say?"

"She told him… she wasn't ready yet. That she needed to think about it."

"So she was honest then… she'll be honest with him now."

I shrugged. "Or… she could marry him."

"And be Queen." Savannah nodded once.

Unlike Hana, I knew she wouldn't try to convince me otherwise. Like me, she knew there was a possibility Myers would say yes. Because, just like me, she knew what it was like to be an outsider at court. A commoner in a world of nobles. She knew what it was like to live with the insecurity that you were not, and never would be, good enough. That knowledge that you never truly fit in, and that everyone around you was deemed "better" than you… Savannah knew that feeling well.

And yet… she sighed. "Look, Drake… I won't start with meaningless platitudes about how she seems to care about you and how you have nothing to worry about, because the truth is… I've only met Milla once. I don't know her that well. And I can't assure you she's going to deny his proposal. The only thing I can say is… talk to her. Wait until she's back and go talk to her. And please, don't assume anything until you talk to her. Don't… don't make the same mistake I did."

I nodded, pressing my lips together. "You're right. I… I'll try to talk to her when she gets back."

"Don't try. Do it."

I sighed. "Okay. I will."

"Good."

I shook my head, trying to clear it. I didn't know if I felt lighter from talking about this with her, or not. "So, how are you?"

"I'm good."

We talked for a little while more, about Bartie, and Bertrand. She told me they were barely talking now, after his last… incident. They mostly texted. She kept him updated on Bartie's well being, and sent him the occasional picture, and he supported her financially, but besides that… they never talked about them.

We said our goodbyes, and I got up. I got a notepad from the nightstand and wrote:

Myers…

Meet me at the hotel balcony tonight. We need to talk.

Drake.

2 p.m.

I slipped the note under Myers' door. Whatever happened now… is up to her.
2:08 p.m.

Time seemed to pass ever so slowly. I looked at the time on my phone. 8 minutes? Seriously?

I tumbled onto my bed again, forcibly stopping myself from banging my head against the wall.

It's going to be a long day …

I looked around my room, some of my clothes scattered on the floor. Since today was our last day in New York, and since I desperately needed something to do, I began packing my stuff for the flight home tomorrow.

Some music, I thought as I opened spotify on my phone, and a mind-numbing task. That's what I need to take my mind off everything.

I got pumped up as AC/DC’s ‘Back in Black’ came on, bobbing my head to the awesome guitar solos, and began packing. I was thinking of how simple this was, when--

Oh, I can't fight this feeling any longer

And yet I'm still afraid to let it flow

What started out this friendship has grown stronger

I only wish I had the strength to let it show

The song immediately made me think of Myers, and I shook my head, quickly reaching for my phone. Nope! Nope! Nope! NEXT!

I see forever when I look in your eyes

You're all I ever wanted

I always want you to be min--

NEXT!

Love hurts

Love scars

Love wounds and marks

SERIOUSLY?! I pushed the next button.

Jessie is a friend, yeah

I know he's been a good friend of mine

But lately something's changed that ain't hard to define

Jessie's got himself a girl and I want to make her mine

“Oh, come on!” I pushed the next button with more force than necessary, and blew out a sigh of relief when the slow, powerful chords of Metallica’s ‘Enter Sandman’ came on. I resumed my packing, mindful to skip any and all power ballads on my playlist, before laying down on my bed with a tired groan. Back to the ceiling it is.
3:48 p.m.

One hour of staring at the ceiling. I wondered what Myers was doing now… Would she still be dress shopping? Had the Beaumonts remembered to buy her lunch, or were they so wrapped up in the whole proposal that they’d forgotten to feed her? Had she met Liam yet?

I knew there was nothing to do now but wait… but at some point, I seriously thought this wait was going to kill me.

5:30 p.m.

I groggily opened my eyes with a yawn. *Okay… maybe this wait wasn't going to kill me. It'd just make me sleep.*

There was a knock on my door and I sat up on the bed so quickly I got a head rush. I groaned, waiting for the dizzy spell to pass, before getting up and opening the door. I was surprised to find Bastien at the door.

"Drake." He nodded.

"Hey, Bastien." I yawned. "What's up?"

He visibly fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable. "I… I should not be here."

"Okay… do you want to come in?"

"I think that would be best."

I stepped aside to let him through, and closed the door. "Wanna tell me what's going on?"

Bastien sighed. "Drake… I don't know if I should tell you this, but… I care for you, and don't want to see you get hurt."

Ah… I knew where this was going. He came to warn me.

"I'm afraid I just received a… rather odd request from his Majesty, King Liam."

"Okay…"

"He asked me to break into Lady Camilla's room and… take her pet corgi."

I snorted. I mean, I knew what it was probably for, but… I still found it funny to imagine Bastien dog-napping Chase.

"Drake," he said sternly, growing at me, "this is serious. I think he means to use the dog to… propose matrimony to Lady Camilla."

I shook my head, the last of my grin fading. "I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do."

Bastien stared at me with wide eyes, like I'd just grown a second head. "And… you're… okay with that? I thought… I thought you cared for Lady Camilla."
I sighed, sitting down on my bed. How do I say this? "I do… and that's why I have to let her choose."

Bastien nodded. "Ah. Well, that's… that's very noble of you." I nodded, my lips a thin line, as he met my eyes. "I suppose I didn't need to warn you, then. I should get back to my duties."

I stood, clapping my hands on my knees. "Yeah, I guess. But… thanks for coming anyway."

Bastien's lips curved upwards into a hint of a smile. "Of course, Drake." He moved and wrapped his arms around me, clapping my back.

I returned the hug, before stepping back. "Take care of Myers' dog. She'll never forgive you if something happens to it."

Bastien chuckled. "Of course." He nodded once, and left.

I sighed, tumbling back onto the bed, a queasy feeling in my stomach.

5:51 p.m.

The door to my room opened, the hinges squeaking slightly. I turned my head to find Maxwell stepping across the threshold, looking tired and conflicted. His eyes widened when he saw me. "Drake! Um… hi."

"Did you find the perfect dress for her?" I couldn't hide the bitterness from my tone, feeling slightly betrayed.

Maxwell flinched. "I'm sorry. Bertrand and I found her this morning, roaming the hallways. She told us and Bertrand just got so excited… he whisked her away to a boutique without even giving her a chance to explain, or get her phone…"

I perked up at that. "What?"

"Milla left her phone in her room, charging. Bertrand didn't want to waste a minute and didn't let her go get it."

My eyes widened, my mouth forming a silent O. That's why she wasn't picking up her phone…

Maxwell sighed. "I'm… really sorry, Drake." He hesitated. "For what it's worth… the night of the U.N. party I told her… I told her she shouldn't sacrifice her happiness for House Beaumont."

My jaw dropped. "What did she say?"

"Nothing. She just gave me this big… bone crushing hug."

I couldn't help the chuckle that escaped me. Maxwell gave me a half smile. That feeling of betrayal faded quickly, because I knew Maxwell was just following Bertrand's orders. I knew… he was a good friend, and he wanted the best for Myers. "You hungry?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Uh… yeah. Starving actually. We skipped lunch today."

I rolled my eyes. I knew it. I sighed. Not much to do about it now. "Okay. Let's get some dinner."
"I'll text Hana."

**6:03 p.m.**

We met with Hana in the lobby, and decided to go out of the hotel for dinner. After trying McDonald's, Hana wanted to try more American 'cuisine', so we walked around the city, through Central Park, and about an hour later, we arrived at Gray's Papaya.

"Oh, hells yeah!" Maxwell exclaimed. "We have to try this! I've seen it in like, every movie in New York ever!"

"Do they sell… papayas?" Hana asked.

"Nope. Hot dogs." I told her.

"Oh!" Hana's face lit up. "I'd love to try a classic American hot dog!"

"Then what are we waiting for?" Maxwell ushered us inside.

We ordered 6 franks with everything on them to go, and walked two blocks back to Central Park. We found a bench, sat down and dug in. Maxwell gulped down his hotdogs, while Hana tried to eat delicately, only for some of the chilli to fall into her dress.

"Oh!" She fished a napkin from the takeout bag, trying to clean her dress. "Well… that's ruined." She sighed.

"You have to try to take big bites," Maxwell told her, "so all of it fits in your mouth. Or! You take small bites, attacking it from different sides."

After Maxwell's instructions, Hana was able to finish her hotdogs without any more accidents. We laughed and talked as we ate, the sun slowly setting. After we finished eating, we walked through Central Park, touring as much of it before it got completely dark. The Carrousel was closed, much to Maxwell's relief and Hana's chagrin. So was the Central Park Zoo, but we were able to visit the Umpire Rock and the Heckscher Playground. We got to a pond and crossed the famous Gapstow Bridge, featured in many movies as Maxwell once again pointed out. He made sure to take a whole lot of pictures of us, too.

Between all the walking, the posing and the landmarks, I was actually able to distract myself, and stop thinking about Myers and Liam. I couldn't help but smirk as I looked at my friends… I knew they were probably trying as hard as they could to take my mind off of tonight, and they'd succeed… I honestly couldn't imagine better friends.

When we got back to the hotel, it was actually past 10. We walked Hana back to her room, where she gave us both hugs, before going in. Maxwell and I walked back to our room, but before we could get there… my phone chimed.

It was a text from Myers. "I'm at the balcony."

**10:26 p.m.**

I pushed the elevator button for the roof, my heart pounding in my chest. I could hear it thudding in my ears, could feel it banging against my ribs. I looked in the elevator mirror as it began it's slow ascent. I looked normal… but I was more nervous than I'd ever been in my entire life. I was suddenly nauseous, and dizzy.
Get it together!


The elevator doors opened. *This is it.*

I stepped out onto the balcony, Myers already there, leaning on the ledge. Her back was turned to me as she looked out to the glimmering lights of New York City. She was wearing a long grey dress with shimmering detailing, and her hair was loose, and I realized she'd straightened it, as it was falling down her back in a straight sheet, instead of her usual waterfall waves. She hadn't turned, but I knew her makeup would be perfectly done, natural and highlighting her almond shaped eyes. I knew she would look beautiful. Quite possibly the most beautiful she could be.

And then she turned… and I knew I was right. Myers looked stunning… so much so she literally took my breath away. I forgot how to speak for a second, until I remembered to breathe and formulate words. "Hey, Myers." I stepped closer. "We need to talk… about us."

Her eyes were impenetrable, and I couldn't read her. "Yeah, we do." I stepped even closer, placing a hand on the ledge. Myers sighed. "Drake… Liam proposed to me tonight."

*If she opened with that…* I looked at her hands, and found she was covering her left ring finger with her other hand. *She said yes…* I realized, failing to hide my heartbreak completely. "Oh… " I looked down at the ground. "I'm hap--"

Myers placed her palm on my hand. *No ring.* She lifted my face, making me meet her eyes. "Don't you dare." Myers said sternly, before her eyes softened. She smiled. "I said no."

"... What?" *I must have heard wrong… or I must be dreaming. Quick, pinch yourself!*

"I said no." She repeated. "Drake… you're the only one I've ever cared about."

"Myers… do you really mean that?" I couldn't believe it. I *still* couldn't believe it. Myers rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Liam is a king. I can't offer you half of what he can."

"I didn't come here looking for a kingdom, Drake. I want to be with you. And I think you invited me out here tonight because you want that too."

Myers looked at me then… and I found myself lost in those dazzling eyes. Those eyes that revealed everything she was feeling: vulnerability, hope, love.

And just like that…my disbelief faded, my insecurities faded, that *voice* inside my head that told me I wasn't good enough faded… because she picked *me.* Against all odds… Myers picked me.

"I do." I told her. "I have for a long time, Myers. I guess I've been afraid of what that would mean. For you, for Liam... and for me. But if you…"

"Drake." She cut me off softly, giving me a beaming smile. "I'm sure about this."

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped me, out of pure and unadulterated joy. I ran a hand through my hair, hoping she didn't see it shake. I stepped closer to her, and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Is this the part where you tell me to stop talking and kiss you?" I cupped her cheek with my other hand, trailing her lips with my thumb. "Because I really want to kiss you."

"So do I, but aren't you worried someone will see us?"
I followed her gaze to a roof close by, where there seemed to be a party going on. There were about two dozen people on that roof. And yet…

*I don't give a shit who sees.*

"Let 'em look. I'm tired of being careful."

Without another word, I pulled her flush against me, crushing my mouth to hers in a searing kiss. I ran my fingers through her hair as she opened her mouth and her tongue met mine. Myers ran her arms over mine, up to my shoulders before linking them behind my neck. The kiss was pure fire, lighting all of my senses, and burning everything away that wasn't Myers. Her taste, her touch, her smell consumed me. The sounds of the city and the raucous shouting of the party on the next roof faded away, until all I heard was my heart thumping in my chest, and I could swear I could hear hers. When we finally pulled apart, we both both breathless and grinning.

"I don't know what the hell I did to deserve you, Myers. But I'll never stop trying to be worthy of it."

Myers rolled her eyes, shaking her head slightly before giving me a tender grin. "You didn't have to do anything. You were always enough."

"Myers…"

Before I could say more, she kissed me again. This kiss was different, it was softer, it was careful, like she was afraid I would break at her touch. When she pulled back, there was a world of meaning in her gaze… but she didn't say it. Not yet. And neither did I.

"Please remember that." She whispered.

"I… I'll try."

Myers shook her head, annoyed. "I'll repeat it as long as it takes, until you get it through your thick skull. *You are enough.*"

"Maybe one day, I'll believe it, Myers."

"I'm looking forward to that day, then."

I tuck an errant strand of hair behind her ear, cupping her cheek before I leaned in for another kiss. Our lips met once more, when we heard lewd shouting, whooping and wolf whistles. We pulled apart to find a couple of people from the party cheering us on with calls of "get 'im, girl!" and "kiss her again!" I shook my head, but Myers merely smiled and waved good naturedly.

Then, her eyes met mine, and Myers wordlessly took my hand and laced her fingers with mine. She led me to the elevator, then to her floor, then to her room. She was barely able to open the door, fumbling with her key, when my mouth was on hers in a searing kiss. I pressed her up against the door, which was already open, causing us both to slip backwards, almost falling.

Myers and I erupted into laughter, until our eyes met, and it felt like this sheer electric current passed between us. We both pulled each other closer, our mouths clashing against each other, our hands running over the other's body. I fisted a bunch of fabric from her skirts as I gripped her hips and pulled her flush against me. Myers began to push my shirt off my shoulders as I began to kiss down her jaw.

“Drake… wait… We… should... talk…” Myers uttered between gasps and moans.
Get ahold of yourself; I told myself. “Yeah… yeah, you’re right.”

We broke apart, both of us breathless. Myers chuckled as she led me to the couch, before moving to the bar to pour drinks for the both of us. The scene was incredibly familiar, immediately bringing back memories of the last time she’d done that.

The night of the Beaumont Bash.

That night, she’d told me of how she wanted to drop out of the competition. Of how she wanted to tell Liam about us. How she wanted there to be an ‘us’.

And now… here we are.

She’d told Liam. And we were, finally and officially, an ‘us’. The only thing that was left… was that one final conversation pending. The conversation between me and my best friend.

Myers walked back to the couch with two tumblers of whisky in her hands. She handed one to me and sat down, a big smile on her face. “To us.” She toasted.

“To us.” I clinked my glass with hers and we both drank.

“So… I should probably tell you what happened tonight.” Myers said, cuddling up next to me.

“Yeah… I think I should know… for when I talk to Liam.”

“Of course. Do you want the gory details or the highlights?”

I honestly didn’t know. Actually, yeah I did. "The highlights." The gory details would make want to jump off the roof with guilt.

"Okay…” Myers said, getting my full attention once again. "After Liam… proposed, and I rejected his proposal, he asked about my future. I told him I’d love for it to be in Cordonia, and… he gave me a Duchy. So… I hope you won't resent me for being a Duchess."

"I could never re--" Wait, what?! "Wait, a what?!" I nearly spilled my whisky.

Myers laughed, a deep, rich laugh. “A Duchess.”

"A Duchess?”

She nodded, shrugging. "Yeah." Myers looked as equally bewildered as I felt.

"He gave you a Duchy? Just like that?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

Wow, talk about highlights. I guess my morbid curiosity wanted some details. "And… how did he-- how did you--" I sighed, unable to get the words out.

"You want a little more detail?"

I nodded.

"Okay… after a walk down memory lane, we ended up at the Statue of Liberty, and… he proposed. I…” She looked down, and I couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed or trying to gather her thoughts. "I told him I couldn't marry him."
"Did he ask why?"

Myers looked at me then, her eyes glistening with emotion. She nodded once. "He did."

"What did you say?"

"I told him… I couldn't marry him, because I had, um… very strong feelings for you."

I sighed. "And what did he say?"

Myers grimaced. "I could see he was hurt but… He… said you were his best friend, and that he was very happy for you… for us."

I sighed, picturing his face. Liam hid his feelings well enough at court, but he could never hide them from me. I knew exactly how his blue eyes would darken, his eyebrows would furrow and his lips would quirk downwards. He would clench his jaw to stop his chin from trembling, making his face seem slimmer and sharper.

In that moment, my eyes began stinging with tears. I felt like crying, because I'd betrayed my best friend, but… I knew he would never hold it against me. I knew that he must be really hurting right now. He loved Myers -- or at least he thought he did… and yet, he was willing to let her go. He was willing to try to be happy for me… and if I was being truly and completely honest… I wasn't surprised at all. Deep down, I always knew Liam would understand. *Liam always put others before himself. Why would this be any different?*

"Drake…" Myers called my name. "I know you're feeling guilty right now… I do too--"

"You shouldn't, Myers. You wanted to tell him since this began, and I was the one who stopped you." I sighed. "I just… I'm sorry it had to come to this… and I'm sorry you had to tell him by yourself, because you literally had no other choice. I'm sorry I made you wait until my best friend was literally down on one knee, because I was too chicken-shit to admit what I felt... I should have been man enough to face him… to stand beside you, and tell him together."

"Hey…" Myers took my chin, making me meet her eyes. "It's not your fault. All those times I tried to pressure you into telling him… I hadn't even considered how difficult it must be for you. And when I saw Liam's face tonight… it hit me. You guys are life-long best friends… and I came between you…"

"Myers…"

"I did. And that's when I finally understood what you might be feeling… all your hesitation, all your fears were completely valid. Even I don't know what I would've done in your shoes."

I sighed. "Well… in any case, it's done now. I… I still have to talk to Liam, though. He has to hear my side of the story. I owe it to him."

"I know…"

We looked at each other for a long time, until a smirk began making its way through Myers' face. "I'm guessing you want to keep this " she gestured to us with her index finger, "to just making out until you talk to Liam yourself?"

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "Uh… actually, yeah. I would appreciate it if we could… wait."

Myers nodded. "I understand. Do what you have to."
"Thank you." I moved to press a soft kiss to her lips. “I… should go now.”

“Go.” She whispered. “I’ll see you tomorrow for the flight home.”

Home… I thought, Cordonia was her home now… “See you tomorrow, Myers.”

“Good luck.”

I nodded, and stood, making my way out of her room, feeling her eyes on me as I walked away.

11:59 p.m.

I stood outside of Liam's suite, my hand poised to knock. But… it was like I was frozen on the spot.

Come on, man up.

I tapped my fingers on the door.

A moment later, Liam opened the door, his red rimmed eyes filled with hurt and disappointment when he saw me. He turned and stepped back, leaving the door open for me to follow. I did, closing the door gently behind me. I waited by the door, as Liam stood by the bed, his fists clenched, trying to get ahold of himself.

"You should have told me." He whispered quietly, almost to himself. He was visibly shaking.

For one second I thought he would punch me… He should punch me, I thought, I deserve it...

"I know."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't really believe it. I refused to believe she would ever choose me over you."

"She loves you." Liam turned, and the way he said it was almost like an accusation. Almost.

I only nodded.

"Do you… do you love her?"

That caught me off guard. I came here expecting to apologize and beg his forgiveness, not… this. "I-I--"

"Drake…" his gaze softened, and he finally looked at me, heartbreak clear in his face. "I j-just… want to know that if I let her go, it's so that you could make her happy. So, tell me the truth… do you love her?"

I sighed, hanging my head. "I… do. I love her. I don't know how it happened, or when… and I definitely never planned for it to happen… but it did."

Liam sighed. He took a couple of deep breaths, exhaling slowly, before finally looking at me. "Why didn't you tell me?" He pleaded. "Did you really think I wouldn't understand? That I wouldn't have stepped aside?"

"I'm sorry… I didn't know what to do. I knew how you felt about her, and I didn't want to hurt you… I tried pushing her away, but…"
Liam chuckled, but there was no joy in it. "I… finally understand now. Why she pulled away all of a sudden, why she shut me out, why she refused to talk about our future…” He clicked his tongue. "It all makes so much sense now. And you knew why. And you never said anything..." He accused, rightly so.

"Liam… I really am sorry…" I sighed. "I tried not to get too close to her… hell, I even tried to hate her, but… I couldn't. And when I realized I was in over my head… I didn't know how to tell you…"

Anger flared in his eyes, the clear blue visibly darkening several shades. He tried to reign it in, but some of it still showed when he spoke. "You ‘didn't know how to tell me'? That is your excuse?"

"It's not an excuse!" I shouted defensively. Liam looked taken aback by my outburst, and I rubbed my face as a weight came over me. I sat on his bed, running a hand through my hair, before resting my elbows on my knees. "How do you tell your life-long best friend you're falling for the woman he loves?" I whispered. "How do you tell him… how do you tell him how much it hurts to watch her compete for him? Hell, how much it hurts to help her compete for him? And how angry it makes you, because she's so amazing, s-so special she shouldn't even have to compete? How…” I swallowed.

"How could I tell you... how much it hurt to have to tell myself a million times a day that she's here for you? How could I tell you that, after almost 20 years, I was starting to resent you -- not because you were a prince or a king -- but because you had the chance to marry the smartest, strongest, most beautiful woman I've ever met? How could I tell you…” My voice shook and wavered, "How do you tell your best friend in the world -- your best friend that you've known your whole life! -- that your chest literally hurts when he looks at you, eyes filled with hope, and talks about how happy he is that he's chosen his bride, and you know he's going to choose her?" I sniffled, my eyes burning with tears I refused to let fall.

I looked up at Liam, and saw him staring back at me with a clenched jaw and a heaving chest, his eyes shining with tears. "That's why you wanted to leave court…” He mumbled under his breath.

I nodded, but kept going. "And even after it was all over…” I continued, looking at him in the eye this time, "when her name was smeared and he wasn't able to choose her… how do you tell your best friend that a part of you is relieved? That a small, but insistent, part of you dares to feel hope? That that same part of you even feels happy? And that, at the same time… you feel like you're drowning in a wave of chest-crushing guilt, because you realize what a horrible friend you are?"

Liam swallowed, his Adam's apple visibly bobbing, and he shook his head slightly.

I sighed. "You're right. I should have told you. I should have tried to tell you every day after I realized how I felt. I should have tried to tell you every time a conversation like that came up… but I just didn't know how. And I'm sorry." My voice broke again, and I whispered, "I'm so sorry, Liam."

There was a moment of silence that seemed to stretch on forever. I actually lost track of time, wondering how many minutes had passed. I hung my head, unable to look my best friend in the eye. I knew I'd fucked up, and I knew he had every right to hate me right now. I knew he had absolutely no obligation to forgive me.

And why would he? Why should he? I'd gone behind his back, stolen the woman he loved, and on top of that, I'd kept it a secret… And I really had no excuse… I had so many chances to tell him… even going back to the social season. I could have told him after the beach party. I could have told him after the incident with Tariq happened. I could have told him the night of the Coronation. And what's even worse… by all rights, I should have told him in Italy -- when he told me he felt her pulling away, and that he felt he was losing her… I should have told him why. Instead, I fed him
some bullshit excuse about how Myers' parents' divorced practically traumatized her and she was intent on being eternally faithful or something.

Myers wanted to tell him...

I should have listened.

The silence stretched on until it became almost suffocating.

Finally, Liam sighed… a long, deep, shuddering breath. "Drake… I forgive you."

"What?" My jaw dropped as I raised my head to look at him.

"I forgive you." He repeated. "I realize now… no, I've always known that you never meant to hurt me. Either of you."

I wiped a single tear that managed to escape my eyes. "Thank you." I felt this huge, monumental weight lift from my shoulders; months worth of guilt finally dissipating. Without even thinking about it, I walked over to Liam and pulled him in for a hug. He held me tight, clapping my back, before stepping back, wiping his eyes.

We both exhaled, trying to regain our composure. Liam walked to the bar and poured us both a couple of whiskies. "T-thanks." I told him, as he handed me a glass. I took a sip, not trusting myself to speak yet. The whiskey was smooth and left a pleasant burn in its wake as it traveled down my throat. I sighed, shooting furtive looks at Liam. "Are you… will you be okay?"

Liam looked into his glass, gently tapping his finger against it. "I… I will be."

"I'm so--"

"Drake, don't apologize."

"But--"

"But nothing. Just… treat her well. I will be fine. You… you can't help who you fall in love with, and… you're the best man I know. You deserve her." He admitted through gritted teeth.

I merely nodded my thanks.

"And Drake… I want you to know… I really am happy for you. Camilla Myers is the most remarkable woman I've ever met, and--" he gulped, trying to get the words out. "And I know you will be happy together."

"Thank you… really, thank you. I… honestly didn't think you'd forgive me so fast, if at all…" I mumbled sheepishly.

"Drake…" Liam sighed deeply. "You're like a brother to me, and I could never hate you for this. I love you, Drake, and… I want you to be happy. If that happiness lies with Camilla… I would never punish you for it, just like I'd never punish her..." I was about to start thanking him again when he laughed suddenly. "If I'm being completely honest… I kind of suspected something was going on between the two of you."

My jaw dropped to the floor. "You did?"

He nodded, his expression carefully neutral. "I actually first noticed it at your birthday party. We were leaving the bar… and the both of you were a couple of steps back, just talking, but the way she
looked at you… I remember feeling very jealous at that moment."

"My birthday? Nothing happened that day."

Liam simply shrugged. "I felt jealous. She never looked at me like that." He took a sip of his whiskey. "My next clue was after the Coronation. You were willing to jump onto a plane to New York for her."

"I--"

"And my next one was in Rome. You hate sightseeing, and yet, you were willing to go to all these tourist spots with her."

I shrugged, blushing a little. "I just… wanted her to see the city."

"You wanted to make her happy. Which is why… I know I couldn't have given her up to anyone more worthy."

I nodded. "Thanks, Liam. You… you really are the greatest friend anyone could ask for."

He chuckled. "So are you..." I was about to protest, but he shook his head. "I... I cannot begin to imagine how hard the social season was for you... everything you just told me... and yet, when I asked you to stay, you stayed..."

I shrugged. "Well... yeah. You needed me. I wasn't going to leave you alone."

"If the whole scandal with Tariq had never happened... you would have stood in that cathedral next to me and watched me marry her?"

I swallowed, the image unbearable. It would have killed me, but I knew I would've done it anyway. "Yeah."

He nodded. "You've given up so much for me... and you were willing to give her up just so I'd be happy... I don't know what I did to deserve a friend like you, and so... what kind of awful friend would I be if I punished you for this? If I asked you to give her up? I would never be that cruel..."

I rubbed my hands together, thinking about what he said. I knew he was right, but still... "Liam... you have every right to hate me right now, to yell, to be angry. I should have told you. I shouldn't have gone behind your back, I--"

Liam shook his head. "Yes, you should have told me. It would've been easier for all of us if you had... but I really do understand why you didn't. I honestly don't know what I would have done if the roles were reversed."

"Probably the same thing... try to push her away so that she'd marry your best friend and be happy."

Liam chuckled. "I'd be a bloody idiot then, wouldn't I? To forget I'm dealing with a woman who's notorious for going after what she wants and never taking no for an answer?" He gave me a pointed look.

"Heh. Touche." I conceded.

"Anyway, I think we both agree you could have handled it better... but I'd never break up our friendship over it. And I do mean it when I say I forgive you."

"Thank you... really, just... thank you."
"Of course." He clapped my shoulder… pulled me in for a hug. When we finally stepped apart, he set his glass back on the tray and checked his watch. "Now, if you don't mind… it's late, and we have an early flight tomorrow."

"Yeah, of course. I'll, uh… let you rest. Good night."

"Good night, Drake."

I walked out and he shut the door. When I got to my room, it was dark and Maxwell was, thankfully, snoring. I tumbled on my bed, still unable to believe everything that's happened in one single day.

Chapter End Notes

Songs mentioned:
Back in Black - AC/DC
Can't fight this feeling - REO Speedwagon
When I Look Into Your Eyes - Firehouse
Love hurts - Nazareth
Jesse's girl - Rick Springfield

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!