



Falling for the Widowed Prince

Author: *Carol Moncado*

Category: Romance

Description: Prince Anthony wants nothing more than to protect his ten-year-old daughter, the new Queen Catherine, from outside influences.

To do that, he must become her regent until she comes of age. He asks Royal Historian Madeleine Woodward to help find a way to force the Council and Parliament to appoint him. She finds a way, but he's not going to like it.

Answers from the past mean Prince Anthony and Madeleine must make sacrifices in the present to protect the young queen's future. Can Madeleine protect her heart at the same time or will she find herself falling for the widowed prince?

Total Pages (Source): 32

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

1

OCTOBER 24, 2010

Madeleine Woodward popped a bit of chocolate in her mouth as she stared at the colored lights on her pre-lit Christmas tree. “That is a ridiculous article.”

Her best friend, Liana, just laughed. “It’s all in good fun. Kind of. Mostly. I don’t make fun of you for having your tree up two months early.”

“That’s a family tradition I love. Which member of the royal family is the most attractive doesn’t seem like an article worthy of our time or interest.” She reached for her drink. “I think I’ll pass.”

Liana rolled her eyes. “I know you work at the palace, but not everyone does. Most people think it’s fun. They list like ten people here, but there’s only three really viable options. Prince Anthony, of course. The Duke of Lancheshire and Earl of Farnesworth are part of the royal family, even if a bit further removed. The rest are back at least four generations, but still technically part of the family. They picked the duke as the most attractive. Can’t blame them.” She sighed and fell back into her chair. “Those blue eyes and the silver fox thing he’s got going on...”

Madeleine didn’t say anything, but she would choose differently.

“Wait.” Liana sat back up. “Maaaad-eeee-leiiiiine,” her sing-song voice made Madeleine wince. “You used to tell me you thought Prince Anthony was a cutie.”

Heat crept up Madeleine's neck then her cheeks. "I said he was cute once, when the engagement was announced. That was like twelve years ago."

"Eleven-and-a-half," Liana corrected.

"Close enough."

"You still think he's the best-looking though, don't you?" Reaching for a snack on the table, Liana had that twinkle in her eye. The one Madeleine normally didn't mind, but this time caused her to grow wary. "You've met him. Are his eyes as dark as they look in photographs?"

Madeleine gave a half-shrug. "I've met him a few times. He's always polite. He knows I'm the historian and has asked me to research something a few times, but most of the communication was done through one of his aides. Besides, he's married, and deeply devoted to the queen."

She almost said more but bit her tongue. Everyone knew the two of them were madly in love, but to even hint that she'd personally seen how he took care of the queen would violate the oath she took after she was hired, as well as her own private code of ethics.

Time to move on. "Fine. He's an attractive man. Most of the country thinks so. I still can't believe you read these magazines and the nonsense they spew. Not with how often you're in them."

Liana gave another roll of her eyes. "I read them when I need a laugh. I know I'm not having affairs with like ten different guys." She flipped the page. "Plus I need to see just how far down we are on the cheesiest shows of the decade."

"You know how I would answer," Madeleine told her around her next bite of

chocolate. “The absolute cheesiest.”

“Only because you can’t even name any other shows on the telly right now.”

“You’re right. I’ve only watched one current show on the telly in years, and you know it. I have no idea what other shows are on, what the recent movies are or what the upcoming ones will be. I don’t really care. I love my history books and documentaries. The stories they tell are at least as intriguing as anything you’ve watched.”

Instead of flipping to the next page, Liana looked at her watch. “I’ve got to run. I have an early morning call time.” She squeezed Madeleine’s shoulder. “At least you know I’m on the telly.”

“Only because I know you’d disown me if I didn’t.”

Liana laughed. “Ciao!” She let herself out the main door to Madeleine’s flat.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Madeleine locked the door and finished her nighttime routine. She didn’t have to be at work early, but she did have a newly discovered book, this one several hundred years old, to look through. It wasn’t as old as some of the ones in the Hall of History, but the oldest one where she’d had the privilege of cataloging the contents.

Those old books were full of stories - dashing heroes engaging in daring sword fights to protect the damsels in distress. There were plenty of damsels who could take care of themselves, too, but they tended to get less space. The history of Eastern Novigradia was male dominated - as many histories were. A few women had made a name for themselves, but usually only for a moment in time, not a life-long story.

Putting it out of her mind, Madeleine slid under the covers and pulled them up to her

chin. It wouldn't be long before the nearly eternal night was upon them. Already the days became much shorter and the time between sunset and sunrise was growing each night.

Fortunately, black out curtains were a thing for the other half of the year.

Madeleine woke earlier than expected, and definitely not well-rested. She'd dreamt, she knew that, but she couldn't remember a thing about them, except they left her unsettled. Something odd had been going on at the palace before she left work the day before. Maybe that had something to do with it.

She arrived at her desk an hour earlier than normal, admiring the Christmas decorations that had started to appear. Before she could open the new book, paperwork needed to be done.

Always paperwork.

As soon as she locked her computer to go to the other room, the phone on her desk rang.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Metaphorically biting her tongue to prevent her frustration from spilling over, she hit the speaker button. “Royal Historian’s Office, Madeleine Woodward speaking.”

“Ms. Woodward, do you have the daily codes?”

The voice sounded familiar, but she couldn’t quite place it. “Uh...” Where were they? She’d never used them before. “I do. One moment.” The safe! She opened the wall safe and removed the correct folder. What was today? She scanned the sheet. “Periwinkle.”

“Histrionic.”

Madeleine didn’t like that a word so close to history had such a different connotation. She ran her finger down the column until she found the right word and the code name that went with it.

The Prime Minister?!

Her eyes about popped out of her head. “How can I help you, sir?”

“You know who I am?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you know that if what I’m about to tell you ever goes outside of the circle, you could be charged with treason.”

Her eyes widened further. “Yes, sir.”

“I need to know what laws, codicils, statutes, treaties, legal precedent or anything else says about regents for a monarch who hasn’t reached the age of majority…”

Madeleine gasped. “The queen…”

The Prime Minister ignored her exclamation. “...particularly when the previous monarch was a queen rather than a king.”

“The queen…” she whispered again.

A heavy sigh could be heard on the other end of the line. “Likely soon. I’ve heard stories about how well you know our history. Is there anything you can tell me now?”

Madeleine struggled to put the queen’s impending passing from her mind and focus on what she was being asked. “Um… the surviving parent is the regent automatically for up to sixty days. Parliament and the Council must appoint a permanent regent before the deadline. There are certain conditions that have to be met for anyone to be regent. I believe any prince consort would meet most, or even all, of them without any difficulty, except that as the widowed consort, it’s very strongly discouraged.”

Something else began to nibble at the edge of her consciousness.

“Is that all?”

Closing her eyes and trying to concentrate didn’t help. “There’s something else, something obscure, but I can’t seem to bring it to mind. I’ll keep trying and start digging through records here to see what I can find.”

“Thank you, Ms. Woodward.” The Prime Minister ended the call without a goodbye.

For the next several hours, Madeleine struggled to keep the tears at bay as she looked through the archives for the information the Prime Minister requested.

The basic requirements were easy enough to find and quickly emailed, along with annotations.

But the other piece...

It wasn't coming to her.

She wanted to keep going, but the growl in her stomach reminded her of the piece of fruit she'd had for breakfast, intending to take an early lunch. The clock told her it was well into the afternoon.

Swiping at her cheeks and knowing it wouldn't matter as fresh tears flowed down them, she left her office and locked it behind her.

A portrait of the queen wearing her favorite amethyst pendant stared down at Madeleine as she started for the executive dining hall. Hot tears filled her eyes again and quickly spilled down her cheeks.

Blinking to clear them only worked so much, and when she rounded the next corner, Madeleine found herself running into someone much taller than herself.

She looked up and gasped.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Prince Anthony.

“I’m so sorry, sir.” She managed to get the words out without her voice cracking.

He gave her a long look she couldn’t quite interpret. “Quite all right, Ms. Woodward. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

She could tell he was trying to give her a reassuring smile, but he failed miserably. The lines of grief on his face made him look years older than she knew him to be. She hated that her conversation with Liana the night before meant she looked straight into his eyes and noticed the deep, rich brown had been colored with pain.

“The Prime Minister told me you’re doing some research into regents. Have you found anything new?”

Madeleine shook her head. “Not yet, sir. I won’t stop until I do. It’s the least I can do for the queen.”

The last thing she would do for her queen.

The prince stared at her for another second, nodded and walked away without saying anything else.

Madeleine watched his back as he turned the corner.

He would take care of everyone else.

Who would take care of him?

October 25, 2010

Five hours earlier

What exactly did one call a Prince Consort who no longer had a queen?

Dowager Prince? Prince Father?

Neither one seemed right - and he didn't think there were many precedents in the Western world. Probably not the Eastern either - not with patriarchal societies dominating world history for as long as they had.

Maybe the ancient world.

Did Cleopatra die before her husband?

Was Cleopatra married when she died? Was she ever?

The now-former Prince Consort Anthony of Eastern Novigradia had no idea.

Staring out the window and down at his late wife's favorite garden maze, he knew such thoughts kept him from a total breakdown.

Well, not the only thing.

Thoughts.

His children.

The people he and the queen both loved.

The new monarch.

So much now rested on the shoulders of a ten-year-old.

So young.

With such a big responsibility.

Anthony continued to hold out hope he could be named regent, protecting his eldest child from outside forces that might seek to influence one way or another.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

They should have looked into it a long time ago.

But they had that always-invincible sense so many young people did.

Not that they qualified as young anymore, but still had a few years before reaching the dreaded middle age.

When the queen took ill, that should have been enough for them to...

But it had all happened so fast.

“Sir?” Without looking, he knew it was the Prime Minister.

Anthony closed his eyes then turned, opening them and tugging the hem of his black suit jacket down to straighten it. “Yes?”

“Some decisions need to be made, sir. As the consort, they fall to you until a regent is officially appointed in sixty days.”

He did some quick calculations in his head. “Christmas Eve?”

The other man gave a sympathetic nod. “Unfortunately. It’s possible we can have it done sooner, but it must be done by then.”

“What do I need to do to be the regent permanently? I think there’s precedence for the Queen Mother to act as regent for her son, but the new kings were much older than Catherine is. We’ve had precious few ruling queens, and none predeceased their

husband.”

“The Royal Historian is searching the archives for guidance - a legal precedent or statute that would be relevant. She said there was something in the back of her mind, but couldn’t quite remember what it was.”

Anthony nodded. The Royal Historian was excellent at her job, with a near encyclopedic memory for details of the history of Eastern Novigradia.

If she thought something existed, it did. If she couldn’t quite recall the information, it must be quite obscure indeed.

He straightened his coat again, even though it didn’t need it. “What do we need to decide?”

For two hours, they went over document after document. Anthony signed each one with the notation of AR for “acting regent.”

It was understandable that the recently-motherless preteen wasn’t expected to take part. Anthony doubted much would sink in after such a loss.

“You will need to make a statement before long, and the entire family will need to be seen in public by this evening.” The Prime Minister put the papers back in the folder, placed it in the attache case, and locked it.

Another nod was all Anthony could manage. “I will. My children are another matter. I won’t force them outside.” He closed his eyes and tried to breath. “Please see that Maxwell gets the details. I need to go find my children. They haven’t been told.”

They would suspect something from the hushed conversations and strained interactions with the assorted caretakers around them.

The Prime Minister stood and bowed slightly at the waist. “You have my deepest condolences, sir, as do your children. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“I appreciate that.”

As the Prime Minister walked out the door, Maxwell entered.

“How are you holding up, sir?”

Anthony’s senior aide knew him well. “I’m in denial. I’m holding it together until everyone who depends on me is more stable.”

“You need to find someone to talk to, sir,” his aide told him gently. “I know there’s not many options, but you need someone in your life who isn’t leaning on you. Someone you can lean on.”

Anthony nodded his acknowledgment, but didn’t know who that person might be. He had acquaintances, friends even, but did he have even one he could count on to be discreet with something like this? He didn’t think so.

“I do have a few things I need you to look at.” Maxwell moved to the table and opened the folder he set on it. “A few decisions need to be made quickly. Much of the events of the next ten days have already been planned in great detail by custom, statute, and the queen’s wishes.”

“Of course.” They’d discussed it a few times, but not in depth. He knew that, years earlier, she’d had one of her senior aides walk her through everything that would need to be arranged.

After another half an hour, Anthony stood and told Maxwell anything else would

have to wait until another time.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

He needed to go find his children.

Maxwell understood and left through a different door.

Anthony wished for the extensive hidden corridors many palaces allegedly had. To his knowledge, this one had only a few hidden doors going from one room to another, but nothing like secret passages.

Instead, he walked through the main halls, knowing that no one from the public would be there. The only people around were the ones who belonged and who would never think about using what they saw or heard to their own advantage.

With that in mind, he stared at the patterned rug covering the ancient stone used in construction. Down three different corridors, up a flight of stairs, down another corridor, turn left then right and stairs would take him to the private quarters.

After he turned left, instead of the clear path he expected, instead he ran into something - or rather, someone.

“I’m so sorry, sir.”

Anthony looked up to see the tear-stained cheeks of the Royal Historian. It seemed odd to him that he’d notice such a thing, but she was the first person he’d talked to that had such an outward expression of grief.

He also suspected her words held more than one meaning. “Quite all right, Ms. Woodward. I wasn’t watching where I was going.” It took everything in him to

manage the smallest smile, but he did his best. “The Prime Minister told me you’re doing some research. Have you found anything new?”

Ms. Woodward shook her head. “Not yet, sir. I won’t stop until I do. It’s the least I can do for the queen.”

She meant it was the last thing she could do for the queen.

With a nod of thanks, Anthony moved to the side and walked around her. Rude? Probably. Did he care? Not particularly. Ms. Woodward would understand.

He needed to find his children.

2

In the weeks since the queen died, Madeleine had done little but scour old documents and search through gigabytes of scanned material for more information on requirements for regents.

She still hadn’t found the thing niggling at the back of her consciousness.

First, she’d meticulously made a new list of monarchs, starting in the present and going back to the first king hundreds of years earlier. Yes, lists existed. Official ones, even. No, she had no reason to doubt their validity, but she wanted to go through the evidence herself to confirm everything.

It had been on her to-do list of random projects for a long time, but there had always been another task that took precedence.

“Ms. Woodward?”

Madeleine looked up to see a familiar face. She blinked. “Is it lunchtime already?” As she glanced at the clock hanging on the wall, she gasped and turned toward the man she thought might becoming her friend. Dipping into a curtsy, she bowed her head as well. “Your Royal Highness.”

He gave her a half-smile - the best one she’d seen since before his wife passed. “I told you, Ms. Woodward, that’s not necessary. Especially in private. I don’t actually have a title anymore, remember?”

She reached for a document, a copy of a copy of the original safely stored in one of the archival rooms. “Actually, I don’t think that’s true.” Sitting back down at the other table, she rolled her chair far enough to one side for the prince to pull his own up next to her.

Somehow, in the last couple of weeks, they’d fallen into a comfortable pattern.

Two days after the funeral, he had come to her office to ask about her progress. She’d been eating, but set her lunch aside. He’d apologized and insisted she continue while they talked and looked at a couple of documents together on her computer.

The next three days were the same. It seemed to be the only time of day he was available.

By day five, he’d started bringing meals for both of them. Except the day before. She hadn’t seen or heard from him at all and assumed that, halfway through November, their lunches had come to an end.

“These are copies, right?” He always double checked before bringing food in.

Madeleine nodded. “Copies of copies actually. The original copies are also kept in a safer place. We’d rather not make any more copies than we have to. No original

documents or first copies are allowed out of the vaults without following strict protocols.”

“And you wouldn’t violate that directive.” It wasn’t a question, not like it had been for the first couple of days.

“Of course not.” She handed him the piece of paper, already highlighted. “Prince Ambrose was married to Queen Catherine. She predeceased him by nearly a year. Their son became King Gregory I. Contemporary documents from the early-1800s continue to refer to him as Prince Ambrose or even the Dowager Prince Consort. Everyone still regarded him as a member of the royal family.” Raising an eyebrow, she made a point she’d made nearly every day. “A widowed queen consort retains her title and status. Why shouldn’t a widowed prince consort?”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

He just stared at her in that way he had. She'd noticed the sharp pain in them slowly diminishing, replaced by sadness or deep sorrow, depending on the day.

Madeleine rolled her eyes. "I know. Men don't typically keep their wives' designations, but most men aren't prince consorts. We've only had a couple. This is the first one I've gotten to in depth enough to know how it was handled. The rest are further back and even then there are only a couple."

"You finished the timeline reconstruction?" He broke a bit of bread off his piece and popped in his mouth.

"I think I finished it," she confirmed. "There're a couple of places I'm still a little uncomfortable with, but I can't put my finger on why that is." She shrugged. "It's probably nothing."

"I knew you were close. I meant to send a message that I wouldn't be here. Louisa wasn't feeling well and wanted her papa." He poked at his salad with his fork.

Madeleine knew what he meant.

Like sick children the world over, the princess had wanted her mother.

Her father likely felt like a poor substitute, but would have done everything in his power to help his little girl feel better.

"It's no problem." Hopefully, she hid her disappointment well.

“But your lunch...”

“I have plenty of snacks stashed in my office.” Did she really have the audacity to interrupt the prince consort?!

“Still.” He leaned back in his seat and reached for the light switch to turn several of the lights off. “Let’s see what you’ve got. Where do you feel uncomfortable?”

With a click of the remote, the projector turned on and her timeline appeared on the wall. “I started with today and worked backwards, looking for confirmation in official documents or even unofficial ones of which monarch came before. I found a couple of minor discrepancies, but I haven’t delved deep enough to see if they mean anything or if it’s simple human error.”

“Show me?”

The red dot from her laser pointer circled around a name. “According to everything I ever learned growing up, and all of the lists we have around here, King Gilead I became monarch in winter of 1627 when his brother King Fulke passed.” Madeleine reached over to click a button on her laptop. A copy of several pieces of the original document appeared. “We’re missing some pieces, but this letter from the third Duke of Lancheshire doesn’t quite jibe. It seems to indicate Gilead didn’t become king until the middle of 1628.”

The prince leaned forward, clearly interested. “What does that mean?”

“The notes with the document say that the coronation was in the summer of 1628, which we already knew, and that was likely what the duke had been referring to.” She pointed her laser at a missing space. “That could be what this area clarified.”

“But you don’t know?”

“Not for certain.” With a shrug, she went back to the timeline. “It is the most likely answer. I’ll keep looking to see if I can find any other references, but it seems like someone would have noticed a long time ago if that’s the case. That would mean there would have to have been another monarch between Fulke and Gilead I.”

The prince fiddled with his fork as he stared at the timeline. “Not necessarily. It’s commonly accepted history. If the only thing to dispute what is believed to be fact is that letter, it could easily be written off as meaning the coronation without delving any further. There hasn’t been a need to do this kind of research in a long time.”

“It still should have been done,” Madeleine muttered.

The sound coming from the prince surprised her, and she looked over at him in surprise.

Was that a laugh?

Why did Ms. Woodward look so shocked?

Anthony surreptitiously ran his tongue over his teeth. Did he have food sticking to his chin?

“What?” he finally asked.

“You laughed,” she told him with a half-smile. “I know I haven’t known you on a personal level for very long, but it’s the first time I’ve heard you actually chuckle.”

He blinked and thought about it. Had he really laughed? The only thing to make him laugh in the last month had been some of his children’s antics. The youngest ones especially didn’t fully understand where their mother had gone. A somber undertone had settled into their quarters, but the little ones had begun to act more normal in the

days following the state funeral.

“I suppose I did,” he told her.

“What did I say that made you laugh?” She really didn’t seem to know.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

“You muttered something about how this kind of confirmation research should have been done. No one but you would have done this. You’re far more conscientious than many of your predecessors. They were very competent keepers of the documents and portraits or other artifacts, but none were overly interested in doing a deep dive into nearly every document available to see if anything we think we know is wrong.” He pointed the tines of his fork her direction. “You, Ms. Woodward, are the only one. I believe any of them would have spent a couple of days doing a cursory search through digitized archives. Perhaps they would have gone to a few of the original sources in the annotations, but none would have gone searching for evidence to confirm or contradict the widely accepted history.”

Her face turned bright red at his compliment. “I don’t know about that...”

“I do,” Anthony told her firmly. “There is no one I’d rather have doing this research to help protect my daughter.”

“I’ll do my best.” Ms. Woodward turned back to the timeline projected on the wall. “I feel like I might be close to a breakthrough, to finding whatever it is that I can’t remember but...” She grimaced. “If I had to guess I would have said I was looking for something closer to the late 1400s or possibly early 1500s than the 1620s.”

“Maybe it is further back. Maybe this is just a slightly odd way of the duke referring to the king’s reign.” He shrugged. “At least we’ll know.” He motioned toward the wall. “Go on. What else have you found?”

She turned her attention back to the wall and directed her laser pointer toward a name and date. “This is a well-known discrepancy. The dates were transcribed incorrectly

by a new..." This time her face scrunched in concentration. "I don't remember what his title was off the top of my head. A recorder of information of some kind. He transposed the year. It's mentioned multiple times in correspondence from his contemporaries. In fact, I believe he may have been imprisoned for quite a while for allegedly intentionally altering the document."

Anthony had grown up in Eastern Novigradia, and knew the story. He'd studied history at university, had a minor in it. But he'd never heard anyone say "allegedly" in relation to this event. "He put 1501 instead of 1510."

"Correct."

"But you don't think it was intentional?"

Ms. Woodward swiveled in her chair. "I think he might have been dyslexic with numbers. A couple of years ago, I was cataloging some recently discovered documents and noticed a similar error in several of his earlier transcriptions. These, however, were more like rough drafts with the incorrect date crossed out and the right one written in. I looked it up. Dyscalculia is often called dyslexia with numbers. That's not quite accurate, and without a lot more information, it's impossible to know if that's what it was, but there is evidence he quite specifically avoided work involving numbers and maths. He may have had difficulty with numbers in general and often transposed them, but he or someone else caught it in the draft stage." She clicked a button on her laptop a couple of times, bringing up the document. "This one made it onto the official document."

"Interesting. It was nearly fifty years later. What would have been his rationale for intentionally recording it incorrectly?" He realized he'd had a bite of food on his fork for the last minute and decided he should probably eat it.

She picked up her beverage. "Who knows what the powers that be thought his

motives were. I think it's far more likely that it was an innocent mistake." It took her a few more minutes to finish getting through the timeline, but there weren't any other surprises. "I haven't quite made it back to King Stephen. I really hope I don't find something that indicates anyone else was our first king. That would be a disaster."

"It would," he agreed. They spent the next fifteen minutes eating their lunches and talking about other things. Nothing deep or serious. She'd carried those conversations the first two weeks, and he'd learned far more about her in a much shorter time than he ever had about anyone before. Slowly, he'd started asking questions for clarification or commenting on a story she told. Most of the stories weren't even about the history of Eastern Novigradia, but rather about her life in general or a documentary she'd watched the night before.

She watched a lot of documentaries on a wide variety of subjects. Everything from expeditions on Everest to cults and their escapees to true crime to big wave surfing to biographies and even one on something she called "malice at the palace" about a fight between two professional basketball teams and their fans in the States at the end of a game.

When they finished, he took their lunch dishes and set them where someone would pick them up. As he walked through the Hall of Records, he glanced up at the camera expertly hidden in the corner, and currently obscured further by Christmas decorations. At least the greenery and other decor was no longer shrouded in black. Twenty-one days had been more than enough.

The camera was an assurance that everything in the archives was recorded, all the rooms, including the offices. There wasn't even a bathroom in the archive suite. It had surprised him, but Ms. Woodward explained. If everything was recorded, it would be much more difficult to do something in the archives without being caught than it would be if there was a known blind spot.

It made sense.

Anthony continued back to his office. For now, he'd insisted the newest monarch only be a part of a few minor things and decisions. It would be fifteen years before a regent was no longer needed. The introductions to the more complex side of the monarchy could be done over a decade-and-a-half.

Well, not quite fifteen years. Catherine would be eleven in just a few months.

He prayed Ms. Woodward could find proof that he could be the regent without Parliamentary approval. The regulations the Prime Minister discussed with him strongly discouraged the remaining parent from taking the job, but didn't outright forbid it. There were a few members of Parliament and the Council who would try to use his grief against him, try to get someone of their choosing in his place.

Several hours later, as Anthony put the last of his things in order for the night, the intercom buzzed.

"Sir, Ms. Woodward is here to see you." Maxwell's voice always sounded like he was in a deep canyon.

She'd never been to his office. Did this mean she'd found something? "Send her in."

He moved to the sitting area near the windows overlooking the capital city as she entered. Motioning to one of the other chairs, he sat down. "Please. Sit."

Ms. Woodward did, but perched near the edge of the seat, not further back. Clearly uncomfortable, she twisted her fingers together before seeming to forcibly stop herself. "I think I found it." She sounded unsure of herself, but having seen her diligence for years, he suspected that she had no reason to.

He waited for her to go on.

“I think I found the reason for the discrepancy for the dates of King Gilead’s reign.” She sucked in a deep breath. “King Fulke passed in late 1627, leaving his young son as the new king. The coronation was scheduled, but prior to it, the son passed under somewhat mysterious circumstances. The crown passed to the late King Fulke’s brother, who became Gilead I. With the coronation already planned, they just used it anyway. There wasn’t even an official mourning period for the young king. It seems most of the population never even knew the switch had been made. The reasons why are currently lost to time. Even the son’s name is lost.”

Interesting. “Was the uncle the son’s regent? Did that make it easier to get away with.”

Ms. Woodward shook her head. “No. His mother, the king’s widow, was his regent.”

A wave of relief started to spread, but he stopped it. There had to be something more.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

“King Fulke made it abundantly clear he wanted his wife to be the regent, and even codified the surviving parent as regent in a Letters Patent...”

It clearly wouldn't be as simple as he hoped or she wouldn't look so scared and refuse to look at him.

“I found reference to a addendum to the Letters Patent forced on her by his advisors shortly after his death. I'll keep digging, but it appears that it was never revoked or invalidated. They were required to confirm King Fulke's widow as the regent, but only on one condition.”

Here it came. “What was the condition?”

Ms. Woodward closed her eyes briefly as though praying for strength.

Finally, she looked at him. “She had to be married.”

3

It had taken Madeleine nearly twenty minutes to work up the nerve to go to the prince's office. That was after she spent thirty minutes staring in disbelief, and another hour double checking everything.

From the look on his face, he was processing through the same things she had, but on a much deeper level.

“What does that mean?” The strangled sound to his voice tore at her heart strings.

“It means it’s possible, legally, for you to be regent regardless of anything else, but requires the approval of Parliament and the Council. However, changes to their guidelines since the death of King Fulke specifically discourage that. Under this addendum to the Letters Patent, if you’re married, they can’t stop you from being regent without going to the courts to have you removed for treason or a couple other very specific things.”

The prince stared, unseeing, toward the window. “I see.”

“It appears she married Gilead, the late king’s brother. Her son then died mysteriously. I don’t have any evidence yet, but I’d guess he forced her to sign it in order to take over himself as soon as he could arrange the death of his nephew.”

“That poor woman,” he murmured, standing to walk to the window. With his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his dress pants, he looked out at the capital city. “First her husband, then her son.”

Madeleine remained perched on the edge of her seat, too anxious to sit back. She knew him well enough to know he wouldn’t shoot the messenger as it were, but she still wasn’t sure she wanted to be around as the implications set in.

She didn’t know how long he stared out the window but it seemed like an eternity. Eventually, he turned.

“So, I have to get married.” His voice now sounded lifeless. “Are there any requirements on who I have to marry?”

“No.” Madeleine shook her head to confirm. “Not that I’ve found.”

“Understood.” He turned to look at her. “Can we keep this between us for the moment? I’d like to wrap my mind around it a little more before the rest of the world

finds out.”

She tipped her head his direction. “Of course. I’ll keep looking to see what else I can find.”

“Thank you, Ms. Woodward.”

Madeleine stood. “My pleasure, sir. I’m just doing my job.”

When he turned back to the window, she decided she’d been dismissed. She knew him well enough now that she felt she could leave without him actually saying so, especially under the circumstances. Six weeks earlier, she wouldn’t have dared.

Walking quietly toward the door, she stopped when he called her name.

“Ms. Woodward?”

Maybe she was in trouble for leaving after all? “Yes, sir?”

“Please tell Maxwell I’m not to be disturbed.”

Though he couldn’t see her, she nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The door had seemed much heavier when she entered than it did when she left. After passing the message on to the aidesitting at the desk outside the prince’s office, she went back to the archives.

In her office, Madeleine stared at a spot on the wall. Unable to sit still any longer, she picked up her pen to make some more notes before going back to look at the source documents again.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

But after writing only two words, she sighed and resumed her staring, turning her pen round and round with her fingers as she did.

This was getting her nowhere.

With a groan, she stood, threw her pen down and grabbed her satchel. She needed a break. For the last month, she'd worked extra hours nearly every day and even came in on the weekends.

She could request a room to stay in if she felt the need, so she messaged the head of housekeeping then went home for what would likely be the last time until the Christmas Eve deadline.

Without changing, Madeleine flopped down on her bed. Before she could make a conscious choice, exhaustion overtook her, and she succumbed to sleep.

A glance at the clock the next time she opened her eyes told her it was the middle of the night. Knowing she likely wouldn't go back to sleep anytime soon, Madeleine packed enough things to stay at the palace for a while. She would start early and work late. Maybe with the extra hours of digging through every resource available to her, she'd be able to find something that would legally allow the prince to be regent without needing to remarry immediately.

She'd reread everything at least ten times, but she'd do it again when she made it back to the office. The way the letter and addendum were worded, it applied to the widowed spouse regardless of gender.

But there had to be another way.

Once packed, it was still the middle of the night. A hot bath with low lights and soft music helped her relax enough to get a few more hours of sleep before going to the palace.

When she arrived, an email told her how to gain access to a visitor's suite for as long as she needed it. She replied telling the head of housekeeping that she'd be staying there indefinitely.

A porter would be sent to take her bags to the suite for her. She left them just outside her office and locked it before going to one of the research rooms. It wasn't uncommon for her to go all day without seeing anyone unless she left the confines of the archives all together.

At least until the last few weeks when the prince had joined her for lunch.

Those days were surely over. So certain was she that she'd ordered her lunch to be delivered from the kitchen, but made certain to only order food that could be kept in the refrigerator if she was elbow deep in history when it arrived.

And so she was. A noise at the door caused her to glance at the clock to confirm the time. "Can you put lunch in the refrigerator in the next room? I'd appreciate it."

"I don't have lunch. It'll be here shortly."

Madeleine gasped and pushed the glasses she'd been wearing onto the top of her head. "Your Royal Highness! I didn't expect to see you!"

He frowned. "If you're in the middle of something, I can leave, but I wanted to check on the research you're doing and see it for myself."

“No. You’re fine. I just didn’t know if you’d come by since I found what we’re looking for.” She honestly hadn’t expected to see him at all. Ever.

Pointing to the box of gloves, she instructed him to put them on.

She’d gone back to the original document, just to be sure something hadn’t been obscured or incorrect when a copy was made.

He stood next to her, his shoulder brushing against hers as he peered down through the protective shield to the ancient document below.

“Show me what you’ve got.”

Reading centuries old handwriting was going to give Anthony a headache.

Ms. Woodward pointed to several different spots on the page as she talked. He tried to focus, but it took far more concentration than he could muster.

Lack of sleep had to be part of the problem - or a lot of it. He’d spent most of the night tossing, turning, staring at the ceiling, and praying for direction.

The idea of letting someone else be regent didn’t sit right with him.

Neither did remarrying less than two months after losing the love of his life.

Even if he were to remarry, who?

How could he trust a woman who would marry him under such conditions? How would he know she wasn’t after power and influence, much like King Fulke’s brother? What about his children?

“Ms. Woodward?” He interrupted her explanations.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

“Yes, sir?” When she looked up at him, he realized how close they stood.

Clearing his throat, he stepped back.

“You have my deepest apologies, but I find myself unable to concentrate.”

She smiled brightly. “We can look at the original later. I have the transcription in the other room. It will be easier to read.”

Anthony didn’t think it would be any better, but nodded anyway. Their lunch had just arrived.

As they ate, Ms. Woodward chatted away about some of the more obscure history she’d come across in her weeks of searching for more information.

The details all went in one ear and out the other. He wouldn’t remember any of it, but he suspected she knew that. Otherwise, she would have started talking about the document in question again.

As his designated lunch time came to an end, Anthony’s phone buzzed. Ms. Woodward paused while he checked it. He stood.

“I just had a meeting added to my schedule. I need to get back to the office.” He tipped his head toward her. “Thank you for all of your hard work and for putting up with my distraction.”

“As ever, it’s my pleasure.” She gave him that bright smile again.

“Please email updates to me on your findings.” Then he could take his time to focus on what she said rather than trying to follow her rapid conversations.

Did her smile dim a bit? “I will. Thank you for lunch.”

He nodded and left. She’d ordered her own lunch from the kitchen. He’d simply adjusted the delivery time slightly to coincide with his arrival.

As he walked through the gallery, he noticed some of the portraits had been changed out to ones related to Christmas or winter rather than the more generic ones typically found. Ms. Woodward likely hadn’t changed them herself, but would have directed those who did. He wondered if she was also in charge of the rest of the Christmas decorations that adorned the room.

Minutes after he returned to his office, the Prime Minister joined him. They went over the most pressing needs before the other man broached the subject they’d been avoiding.

“Do you have a suggestion for regent?” the Prime Minister asked gently. “I know it’s not your preference, but I don’t think we’ll be able to convince a near-unanimous majority of both Parliament and the Council that you’re the right person to do it, not when your grief is so fresh.”

Anthony tried not to let his frustration show. "I haven't found someone I'm comfortable with advising my daughter. She's the first queen to come after another queen in our history. She's also my child. Who can I trust to advise my child in life, much less have such influence over matters affecting her mother's beloved country?"

The Prime Minister nodded. "I understand, sir, but we will need to have a short list of names in the next week. There is a process we have to go through, and I think all of us would prefer not to do this on Christmas Eve if we can avoid it, especially if there

could be conflict. Even a minor conflict would make everyone's Christmas more difficult."

"I'll work on it." That was the most he could promise. What he'd really work on was helping Ms. Woodward verify the information she'd found.

"Thank you. I don't expect we'll need to meet again until next week, but don't hesitate to call me if I can help with anything."

Anthony stood and shook the man's hand. He'd never had any reason to believe the Prime Minister had anything but the country's best interests at heart - and that always included the monarch's best interest as well.

Once alone in his office, he opened his email, scanning the senders and subject lines for anything he needed to deal with in a timely manner.

His brows knit together when he saw an email from Mrs. Norton, the head of housekeeping. If not for the name in the preview, it wouldn't have caught his eye.

Subject: Household Changes

Madeleine Woodward will be...

Opening the message, he felt relief wash over him. In the few seconds since he read the subject and preview, an uneasy feeling had begun to settle over him.

Madeleine Woodward, Royal Historian, will be staying in temporary housing, Suite 294, until further notice.

When was the last time he'd seen a notice like that? Maybe his wife had, but now that he was acting on behalf of the monarch, he received the notices?

The thought didn't answer his questions about why Ms. Woodward would be staying in the palace. He would ask her when he saw her next, though he didn't know if he'd join her again for lunch or not.

Wrapping up the last of the things he needed to accomplish for the day, Anthony locked up everything he needed to and went out a back way heading up to the family's quarters.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Papa!" His youngest child, a mere four-years-old, ran toward him.

He swung her up into his arms.

"Dinner ready." As she often did, she played with the knot on his tie. "Mama be here today?"

Anthony closed his eyes and prayed for help. "No, sweet girl. Mama won't be here tonight."

"Mama won't be coming back. Ever." Almost eight-year-old Nessa's sullen response was typical of her attitude since her mother's passing. While not surprising, and definitely understandable, Anthony hoped she would start to heal sooner rather than later - just like he hoped for all of them.

For the entirety of their marriage, they'd enforced a "family only" dinner and bedtime policy whenever possible. That meant Anthony now had two small children and three older ones without any other adult help. The nannies had helped the first couple of weeks, but it had been time to discover their new normal.

A new normal that would have to change soon. If he remarried, another woman would be at their dinner table. If he didn't, there would likely be one less place as the regent took up more and more of the new queen's time.

That alone made one decision more likely, but the question of "who" still remained, followed closely by how he would tell his children he was marrying again, but not trying to replace their beloved mother.

The sheer challenges of getting his children bathed and to bed at a reasonable hour made him wish for someone to come alongside him.

Someone who wasn't a nanny, though they loved the children.

Someone who did so because she wanted to, not because it was her job.

Someone he could talk to, vent his frustrations to, ask advice of, and trust to have his family's best interests at heart.

Someone who would understand why he needed her in his life for at least fifteen years, but who would also understand his heart wouldn't be involved.

A good working relationship with someone who would love and help take care of his children was all he required.

Much later than he preferred, he made his way to his lonely bedroom and found himself staring at the ceiling. He mentally ran through all of the women he knew, considering whom he might be able to resign himself to a life with and also maybe, someday, settle into an easy camaraderie with as they took care of his children and their country together.

No matter how many names he came up with, only one stayed at the forefront of his mind.

If only she'd agree.

Unless she found another way, he would ask Madeleine Woodward to marry him.

For two days the only contact Madeleine had with the prince was via email. It surprised her to realize how much she'd come to enjoy their daily lunches and conversations, one-sided though they often were.

In all of digging, she had yet to find any other way to guarantee the prince could be the regent without also requiring him to marry again.

Needing a break from the research, Madeleine opened the book she'd been planning to work on the day their world changed. She'd been told it came from the late-seventeenth or early-eighteenth century, but needed to verify its authenticity as well as catalog the contents and make initial copies of the pages.

Carefully opening the front cover, she read the title for the second time.

A History of Eastern Novigradia through 1690

Was it just a coincidence she'd been given a book from the era she was investigating in depth? Or was it divine intervention?

She used her digital audio recorder to document her findings as she went.

"Water damage to the cover is moderate, but does not obscure the spine. From initial observations, there is also water damage to a significant number of pages, though at first glance it doesn't appear to be throughout the entirety of the book or cover all of any given page. The author is a well-known historian from the era. Copies of other books by the same author have been found and are stored in the archive. The existence of this particular one was unknown until a couple of months ago. The date of the monograph has been authenticated as 1701."

Very carefully, she turned to the table of contents, recording information about the previous pages as she did. "The chapters are divided into sections based on the

monarch. The last era is that of King Gilead III. The chapters all seem to have sections on accomplishments and controversies, in addition to sections which indicate a specific era or event within that monarch's reign."

She paused. King Gilead III? Her research had confirmed the widely accepted list taught to school children throughout the country.

It only included two Gileads.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

But what about King Fulke's son?

She'd never found his name.

Could he be the true Gilead I?

It only took her a few seconds to scan the section headings.

King Gilead I

b. May 12, 1618

d. June 19, 1628

Reign: December 1, 1627 - June 19, 1628

It only contained two sections -AccomplishmentsandControversiesandSuspicious Death.

Below it was the next monarch.

King Gilead II

b. August 1595

d. August 6, 1638

Reign: June 19, 1628 - August 6, 1638

One chapter title caught her eye. The last chapter she found intriguing.

Assassination of King Gilead II

She'd never heard of a viable assassination attempt on any monarch, much less a successful one. Two successful ones, if he'd killed his nephew so he could take the throne himself.

Madeleine sat in the chair behind her. She preferred to stand while doing this sort of thing, but the thoughts swirling in her head caused her knees to go weak.

The implications of this discovery - if proven accurate - would change history of Eastern Novigradia. The affects likely wouldn't be of much consequence aside from adding questions to examinations for students country-wide.

Except to Prince Anthony and the newest queen.

This could help her find the evidence she needed to ensure the prince acted as regent for the next several years.

"That's quite a look of concentration."

Madeleine jumped, clasping her hand, still covered by the glove, to her chest then glared in the direction of the prince consort. "You scared me."

"I do apologize." He seemed genuinely contrite. "I didn't realize you were that deep in concentration." He walked into the room and nodded at the book in front of her. "What's that?"

"A book from 1701 recently discovered in someone's grandma's hope chest, I believe." Should she tell him the implications or wait until she knew more?

Before she could decide, he walked toward the table. "Mind if I take a look?" He held his hands up then clasped them behind his back. "I promise not to touch."

Madeleine could see him scanning the table of contents.

And could tell when he discovered the same thing she had.

"King Gilead III?" His caution mirrored her own.

"That's the first thing that caught my attention as well. I haven't looked any further than what you see there. Without looking any further, I'd suspect he had his father killed - after his father killed his own nephew, which also makes me wonder about King Fulke's death, though there's nothing mentioned about it being suspicious."

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

He took a step back. "Is there someone who can assist you? Be with you as you look through the relevant chapters for information that could lead to the status of the Letters Patent?"

What could be behind his question? "I could call someone I went to university with. There are several in the city who understand the need for discretion as well as being incredibly competent."

"I would ask that you do so, and let that person take the lead in discovering the history of those three kings."

She leaned back in her chair and stared up at him, noticing again his dark eyes. The intense pain had given way to deep sorrow that likely wouldn't leave for quite some time. "May I ask why someone else needs to do it? It's my job as Royal Historian to do these things. I should be the one reading through it for the first time."

He tilted his head in acknowledgment. "I know, however, for reasons I'm not at liberty to discuss right now, I would ask that you bring someone else in - perhaps two or three people if you can trust them implicitly - to read through the contents under your supervision." A glance to one corner of the room confused her. "Everything in here is recorded, correct?"

"Yes." They'd discussed that several times before.

"How soon can you arrange for someone to be here and document what's in there?"

"I can make a few calls and try to get them here today. It depends on who's in town

but not in the middle of some other big project." A couple of names came to the forefront of her mind.

"This is of the utmost national importance." Those words meant something. "Do what you need to do to get this started as soon as possible."

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but instead turned and left without another word.

After securing the book and the room, Madeleine went to her office and opened her contacts on her phone. She didn't understand what was running through Prince Anthony's mind, but she felt like these calls needed to come from her official phone and not her mobile.

"Tristan Goodey." Her ex-boyfriend's voice came through loud and clear.

"This is Madeleine. Are you in town?" Just jump right in.

"For the moment. I'm leaving tomorrow to visit my sister in the States. What's up?"

She took a deep breath and dove in. "I have a special project at the palace, a project of the utmost national importance." He would know what those words meant. "I need someone I can trust to assist with it. I wouldn't think it would take more than a few days, but it's time sensitive and starts immediately. Are you interested?" She held her breath.

They'd dated briefly in university and parted as friends, spending much of their undergrad studies in the same classes. He'd excelled in all of them.

The seconds of silence stretched into a minute. She could almost see the wheels turning in his head. He would want to visit his sister, but opportunities like this didn't

come along very often.

"What's the artifact?" She knew what his decision would be as soon as he asked the question.

"A book. Even if you participate in the project, it's likely you won't know the full details of why the information is important. I'm not even certain I know the full details. In fact, I know I don't." She almost said something about how you didn't say no when the prince consort asked, but she couldn't even tell him that much. Not yet.

"Let me call my sister. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Every night, one of the nannies was on call. One slept in a nearby room previously used by Ladies in Waiting. If Anthony needed to leave the family quarters, all he needed to do was give her a call. She'd move to the main quarters to ensure the children were taken care of.

When Ms. Woodward called just after midnight, it seemed like she held back some excitement. That would be a good sign.

It did bother him a bit that he debated so long about what to wear. He settled on a pair of comfortable jeans and a t-shirt proclaiming his allegiance to a baseball team in the States. Someone had given it to him on one of his visits.

As he walked through the outer gallery, he could hear voices coming from Ms. Woodward's office, but he didn't recognize them.

When he entered the doorway, three people jumped to their feet and bowed their heads his direction. He noticed Ms. Woodward didn't, but he'd seen her earlier in the day.

Though she hadn't followed protocol then either. Interesting. For someone who'd always insisted on doing so, it seemed a bit odd.

"Sir, these are three of the best archivists in the area."

She introduced them one at a time.

Two appeared to be about her age, but the third was a fair bit older. When she titled the man as "professor" it made sense. It didn't escape his notice that Ms. Woodward was the only female in the group.

Ms. Woodward held a hand out toward the door. "Why don't we go into the conference room?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Many of their lunches had been eaten in that conference room. He took the same seat he normally did - at the far end, away from the wall the projector was pointed at, giving him the best view. Ms. Woodward surprised him by sitting near him rather than closer to the computer.

The professor started the presentation with a photo of the book as the first visual. "Your Royal Highness, Madeleine hasn't shared why this information is important or why time is of the essence, but we were able to photograph the chapters in question and decipher the contents without knowing why."

"I would imagine you've all signed non-disclosure agreements?" Ms. Woodward wouldn't have given them access if they hadn't, but he needed to be certain they wouldn't discuss what they'd learned.

They all replied in the affirmative.

"All we've done is make copies and read them," the professor went on. "We did ensure the copies contained any small annotations or other notes that aren't always visible in reproductions. As I'm sure you know, our history contains King Gilead I and King Gilead II. This book also includes a third King Gilead, who is actually the first King Gilead. He was only ten when his father passed. His mother became his regent, but only upon her marriage to her late husband's brother. This book is the first any of us have seen containing his story. Upon further reflection, we all noted that the details surrounding his uncle's rise to power have been obscured at best. Every historian I've spoken with about it in my career assumed they'd simply been lost to the ravages of time like so many other things."

One of the younger men took over. "Once this becomes public, there will be a great deal of searching all archives for more information. Madeleine told us about the letter she'd found which alluded to the real first King Gilead. There's likely limits to what we can find on our own. Crowd sourcing as it were will likely yield the best results. It's quite possible there are other sources in libraries or at universities the importance of which no one currently understands. They may well have been written off as anomalies or as making unclear allusions. This book will need to be fully authenticated, but none of us see any reasons why it wouldn't be."

"What conclusions have you come to?" Anthony leaned back in his seat, trying to project an air of comfortability he didn't quite feel.

"A Letters Patent was issued by King Fulke requiring his widow be his son's regent. After his untimely death, his widow was forced into signing an addendum requiring her marriage to her brother-in-law. In less than six months, her brother-in-law became who we know as King Gilead I, but in reality seems to be King Gilead II."

"This addendum..." Anthony tried to figure out how to word question. "What exactly does it say?" That seemed like the easiest and least potentially troublesome way to word it.

The professor took over again. "It requires her to marry. It doesn't specifically require her to marry her brother-in-law, but it's worded in such a way that approvals were needed for the marriage to 'count' for her to remain regent. I suspect she wouldn't have chosen Prince Gilead otherwise."

Given the suppositions about what happened to the young King Gilead a few months later, it would surprise Anthony if he'd been her first choice.

"What approvals are needed?" It could be a problem if it required a significant portion of Parliament and the Council. The Prime Minister made it clear he didn't

have the near-unanimous vote currently needed.

"Only two."

Anthony lifted his head in surprise. "Two?"

"Yes, sir. The Prime Minister and the longest serving Council member."

The other young man jumped in. "Ironically, Prince Gilead was the longest serving Council member and the Prime Minister was his good friend."

It didn't surprise Anthony at all that the fix had been in.

The three men looked at each other before the professor went on. "Madeleine hasn't told us anything, but we discussed it amongst ourselves. We imagine it would be quite important to you to be the regent for our new queen. We believe it would be in her best interests as well as the best interests of the country. With that in mind, we guessed that's why you wanted this information."

Anthony didn't confirm or deny the deduction.

"As long as the Prime Minister and the longest serving Council member approve of a new marriage, legally, you should be the only choice for regent," the professor shared their conclusion. "Madeleine has already done a search, and we did a very targeted one ourselves. It appears this Letters Patent and its addendum is still in effect."

"What about the more recent resolutions defining the qualifications for a regent?"

"None of them specifically negate the Letter and its addendum. They don't specifically address this situation. Therefore, the Letter and addendum are still in effect," the professor informed him.

Anthony gave a nod. "Thank you for your time and service, gentlemen." He knew he was, in effect, dismissing them without saying so. "I would appreciate your continued assistance for the next few days or weeks to continue your research."

A chorus of "yes, sirs" accompanied their departure.

Ms. Woodward gathered her things to follow them.

"Please wait." He tilted his head toward her chair. "Please, have a seat."

She sat back down and watched him expectantly.

"On behalf of the crown, I want you to know how much I appreciate your service in the last few weeks." He stared at his hands, now clasped on top of the conference table.

The silence hung heavy between them as he worked up his nerve and his determination to protect his daughter.

She waited.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Ms. Woodward..." No. That couldn't be right. "Madeleine, would you consider supporting my quest to become the permanent regent by..." He swallowed hard and couldn't go on.

"Yes," she prompted gently when he didn't continue.

He took a deep breath. "Would you be my wife and allow me to be regent?"

5

For nearly twenty-four hours, Madeleine could do little but stare in the distance and try to make sense of the question the prince had asked of her.

She knew her jaw had dropped then opened and closed a few times before he spoke again and told her to take a day or two and think about it.

While she couldn't imagine saying yes, she also didn't think she'd be able to live with herself if she said no and someone else ended up as regent...

If it went badly, as she knew it sometimes did, she would never forgive herself.

The other option was for the prince to marry someone else who would then use her new position to her advantage with little or no consideration for the young queen or the country as a whole.

Sitting in a chair in the living area of her palace suite, Madeleine kept the lights off as she looked out over the twinkling lights of the capital city. Hot cocoa wasn't

something generally on the palace menu, but she knew the kitchens could come up with just about anything anyone could want so she'd asked.

Holding the warm mug with both hands, she took a sip and continued to try to wrap her mind around it all. To try to walk through what it would be like in reality if she said yes.

Would she move into the palace? Possibly even the family quarters? She'd never even seen them.

Madeleine was under no illusions that it would be a love match. There would be no snuggles in a shared big chair or soft kisses and whispered words of love.

It would likely involve helping care for the younger children, and possibly even the queen herself to an extent. Though she worked in the palace, Madeleine had never met any of the younger members of the family and only seen them in passing a few times. She preferred studying the books and artifacts and being the caretaker of the royal history to hoping for glimpses of the less public members of the family - like she knew some staff members did.

That thought sent her thoughts in another direction.

How would logistics work? Could she keep her job? Would she join the prince at official functions? She wouldn't get a title. That didn't matter to her, though she suspected some naysayers would accuse her of being just interested in a tiara.

When her phone buzzed, she glanced at the screen.

Liana.

As much as she wanted advice from her best friend, Madeleine couldn't talk about

this. The prince hadn't told her that, but he didn't need to.

Regardless, she answered the phone.

"Where have you been?" Liana demanded before either exchanged a greeting.

It made Madeleine laugh. "I've been asked to do a big project at work so I'm staying here for a few days until it's done."

Or she married Prince Anthony.

"Why didn't you tell me? I got here twenty minutes ago for dinner and a movie. This is the fifth time I've called you."

The date registered with Madeleine, and she groaned. "I'm sorry, Lis. I completely forgot. You know what happens sometimes when I get involved in a good history mystery."

"A mystery?! Do tell!"

If she'd thought about it for half a second, Madeleine would have known that would be Liana's first question. "I can't talk about it yet. It's got to do with some new material from the sixteen and seventeen hundreds and some discoveries in it." That should be safe enough. "But I probably shouldn't even tell you that much." And that would hopefully help make sure Liana didn't mention anything on accident. "I'll let you know when I can."

Madeleine could hear the door to an auto shut followed by the sound of the engine starting. "I really am sorry, Lia. I'm not sure how long I'll be fully absorbed with the project, but as soon as I can, we'll set a new time."

“I’m headed out of town for a couple of weeks to film a movie for the spring HEA TV line up. I’ll be back a week before Christmas.” Liana’s voice took on that slightly distant quality it often did when connected to the auto’s infotainment system.

Biting back a groan, Madeleine set her mug down on the side table. “I’m so sorry, Lia. I forgot all about that.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Liana laughed. "You've apologized three times already, Mad. It's fine. I'll miss you, but we'll get together for Christmas." She paused. "Unless you're going home?"

There was something else Madeleine hadn't thought about. What about her parents? Her brothers? Would her Christmas plans ever include them again?

She quickly gathered herself so Liana wouldn't have to snap her out of her thoughts again. "I'm not certain what my Christmas plans are just yet, but I'll let you know."

"You're always welcome to join me and Scott, you know that." The sound of a blinker being turned on clued Madeleine in on Liana's progress. There were only two turns between their homes.

"I know, and I appreciate the offer." Madeleine had joined her best friend and her husband several times when winter weather prohibited travel from Eastern Novigradia's capital city to the town on the northern coast where they'd grown up.

"Gotta run, Mad. Love you!"

Before Madeleine could reply, the call ended.

With a chuckle, she set her phone down and picked her mug back up, taking a sip as the lights twinkled in front of her.

How could she have been so preoccupied that she hadn't checked her calendar for something as important as their traditional pre-travel girls' night?

If she married the prince, would she ever get to have girls' nights again? They'd almost certainly look different than they ever had.

What Madeleine really needed was a chance to talk to the prince or someone he designated and ask all of these questions and many more that were sure to occur to her.

But she didn't even know how to get ahold of Prince Anthony except to call his office or send an email. He wouldn't see it until morning unless one of his assistants alerted him to it. The prince never checked his email outside of office hours. One of his aides kept an eye on it until morning and only passed on urgent messages.

Madeleine doubted she'd make the list of people the aides would pass on.

Her cocoa cooled long before she came to any genuine conclusion. A glance at the clock told her she should send for dinner or make something easy in the kitchenette found in one part of the suite.

When her phone buzzed again, she knew it was a text without looking. It was likely a picture from Liana showing the movie Madeleine was now missing. A minute later, Madeleine picked it up and gasped when she realized it wasn't from Liana after all.

The number hadn't been saved in Madeleine's phone, but the text of the message told her exactly who it came from.

Prince Anthony.

Though he only used his given name. She couldn't do that, even in her own mind.

More important was the request that came along with his name.

To have dinner in the family suite.

With his children.

Anthony had stared at the text for several minutes before convincing himself to hit the send button inviting Ms. Woodward to dinner with his family. He'd asked her to marry him, but before a decision could be finalized, he needed to see her with his children.

The wedding would have to happen at least a week before Christmas to give everyone time to get the official paperwork sorted out.

If Ms. Woodward chose not to marry him, or he realized it wasn't going to work, for any reason, he'd need to find someone else. Maybe one of his wife's distant cousins?

No.

They were nice enough, but had purposely stayed out of the royal spotlight most of the time. Being in the center of attention, or at least adjacent to it, wouldn't be high on their wish list.

A notification told him Ms. Woodward was nearing the family quarters. He needed to meet her. Staff members were already setting the table and bringing the food in. Some nights he cooked or they cooked as a family, but he hadn't done that since...

Well, since everything changed.

Anthony called out to his eldest child, the one who was now queen, to keep an eye on her siblings, and he'd be back in a minute.

Once outside the ornate wooden door, he turned left and walked to the end of the

wide hall. Ms. Woodward stood in front of the most recent family portrait that hung near the entrance to the restricted area.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Thank you for coming, Ms. Woodward."

"You don't actually have to sit for a portrait anymore, do you? Like all of you sitting still and smiling for like a week while someone painted you?" She hadn't looked at him.

But she made him laugh. "No. A photograph was taken and the artist used it."

"That's good. I don't think I could do it, much less expect young children to." A nervous sound returned to her voice.

"Come with me." Anthony gently grasped her elbow and turned her to the hallway. "That is why I asked you to come this evening. We both need for you to meet my children and spend some time with them before a life-altering decision is made." He stopped in his tracks. "Unless you've already decided to decline?"

Ms. Woodward shook her head. "No. I've done little but contemplate a thousand things in regard to our discussion last night, but I have come to no conclusions just yet."

"Then I ask that you keep an open mind." Should he tell her about one of his greatest concerns? He had to. "I should warn you that my children are still deep in the throes of mourning their mother, some more than others. Even without knowing the true purpose for your visit, you may get a reception that is frosty at best and completely disrespectful and unacceptable at worst."

She looked up at him and gave him a bright smile. "I have no doubt that your children

will be well-behaved regardless of the circumstances. I've never heard anyone say a cross word about them."

He smiled back, though with less assurance. "That's always nice to hear. Now, if you will..."

The smile dropped off her face as she blew out a breath. It returned as he opened the door to the family's living area.

"Papa..." Anthony could tell something happened in those few minutes to make Nessa grumpy. "Who's she, Papa?" The grumpy tone changed to flat out sullen.

"Nessa," he reprimanded gently. "Ms. Woodward is a guest in our home."

Nessa just glared at both of them. "Issy hit me."

He looked at his youngest. "Issy, did you hit Nessa?"

The dark curls bobbed up and down. "Ness tore my picture." She held up a piece of paper with a drawing on it that could have been their family or possibly their family if they were a group of dolphins.

Anthony turned back to Nessa. "Did you?"

The glare told him as much as the silence. "Wait for me in your room."

Nessa turned in a huff and stomped off.

Anthony faced their guest. "Ms. Woodward, would you mind staying here for a few minutes while I have a conversation with my daughter?"

Compassion could easily be seen on her face. "Of course." She crouched down in front of Issy and held out a hand. "Hello. I'm Maddie. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The smile that lit up Issy's face was the most genuine he'd seen in a long time. "I'm Louisa. Ever'body calls me Issy." She took Ms. Woodward's hand and gave it a single shake. "Are you gonna have dinner with us?"

"Your father asked me to. Would it be all right with you?"

Issy's eyes narrowed as she stared at their guest. "Yes. He'p me draw a picture first?"

"Of course." Ms. Woodward took the little hand in her own as Issy started to drag her toward the art station.

With a tired sigh, he went to Nessa's room to find her face down on her bed, sobbing. He sat next to her and laid a hand on her back. "Want to tell me what that was all about, Ness?"

She shook her head.

"I'll sit with you for a few moments, but we will need to talk then go to dinner. We have a guest." All of his children, even Issy, knew how they were expected to behave when they had company.

"Is she our new mum?" The pain in Nessa's voice tore at him.

"No," he answered slowly. "You will never have another mum. I hope there will be many people in your life who love you nearly as much, but none will ever replace Mummy."

She sat up, her tear-stained face evidence of the pain she felt inside. "You won't get

married again?"

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Anthony brushed the tears off her cheek with his thumb then took both of her hands in his own. "There is a very good chance that I will marry someone else one day, maybe even one day soon, much sooner than you'd like, but I would never choose someone who would try to make you forget your mum or try to take her place."

"Promise?" She snuffled.

"I promise." He leaned over and kissed her forehead.

Nessa nodded.

Anthony held his arms open for Nessa to crawl in like she had for years. They sat there for several minutes before he felt her take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Do you think you can give Ms. Woodward a chance? Be on your good behavior?"

She nodded against him. "I can, Papa."

After giving her another squeeze and kissing the side of her head, he let her go. "Can you wash your face?"

With a nod, Nessa stood and walked toward her bathroom.

Anthony headed for the family area and heard something he hadn't heard in weeks.

The new young queen laughing.

The new queen and her siblings were delightful.

That was the first impression Madeleine had of the royal children. Did the little girl even know she was now the queen? Could she understand that at age ten?

It didn't seem likely.

Could Madeleine come in and take the... not take the place of their mother but become a mother figure to them? Or would that be left to the nannies she knew they had, and she would simply be the woman their father married but didn't love?

Was that something she could live with? If so, was it something she was willing to live with?

Or would anyone really know? Would the Prime Minister and the member of the Council be the only ones to know the reason the prince consort became the regent was their marriage? Would he continue to be the grieving widower to everyone else?

These were things she should probably talk to him about. Things they needed to decide together.

No.

It would be up to him. Whatever he wanted or needed would be the right direction. Yes, she mourned the queen, but only in the way the rest of the country did.

While drawing a picture with Princess Louisa - she didn't know where the Issy nickname came from - the other three royal children came to join them. Tentative at first, but then a bit more comfortable as they all worked on artwork.

"Can I put Mummy in my picture?" the queen asked without looking up.

"Of course." Madeleine smiled at her. "Your mum will always be part of your family. She will always be your mum."

"Even if Papa gets married again?" The queen still didn't look up.

"Of course. Even if your father marries someone else, she won't be your mum. She will probably try to help you and teach you the same kinds of things your mum would, but she'll know she's not your mum and wouldn't try to be." In a move that surprised herself, Madeleine reached over and lifted the queen's chin to look at her. "She'll love you as though you were her own child, and do everything she can to help you grow up to be someone your mum would be proud of, but she'll never take the place of your mum."

The tears that shown bright in the blue eyes spilled over but a smile appeared on her face. "Thank you, Ms. Madeleine."

"My pleasure." She smiled in return. "Now, why don't you tell me one of your favorite stories about your mum? Did she ever do silly things?"

A good memory would hopefully help break the melancholy.

"Sometimes," the girl nodded then her smile widened. "We were at the lake cottage and there was lotsa snow one night. Mummy woke us up and took us outside to make snow angels and a snowman family, right in the middle of the night. Then we had hot cocoa and danced in the ballroom in our socks."

"That sounds lovely." Madeleine leaned in closer. "Hot cocoa is my favorite. In fact, I had some earlier tonight."

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

The young queen leaned in closer as well, her nose wrinkling. "Mummy made her own hot cocoa sometimes, but it wasn't very good." She giggled. "Chef makes it better."

Before Madeleine could reply, a noise made them all look up. Prince Anthony emerged from the hallway, a smile on his face.

And were those hints of tears in his eyes?

He held a hand toward an arched doorway. "It's time for dinner. Nessa will be along in a moment."

A chorus of "Yes, Papa" came from all of the children.

Madeleine started to follow, but Prince Anthony's hand on her arm stopped her. She looked up to see that his eyes definitely held tears.

"I haven't heard her laugh in weeks," he said softly. "I don't know what you said or did, but thank you."

"I just asked her to tell me a favorite story about her mum. Then she told me her mum's hot cocoa wasn't as good as Chef's."

The prince chuckled. "My wife excelled at many things, but making hot cocoa wasn't one of them."

He released her forearm and started to follow his children into the dining area. When

they reached the table, he held a chair for her, but clearly not the one their mum would have been in.

The new queen gave her father an odd look. "Papa, that's my..."

He tilted his head toward the other end of the table. "Why don't you sit there this evening?"

The girl's eyes went wide. "But that's Mummy's place."

"I know." The prince crouched a bit until he was on her level. "I think Mummy would be okay with you sitting there now."

He straightened then held the chair for his daughter.

What an ingenious way to introduce the idea that the chair at the head of the table belonged to her now.

When the prince looked at Madeleine, he gave her a slight wink, like they were working together. Madeleine tried to hide her smile, but knew she failed. At least maybe it wasn't the big grin it could have been. That didn't seem appropriate.

He went around the table and held chairs for his other daughters, including Princess Nessa who joined them with her tear-stained cheeks and tremulous smile. "I'm sorry for ripping your picture, Issy, and for being rude, Ms. Madeleine."

The youngest princess glared at her sister, but Madeleine gave a single nod. "It's forgotten. Please, call me Maddie."

"Ms. Maddie," the prince told her.

"Ms. Maddie," Princess Nessa corrected.

The prince reached a hand out to each side. When she saw the others join hands, Madeleine took the hand of the youngest princess on one side and the prince consort on the other. The prayer was short and to the point, likely necessary with young children.

A staff member entered the room with two plates. She seemed to startle slightly at the seating arrangement, but set the first meal down in front of the queen. The next went to Prince Anthony. Someone handed her two more plates. Madeleine saw her look to the prince consort for direction and then saw his gaze flicker her direction ever so slightly.

It surprised Madeleine when the next plate went to her, then to the other children in descending order by age. Once everyone was served, they began to eat.

As expected, the meal was excellent. Madeleine hadn't eaten at the palace often, not outside of the meals she had while working. She'd always heard the food at balls and banquets was something to be envied. If this meal was any indication, the reputation was quite well-deserved.

There wasn't much conversation around the table. Madeleine had the impression it wasn't normal, not the way the children tried to talk to each other, but none of their hearts were really in it.

Someday, it would be better, but that day hadn't arrived yet. Once dinner ended, Prince Anthony asked her to have a seat in the living area and excused himself and the children. She suspected they were going to get ready for bed.

She wanted to wander around, to get a better feel for the room that looked much more like her living room at her parents' home than she would have expected. The art

station in the corner. The children's books, many of which she'd read as a child, on the end and side tables. The childish drawings framed and hung on the walls.

Family photos never released to the public were also featured. She couldn't stop herself from standing and walking closer to look at them. They were arranged in order, starting with the courtship of the late queen and her prince. The most recent ones had to have been from the summer before. The queen and prince shared a kiss while the children had varying looks of surprise and faux disgust on their faces. The next one had to have been taken immediately before or after. They were in the same places but all of them were laughing.

"That was a good day."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Madeleine turned to see Prince Anthony walking in. He came to stand next to her, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

"You've met my kids, spent a little bit of time with them. I know it's not remotely fair to you, or any of us, but have you made a decision?"

She had so many questions about logistics, how things would work, and started to ask them, but when her mouth opened only one word came out.

"Yes."

After Ms. Woodw...no, Madeleine. She'd insisted that, if they were going to be married, he needed to use her given name. She'd also informed him that afterward, she would take his last name rather than hyphenated with the Armstrong name like he'd used since his marriage and which his children would use whenever they needed a last name outside of the royal world.

Anthony shook himself. Since she left, he'd spent most of his time staring at the lights of the city and the bay that could be seen from this particular window. How was he going to tell his children? The people would be easy, though they'd have to work on exactly how and when and the precise wording of the announcement so they understood why he was marrying so soon after the death of his wife. Their opinions would vary wildly, but he believed that, overall, they'd be supportive.

His little family would be different. Neither of their maternal grandparents still lived, and his parents had long since moved to Southern Santiero for his mother's health. They would understand, but wouldn't be around to assist. They hadn't made the

funeral service, sending their regrets that his mum was unable to travel. Even with the offer of the royal jet, the cold would be too much for her. Every summer they visited for several weeks, but they wouldn't make it back to Eastern Novigradia until at least June. Whenever official business required them to travel to his parents' adopted home, they took the children with them, but it was, at most, once a year.

Even Nessa, who felt her mother's loss the most vocally, was enamored with Ms. Woodw... Madeleine by the time she left to go back to her suite. He'd asked the nannies to get the children ready for bed then went to tuck them in. Since she'd agreed to marry him, he asked Madeleine to go with him.

Nessa and Issy currently shared a room - by choice. While he sat with Issy for a few minutes, Madeleine had perched on the edge of Nessa's bed, talking quietly with her. He didn't know what she said, but Nessa hugged her when it was her turn to be tucked in.

The next morning, he waited in his own office for the Prime Minister and the 18th Duke of Lancheshire to arrive. He'd asked Madeleine's professor friend to be the one to explain what they'd found. Madeleine couldn't be part of the process, and she couldn't be the one to make the presentations.

Once all of them had arrived, Anthony, the Prime Minister, Duke of Lancheshire, and Maxwell took places around the conference table with a telly hanging on the wall next to the professor.

The professor proceeded to walk all of them through the details of what they'd found in the letter, book, and other documents that made more sense once they knew what to look for. All of them listened intently, asking only for a couple of clarifications until the presentation ended.

"Let me make sure I understand," the Prime Minister said. "The royal lineage as we

know it isn't accurate because they erased the real King Gilead I from history. Only this book mentions him in detail. The other sources refer to him more obliquely. The references in those sources have never been quite clear to historians until this new information came to the surface."

"Correct." The professor hesitated and glanced at Anthony who nodded slightly. "There's also information to suggest that the king we've always believed to be King Gilead I was assassinated. That bit of knowledge isn't relevant to why we're here today, but now that it's come to light, it will be released to the public within the next six months at the latest. Statute says there's a bit of time to fit the information into what we already know before copies are published and the original is available to researchers, in controlled conditions under the oversight of the Royal Historian."

The duke looked at Anthony, his eyes shifting slightly. "Why isn't the Royal Historian giving this presentation? I understood she was one of the best. Shouldn't she be here?"

"The prince and Ms. Woodward thought it best for an outside source to confirm the information. In fact, myself and two other historians were with Ms. Woodward when the relevant portions of the book were read for the first time. Once she read the table of contents and showed them to the prince, they wanted others to be a part of the process."

"Is there proof that Ms. Woodward or anyone else didn't doctor the book?" the Prime Minister asked. He sounded more curious and cautious than suspicious like the duke.

"Everything in the archives is recorded," Anthony told him. "There's not even a bathroom in there so absolutely everything is recorded from multiple angles. From the time the book was brought to the palace, it's been visible to surveillance at all times."

"Good." The Prime Minister swiveled in his chair to face Anthony. "I have my suspicions about why you're having this meeting, but I don't want to be presumptuous. Can you tell us the real-world implications of this information?"

The duke narrowed his gaze as he looked expectantly at Anthony.

Anthony looked straight at him. "The real-world implications are that, if married, I am legally required to be my daughter's regent. Unless my choice of new spouse is objectionable for very specific reasons, the proposal cannot be denied by either of you."

"The Letters Patent doesn't say anything about a prince consort," the duke pointed out.

"No, it doesn't," Anthony admitted.

The professor jumped in. "If you read it closely, there's no reference to gender or other reason to believe it only applied to a queen consort. We've searched for anything that supersedes it, but there is nothing."

"You're going to get married? So soon after your wife's death? The wife you've always said was the love of your life?" The duke's icy tone surprised Anthony. He knew the man would be harder to get on board than the Prime Minister, but he hadn't expected open hostility.

"Yes." He leaned back in his chair, doing his best to project an air of confidence and ease he wasn't certain he felt. "As soon as arrangements can be made."

"Who?" The Prime Minister's voice was tentatively optimistic.

Anthony nodded at Maxwell who stood and went to a side door, motioning to the

person waiting there. A second later, she entered.

He stood and reached out a hand.

Madeleine took it and came to stand at his side.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet my future wife. Madeleine Woodward."

7

What was this wedding going to be like?

She needed to call Liana to be her maid of honor and her parents needed to be notified, but they were out of the country until a few days before Christmas.

First, the Eastern Novigradians needed to be told. Their reactions might determine exactly how this went. Rather than watching in her office, where everything was recorded, Madeleine went to the suite she would use indefinitely. With her cup of hot cocoa, she watched the direct feed to the press room.

No one stood at the microphones just yet, but a timer counting down said they only had about thirty seconds until someone appeared. The late queen had always, always, been on time. No one quite knew why she was so fastidious, more even than most people were. Maybe Princ... no, Anthony. He'd insisted she call him by his name, something that would take quite some time to get used to.

Regardless, maybe Anthony knew.

The clocked ticked down to zero then started counting back up, this time in red to indicate the late start. When it reached a minute-and-a-half, the press secretary appeared with the PrimeMinister, Duke of Lancheshire, and Anthony standing behind him.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press and fellow countrymen beyond, a decision has been made regarding who will act as regent on behalf of Queen Catherine. The Prime Minister will provide further details." The press secretary stood to the side to allow the Prime Minister to take his place.

"Good afternoon. The short presentation I'm about to give will be available on our website shortly and is being provided to members of the press right now." The late queen's royal cipher, now pictured with black fabric draped over it and still in use until Queen Catherine had her own, disappeared and was replaced with the first slide. "As everyone is aware, Prince Anthony has been Acting Regent for Queen Catherine since the passing of our beloved queen. Parliament and the Council have been diligently searching for a the right person to fill the role indefinitely. We have agreed with public opinion - the prince consort should be able to retain the position, but by statute, it was unlikely he would be able to do so."

He went on to explain the circumstances under which they could - which basically meant absolutely no other acceptable candidate could be found. There was even a list of positions in Parliament and the Council to be considered before the widower could be a valid option.

"With assistance first from Royal Historian Madeleine Woodward and later from three other renowned historians, another option has been discovered. Full details about the investigation and the details uncovered will be made available via our website and are being distributed to news outlets at the moment." The screen changed to the Letters Patent. "As this correspondence indicates, a Letters Patent had been issued by King Fulke prior to his death, providing for his wife to be regent for their young son. Upon his death, the widowed regent was forced to sign an addendum saying the widow had to be married."

Whispers started in the gallery.

The table of contents for the book appeared. "As you can see from this slide, a piece of our history has been rediscovered. Studying the relevant passages in the book as well as other documents, both contemporary to the time and from later periods, this information is believed to be the accurate history of the Armstrong Dynasty. More information on the other aspects of this discovery will be available at a later time. Intense research has led us to believe the Letters Patent has never been rescinded and, should the monarch's widow choose to remarry, he or she must be named regent."

The whispers grew louder.

"Given those two contradictory requirements and his desire to protect both his young daughter and the country as a whole, the decision has been made by Prince Anthony to marry prior to the Christmas Eve deadline. In due time, the bride-to-be will be introduced to the country. I personally have known her for some time and believe she will make an excellent help meet for the prince and be a wonderfully good influence on all of the late queen's children."

The picture on the screen changed again. "As outlined in the Letters Patent, myself and the longest serving member of the Council, currently Duke of Lancheshire, have approved the prince's choice of spouse. Details for the wedding and other relevant events will be also be released in due time."

He took a step back allowing the press secretary to take his spot.

"We will take a limited number of questions at this time."

The press secretary pointed to someone Madeleine couldn't see. "The prince will remarry less than sixty days after the passing of his wife. What, if anything, does that say about the state of their marriage at the time of her death?"

Madeleine could see Anthony's face harden at the question.

"Nothing," the press secretary snapped. "The queen would want the prince consort to advise their daughter as she grows into the queen she will become. The only way to do that is to remarry." He pointed to someone else.

"What does this say about the woman he'll marry? Is she after a title? Money?"

Tears stung the back of Madeleine's eyes, though she'd expected a question along those lines. When she looked at Anthony, his face had hardened further.

"The prince has complete confidence that he has found someone with only the best interests of his children and the country in mind, in that order. Any suggestions to the contrary are baseless and will be dealt with severely should the need arise." Meaning the news organization could have their palace credentials rescinded.

He chose someone else.

"Will the prince's new wife join him for state functions? Will she act as an advisor, officially or unofficially?" This question came from a woman. Madeleine recognized her voice but couldn't quite remember who she was.

"That remains to be seen. Those details will be worked out as time moves on. At minimum, as many couples do - and as the prince often did for our late queen - the prince will likely turn to her for input on a regular basis. She will be an unofficial advisor, potentially, for anything that doesn't require security clearance beyond what she would already have."

Madeleine hadn't thought about that. There would be things he wouldn't be able to tell her about.

But there would be things he could - and likely would.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

A couple more asked questions had to do with the wedding itself - would it be a large wedding? Would it be televised? Would Madeleine be doing any interviews, with or without the prince?

They didn't use her name, but butterflies began to settle in Madeleine's stomach regardless.

Her phone buzzed. It shouldn't have surprised her to see a text from Liana, but somehow she hadn't thought about her friend reaching out as the press conference wound down.

Is this the project you were working on?! The prince is getting married?! Do you know who the woman is?! As soon as you find out when the wedding will be, let me know! I want an invite!

Madeleine stared at her phone. How could she tell her best friend that she was the one getting married?

This would be much harder than the press conference had been. Anthony hadn't said anything then, just forced himself to remain stoic while the news of his second marriage went public. The initial reports were cautiously optimistic with a giant side of outrage on his behalf - that this was the only choice so he could be regent.

With his next audience, everything would come down to him.

He gathered his children in his room, all seated on the bed he'd shared with their mother.

That thought brought other questions to mind, ones he didn't want to deal with anytime soon, but would likely have to address in one form or another far sooner than he'd prefer.

"I have something I need to talk to you about." The nannies made sure none of them had inadvertently heard the news from anywhere else. Five pairs of eyes stared at him expectantly.

He prayed for strength and wisdom. "You know Mummy had a special job, right?"

"Mummy was queen." Aaron answered first.

"That's right. Mummy was the queen of Eastern Novigradia, and that means we need a new queen."

"Like when Maria moved and Therese came to take care of us?" His five-year-old son was the first one to jump in again, this time mentioning his favorite nanny.

"Kind of. The way it works for kings or queens is that when one of them dies, their oldest child takes over for them."

Nessa and Eli looked over at Catherine, whose face had gone white.

He should have talked to her about this privately beforehand.

"Kinsey is queen?" This question, along with the family nickname, came from Nessa.

"That's right." He and his wife had discussed it a little bit with the two oldest children, but hadn't fully thought through the implications if something were to happen while they were so young. "But Catherine isn't old enough to be queen by herself just yet. In fact, she needs to be twenty-five to be queen on her own. Until

then she has someone who will do all of the things Mummy used to do for her. That person is called a regent, and they're like a temporary king or queen until the real one is old enough."

His eldest daughter still didn't say anything.

"Part of my job as Kinsey's papa is to make sure the regent is someone who will only do good things for Catherine and for Eastern Novigradia. As she gets older, the regent will help her learn to do all of the things she needs to do to be a good queen, just like Mummy was. Mummy learned from her papa. Catherine will learn from the regent."

Four of his children looked expectantly at him, but Catherine had started staring at the bed.

"Who will it be?" Catherine asked. She sounded scared.

"My first choice, Mummy's first choice, would be me."

Her head snapped up. "You?" Hope began to overcome the fear.

"Yes, but there's a problem."

The hope disappeared from her face.

"For me to be the regent, I have to do something I don't really want to do, but I will because it's best for the country, but most importantly it's best for you." He looked at the others. "I think it will be good for the rest of you, too."

"What do you have to do?" Catherine's fear had changed to resignation.

"I have to get married again." He watched all of them carefully for their reactions.

Issy didn't seem to care. Aaron looked confused. Nessa looked like she was mad enough to cry. Eli had an impassive look on his face. Catherine just stared at him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Who?" Nessa spoke first.

"Do you remember Ms. Madeleine who had dinner with us last week?"

They all nodded.

"I am going to marry Ms. Madeleine sometime in the next couple of weeks. I'm not sure exactly how it's all going to work, but she'll help me take care of all of you, and it will let me help Catherine."

Issy's face lit up. "I like Maddie!"

"Me, too." Catherine spoke.

"Madeleine will come to live here with us, help us make dinner, do homework, play games, make artwork, help put you to bed, all of the things a mummy does, but..."

"She won't be Mummy." Catherine finished for him. "She told me if you married someone, it would be someone who loved us but wouldn't try to take Mummy's place."

Madeleine had already laid some of the ground work for him? That seemed like something she'd do, but he hadn't thought to talk to her about it beforehand.

"That's right. Madeleine will love all of you, but she knows you already have a mum."

"When?" Nessa asked the question.

"I'm not sure, but soon."

They talked for another half hour. Some of it was about Madeleine and the changes in their lives, but also just about anything and everything any of them wanted to talk about.

After tucking them all in, he went to the sitting area in the bedroom of the Monarch's Suite. He should probably vacate it soon and let Catherine move in when she was ready. Or maybe that would be too much change for them all at once. They needed to know not much would be different.

The furniture in the sitting room had been chosen for function over form. He sat in his favorite recliner and pulled the lever to kick the footrest out. He closed his eyes and grabbed the quilt lying on the floor next to him. A gift from a visiting American dignitary, Caroline had loved it.

As he had every night since his world fell apart, Anthony would sleep in the chair rather than in the bed he'd shared with Caroline for the entirety of their marriage. One day he might have to sleep there again, but this was not that day.

December would arrive in just a few days. Did they want to get married in November so it wouldn't compete as much with Christmas or wait a week or two to give themselves enough time to plan a little bit? His wedding to Caroline had been everything his wife had dreamed of. He doubted that would be the case this time. Madeleine wouldn't have that choice. At most, it would likely be a small ceremony in the chapel attached to the palace. It might not even be that. It could be an even more simple ceremony in front of one of the fireplaces or a nice window.

He needed to find her the next day and discuss these things, along with several others

about their immediate future.

A buzz from his phone told him to check his messages. One had just come in from Madeleine.

When can I tell my family and best friend? They can all be trusted, but they'll need to be prepared to make plans once we know more details.

He typed out a quick response.

Whenever you're ready. Just ask them not to say anything until after the official announcement.

Word would start getting out soon, no matter how they tried to control it. Best they hear it from her.

He changed the settings on his phone so it wouldn't disturb him, and willed himself to sleep.

8

So much had happened in such a short period of time. Now, just over two weeks before Christmas, Madeleine stood in an ante room near the chapel attached to the palace.

"You look beautiful." Liana stood next to her, dressed in a dark maroon dress that was the only nod to Christmas in the wedding. There were no poinsettias in the decorations. No red and green ribbons in the chapel. No mistletoe anywhere around.

Unsurprisingly, her family and best friend, had been shocked, but after discussions with Anthony and spending a day with him and his family, they were cautiously on

board.

She'd spent time with Anthony and the children almost every day since the decision was made. Three days after the press conference, a press release was sent out identifying her as the bride. She hadn't been subjected to any interviews or things of that nature. In fact, she hadn't left the palace since. Anthony had sent staff members to her apartment to pack her things and move them to the palace.

Madeleine shook herself out of the thoughts of the last few weeks, and tried to focus on the next few minutes which would see her become stepmother to a queen.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Are you sure?" her father asked gently.

"I am." The conviction behind the words wasn't forced. She truly believed this was the right thing to do. It wouldn't be easy at times, she knew that, but that didn't mean she shouldn't do it. Madeleine squeezed the hands of both of her parents.

Even Nessa had started to warm up to her.

The coordinator knocked lightly on the door. "We're ready, ma'am."

"Thank you." The four of them left the ante room and moved toward the entrance to the chapel. It had been determined that her parents would enter first, followed by Liana, then Madeleine would walk herself down the aisle. In her thirties, and in the 21st century, she didn't need someone to give her away.

Her bouquet was handed to her by the coordinator as they lined up.

The chapel was significantly smaller than the cathedral used for most royal weddings. Only a few hundred people compared to nearly two thousand, but Madeleine would have been okay with a smaller wedding. She definitely would have been okay without the cameras broadcasting everything to the country and to the world beyond via live streams.

Before she could think further, the door opened again, and it was her turn to start down the aisle.

At the other end, next to the steps leading to the altar, Anthony waited. The front row

on one side held her family. The other held her new family. She kept her eyes on Anthony as she walked. There were no tears from either one of them, not like one might expect at most weddings. Instead, she saw encouragement and companionship.

When she reached the front, he extended his elbow. She slid her hand inside and gripped his arm tightly as they moved toward the stairs. With the hand that also held her bouquet, she lifted her skirt to allow her to climb them without tripping.

That would be bad.

Her first time on the national stage, and she'd lose her balance and be on every blooper show ever for eternity.

They made it to the top without incident. A member of the clergy waited for them. The service itself didn't last overly long. They promised the same things to each other that countless other couples had done for millenia. She did find herself grateful there would be no "you may kiss your bride" moment. There wouldn't be a kiss on a balcony either.

With the current perpetual darkness, cold temperatures, and short notice, it didn't make sense to have a balcony moment. They wouldn't be able to set up tents or heaters or take other measures to ensure the safety of those who would come. That had been made abundantly clear in the media, but Madeleine knew there would be people out there anyway. Under other circumstances, she would have been one of them.

Those gathered applauded as they turned and went back down the steps. When they reached the front row, Anthony's five children stood and joined them. Issy took Madeleine's free hand while Aaron took Anthony's. Catherine and Nessa took the hands of their younger siblings with Elijah on the other side of Nessa. The seven of them walked up the aisle together.

Once back in the ante room, Madeleine sat in one of the chairs and took the chance to hug each of the children. Anthony did the same.

"We're going to take some photos then go have lunch in the big banquet hall," Anthony told them. "You won't have to stay for the whole thing. We'll eat, have cake for dessert, then you can go back upstairs, all right?"

They all nodded their understanding. They all went to take pictures in another part of the palace then to the banquet hall to wait for Anthony and Madeleine to arrive once everyone else had moved from the chapel to the banquet hall.

"How are you?" Anthony's quiet voice reminded Madeleine that they were now alone together.

"A little overwhelmed, to be honest." She took a deep breath. "I know this is the right thing, this is the best way to ensure the security and safety not only of the country but also of your daughter. But it's still a little overwhelming."

He chuckled. "I understand. I chose this life with far more notice and understanding than you and I was overwhelmed." The look on his face turned serious. "I wish there had been another way."

Madeleine reached over and lightly grasped his hand. "I know what I'm getting into." I think. "I'm glad I'm able to be here."

He covered her hand with his. "I thank you for it."

They had talked a bit about what would be expected at the luncheon banquet. Due to the time of day, there wouldn't be dancing. Madeleine suspected choosing the time of day had more to do with the circumstances surrounding the wedding than anything. By choosing that time, they didn't have to make decisions about dancing or other

things that might have come with an evening wedding. The meal could be a little lighter in nature, a little shorter, and no one expected otherwise.

For the next few moments, they sat there, hands clasped, until her new stylist joined them. The woman had worked with the late queen for many years. She fussed with Madeleine's hair a bit then touched up her make up, before helping bustle the train of her wedding dress so she wouldn't have to deal with it dragging behind her.

The woman looked up with her head tilted to the side as though she heard something they couldn't. She looked back at them and smiled.

"It's time."

The best thing that could be said about the luncheon was that it didn't last overly long. There was no dancing, no mingling, and no small talk.

For all of those reasons, and more, Anthony found himself grateful. Once several speeches had been given, including a short one by Anthony himself, they were able to take their leave. The children had left before the speeches began. They wouldn't have enjoyed them. Anthony hadn't and suspected Madeleine hadn't either.

With her hand tucked in his elbow, they left the banquet hall, and he led the way through the palace halls to the family quarters. The children were already there, changed out of their wedding clothes, and working on a bit of schoolwork despite the holiday for everyone else. He suspected it was a ploy by the nannies to keep them busy and take their focus off the other events of the day.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Papa! Maddie!" The cries came from all five children.

More hugs were given all around.

Anthony tugged his tie loose and unbuttoned the very top of his shirt, allowing him to breathe a little easier. "I'm going to change clothes," he told the nannies. "Once I'm done, you'll be able to leave for the day."

He headed for his room and quickly changed into his favorite pair of jeans and a t-shirt. When he returned to the living area, the first thing he noticed was Madeleine sitting in one of the chairs reading a book to Issy.

Still in her wedding gown.

She looked up at him and smiled. He tilted his head toward the back part of the family's quarters, indicating she could go change. With a nod, she turned back to the book. It was then he noticed she'd already let the nannies go for the day. She must not have felt the need for the assistance. That had to be a good sign. After several more minutes, she finished reading the book and gave Issy a big hug then stood.

From his new location next to Catherine, Anthony watched as she walked down the hallway.

He continued helping Catherine with her sums and didn't notice anything amiss until Issy spoke.

"Papa, when Maddie comin' back?"

Surprised, Anthony looked up and then around. "I don't know. I'll go check on her." He gave all of his children his best stern father look. "Behave." Normally, they did well together, but occasionally there were fights, and days when they had been expected to be "on" for part of it were worse than most.

Walking down the corridor, he reached the door to his room still standing open as he'd left it. "Madeleine?" he called as he took a couple of steps inside.

"Anthony?" Her voice came from behind him.

Puzzled, he turned back to the hall and called out again to determine where exactly she was. When he reached that closed door, he knocked lightly.

"It's open."

Though she knew he was coming, he still opened the door cautiously until he saw her sitting on the edge of the bed still in her bridal gown. "Are you all right?"

She gave a half-shrug and sent a small smile his way. "I didn't know where my things had been taken, but then I realized that even if I did, I don't think I can get this dress off by myself. I was going to text Liana to come help me, but I think she's already home, and I don't have my phone anyway."

He felt himself grimace. "I'm sorry, Madeleine." Sitting next to her on the bed, he took her hand. "Please be sure to come to me if you have any other issues or questions along those lines. I'm here to help."

"I know you are, but it didn't seem quite right to ask you to help me. If I'd thought about it, I would have asked one of the nannies, but they were long gone by then. I know it would seem odd under most circumstances, but everyone knows these aren't most circumstances."

The Duke of Lancheshire had made it quite he expected their marriage to be a real one in every sense of the word, but the Prime Minister managed to rein him in enough that they didn't have to sign some sort of paperwork saying it would be. However, Anthony knew at least some appearances needed to be kept up.

"Actually..." He pulled out his phone. "I'm surprised Caroline's stylist didn't come to help you. She often helped Caroline with complicated gowns or hairstyles." When he saw the messages waiting for him, Anthony groaned. "I never turned notifications back on." Quickly sending a text, he turned to Madeleine. "She'll be here in a few minutes, but your things have been taken to the Monarch's Suite."

Her head tilted. "That isn't Catherine's room?"

"No. She'll move in there eventually, but for now it seems best to keep things as normal as possible." He stood and held out a hand to help her to her feet. With a hand resting lightly on her back, he directed her through one open door and to another. Once inside the suite, he showed her where her closet and dressing room would be.

"Thank you, Anthony." She turned and gave him a better smile. "I appreciate all of your help. You don't happen to know where my phone is, do you?"

With a laugh, he pulled his back out of his pocket. "No, but I can find out."

He followed her into the dressing room and started to show her some of the things she needed to know about it. "The safe holds anything of value, like tiaras and earrings and all of those sorts of things."

Madeleine quirked an eyebrow at him, something he hadn't known anyone could actually do until she had a few weeks earlier. "I won't be wearing tiaras. I'm not a member of the royal family. I'm simply married to the late queen's prince consort. That doesn't give me any kind of title or expectation for that sort of thing. It also

means there won't be pressure on me to do any number of things I would have had to do if you were the member of the royal family rather than Queen Caroline."

"If I'd been a member of the royal family, there would be no need for a regent," he pointed out.

"True, but the point holds. I remember when you married the first time. Within a week there was speculation about when your first two children would be born. I don't have to deal with any of that," she reminded him.

Before their conversation could go any further, the stylist walked in holding Madeleine's phone. She curtsied slightly toward Anthony then tilted her head toward the door. "Out."

Long years of acquaintance let her do that and have the only repercussions be his laugh and Madeleine's look of horror.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

The door to the dressing room closed behind him as he left, but as he crossed the room, he froze.

In all of the things they'd discussed prior to reaching this point, they'd missed one very big one.

What the sleeping arrangements would be.

9

Once they put the children to bed - just as they had several other times in the last couple of weeks - Madeleine couldn't figure out where Anthony had gone. He'd disappeared.

She carefully looked around the apartment, knocking on, then opening doors and finding all kinds of different rooms.

Like several extra bedrooms besides the one she'd been in earlier.

They hadn't talked about it, but she had every intention of living in one of the other rooms. He was still deeply mourning his wife. This wasn't a real marriage no matter what the duke on the Council tried to force them to commit to. Maybe one day it could grow into something more, but she wasn't going to do anything that would make him uncomfortable. If he ever decided he was ready to start a real relationship, they would figure it all out then.

She was fairly certain she'd searched the entire apartment and still hadn't found him.

With a sigh, she went to the dressing room she'd been given. It didn't really make any sense. The late queen's things had all been cleaned out, but Madeleine wouldn't be able to fill it up in her lifetime, even if she tried her hardest.

Despite marrying the man who would be regent for the next decade and a half, she did not anticipate needing many clothes for public appearances. She'd be working in her archive, reading the new book carefully over and over to glean all of the information she could from it then prepare reports to disseminate to the professional associations and the public as a whole. She would stay in the background taking care of the other children and things like dinner and homework.

Once changed into her pajamas and having finished her bedtime routine, Madeleine left the Monarch's Suite and made her way down the hall to the other room. Arriving there, she pulled the covers back and snuggled under them. It was the most comfortable mattress she'd ever slept on. The warmth of the blankets enveloped her and, exhausted from everything that happened in the last few weeks, she quickly fell asleep in the cocoon it created.

Madeleine woke the next morning fairly certain she hadn't moved at all in the night. She was pretty sure Anthony had told her the nannies typically took care of the morning routines, so she didn't think she had that to worry about.

A glance at her watch told her it was early enough the nannies shouldn't be in the apartment yet. Moving quickly, she made the bed back the way it was - a task made easier by her deep sleep.

Back in the Monarch's Suite, she still didn't see Anthony. The bed either hadn't been slept in or he did a better job than she did at remaking it. Quickly dressing in her normal work clothes, she started for the kitchen.

"Madeleine?" Anthony's sleepy voice called her back.

When she turned, she saw him standing up from a recliner in the sitting area of the suite. He let a blanket of some kind fall onto it. He wore what looked to be comfortable pajama pants and a t-shirt likely worn soft by years of washings.

"Good morning." She kept her voice soft as he clearly wasn't yet awake.

He looked from her to the bed and back again. "Where did you sleep?"

"One of the other rooms. We hadn't talked about it, and I didn't want to make you uncomfortable."

Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes with the heels of his hands, Anthony yawned. "We'll talk today. I've cleared my calendar as much as I can through Christmas. There are a number of events we'll attend between now and the holiday itself. The children will go to a couple of them, but until Catherine is a bit older, she won't attend very many. Today is the meeting in Parliament to officially make me the permanent regent. It's at ten, so we'll need to be in the car by quarter till."

His words confused her. "We?"

As he spoke he'd walked across the room toward her, stopping just a few feet away. "Yeah. You're expected to be there. At least I was told you would be there."

Madeleine looked down at her slacks and silky blouse. "What do I wear to something like that? I had plans at work today. Nothing that can't wait, but advance notice of stuff like this would be great."

His brows knit in confusion. "Work?"

She felt both of her eyebrows shoot up. "Royal Historian, remember? That's how we met and how we knew all of this was a thing that needed to happen."

"You're planning to keep working?" His confusion mounted.

"Why wouldn't I?"

He shook his head, presumably to clear the cobwebs. "You're probably not going to be able keep working. I know you're not technically a royal, but for lack of a better term, you'll be a working royal."

"Yes. I'll be working as Royal Historian," she countered. "I can attend events if I need to, but I don't plan on being a substitute queen consort or whatever the correct term for my role might be."

With another yawn, he shook his head. "We'll talk about it more later, but for now, I need to get a shower and get ready for another meeting before we leave for Parliament. I'll send a message to Caroline's stylist to see if she can help make sure you're wearing something appropriate." He took a good look at her. "I think you'd be fine in what you're wearing, but I've not paid enough attention to women's clothes to be certain."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

"Thanks for arranging for someone to help me. I'm going to grab a quick bite to eat and go to my office. You can text me or she can get a hold of me there." Madeleine gave him her best smile. They'd talk about it later, but she didn't think the conversation would go the way Anthony expected it to. They'd have to come to a happy medium. Some sort of compromise, because she had no intention of giving up her job completely. "I'll see you a little bit before we leave."

In the kitchen, she found coffee already made so she filled her travel mug. She filled her water bottle, grabbed a snack bar and her satchel, then left the family quarters. Her ID was on a lanyard that went around her neck. She used it to scan into the gallery and then into her office.

Rather than going straight to the book like she wanted to, she started on some paperwork because Madeleine knew that if she started working on the book, she wouldn't want to leave it.

After answering a couple of emails, she ate the snack bar then went back to deal with a few more waiting on the server since she hadn't done anything the day before. Thirty minutes after she arrived, her phone rang.

"Madeleine Woodward," she answered, forgetting she had a new last name.

"Ma'am, this Eileen, the stylist. Can you meet me in the dressing room about half past eight? I have a number of things for you to try on so you can be certain you're dressed appropriately for the official ceremony."

Madeleine blew out a breath. That didn't give her long to finish working, but she had

to do what she had to do. "I'll be there."

While he waited for Madeleine to join him for the drive to Parliament, Anthony scrolled through the links Maxwell had sent him. He didn't particularly like reading the tabloid material, but he needed to keep abreast of what the more legitimate news sources were saying. The overall reaction to the wedding was cautious optimism.

The vast majority of those polled believed the idea that he needed to marry to preserve his position as regent was absolutely ridiculous. He suspected a push would be made to change the restrictions on the requirement for the widowed spouse to remarry. They had been introduced to Madeleine in a segment on one of the national news programs with the piece also posted online for later viewing. Neither one of them had been interviewed for it, but they had dug up some footage of her in her position as Royal Historian. She'd spoken at a number of events over the years and hosted a special or two of her own on the contents of her beloved archive.

The response to Madeleine was largely favorable among the populace. There were a number of comments, commentaries, and even a fairly legitimate article or two wondering at the sacrifices she made to marry him. Would her step-daughters someday make her a member of one of the orders for exceptional duty to the crown? How many events would she attend? Had she been dating someone or did she have long term plans that didn't include staying in the capital? Had she expected to give up her job, because most certainly she would?

Would there be more children?

He hadn't thought of any of those. Not about anything beyond what she would have wanted for her wedding under other circumstances and the short discussion earlier about her job. They should talk about all of them.

They should talk about a lot of things.

Before he could contemplate further, she entered the room where he waited. He noticed the change of clothes and that someone had done something fancier with her hair. He didn't know the details of either thing, but knew they had been changed.

"Ready?" he asked, tucking his phone back in his pocket.

"Not in the slightest." Her nervousness became apparent in her voice and posture.

Anthony chuckled. "I know. I remember my first visit as the prince consort. It's not fun, but you'll be surprised by how well they're likely to treat you. Everyone is still mourning Caroline obviously. With that in mind, they're acutely aware of what you've done to protect their new queen. Almost anything you do would be met with great understanding and compassion, at least for the first few months. Plus, the ones who might be snarky will mostly direct it at me. I've got thick skin."

She gave a slightly crooked smile. "I'm sorry you'll have to deal with that, but I'm glad they'll give me the benefit of the doubt."

He held out a hand. When she took it, he tucked her hand inside his elbow. "We've got to go, but we will potentially be visible to cameras on our way to the auto."

With a nod, she started for the door.

"Let me hold your door for you," he murmured.

Since the door to the portico was now open, this nod would have been nearly imperceptible.

The ride to the Parliament building was silent, but short. When they exited the vehicle, Anthony offered her his arm again, and she readily took it. Maxwell met them and led the way to an ante room where they'd wait to be called by the Prime

Minister.

"They won't keep us waiting long," Anthony promised her. "They shouldn't," he corrected. "They would never keep Caroline or her father waiting. They might try to see how much they can push me around." The thought surprised him.

Would they test him for this meeting?

He had no doubt they would eventually, but surely not this meeting where the eyes of the nation would be on them.

In less than ten minutes, he was proven correct. Delays would wait for another day.

Madeleine gave him a smile and squeezed the inside of his arm before Maxwell led her to the gallery where she'd watch the proceedings. At least there wouldn't be a reception afterward. Given the proximity to Christmas and the amount of work Parliament needed to finish before the end of the year, the hours needed for one couldn't be spared.

Anthony was led into the main chamber to stand in a witness box. The top of the ornate wooden railing was smooth against the palms of his hands as he used it to ground himself, just a bit. As much as he'd rather be home with his children, doing Christmas things, and possibly working out until he couldn't keep his eyes open to stave off the grief, he had to do this for his daughter and their country.

The official announcer spoke loudly. "Mr. Prime Minister, members of the Council and Parliament, the Dowager Prince Consort..."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

Was that the title they were going with?

"... has come before this body today to certify his selection as regent for Queen Catherine until such a time as he is deemed unfit or she comes of age."

"It is so noted," the Prime Minister responded. "We can do this with a simple voice vote. All in favor?"

A chorus of ayes sounded throughout the chamber.

A wave of relief he hadn't expected washed over Anthony. Glancing at the gallery, he could see Madeleine with her eyes on him.

"All opposed?"

"Nay." Several voices rang out. He knew there would be a couple, but hadn't expected quite so many.

"We call for a debate followed by a second vote," the eldest member of the Council stated from his seat behind the Prime Minister.

Anthony knew the Prime Minister well enough to know he was furious, but was impressed at how he kept his reactions under control.

"Very well. All opposed, please rise and state your objections."

About fifteen members of Parliament stood up, plus three of the nine Council

members. Except for one already seated at the front, they all filed down to one of two microphones set up for just such occasions.

"Is there someone who would speak for the prince?" Anthony suspected the Prime Minister wanted to do it himself, but protocol precluded it. Three others approached, one man and two women - one of whom he recognized as the second in her party.

The Prime Minister turned. "Councilman, would you care to lead us off?"

The councilman stood. "We all know the sole reason for Anthony's..."

"Prince Anthony," the Prime Minister reprimanded.

It earned him a glare. "For Prince Anthony's marriage to Ms. Woodward is to take on the role as regent, thereby preventing these two bodies from choosing the most qualified person for the job."

"You mean to keep you from getting the job," someone yelled from the floor.

The councilman bowed his head. "I would be honored to take on the role of regent for our young queen, but I have not been given due consideration. Neither has anyone else."

One of the women who had come to defend him spoke. "If Prince Anthony were an unacceptable option, we would have the opportunity to prevent him from taking the office. However, the body as a whole clearly has no objection, and were we able to ask the late queen, very few of us could honestly say we believe she would have wanted anyone else. The law is clear on the matter. The statutes strongly discouraging the prince from taking office are superseded by the Letters Patent. A document those who have seen it and the relevant chapters and other documents believe the Queen Mother of the first King Gilead was forced to sign by her late

husband's brother to ensure his position on the throne after killing her son." The woman's eyes narrowed. "Are you suggesting that Mrs. Anderson is attempting to gain the throne for herself and therefore the queen must be protected from her machinations?"

Anthony looked up at Madeleine and willed her to remain calm. They'd be fine.

10

By the time she met up with Anthony back at the SUV, Madeleine felt like she'd run a marathon.

And been beat up in the process.

The debate had been heated at times, but it was clear from the outset that those objecting had no real reason. They simply didn't like the fact that Anthony would be regent, and there wasn't really anything they could do about it. She suspected the councilman wanted the job for himself to give his family and friends contracts or other lucrative deals or somehow set himself up to take power permanently. She'd heard of it happening in other places, like Southern Santiero a couple of generations earlier, but never would have thought it could happen in Eastern Novigradia.

Of course, she hadn't expected Caroline to die so suddenly and neither had anyone else. She hadn't dared ask Anthony about it, not wanting to force him to relive memories he'd rather bury until further notice, but she suspected he hadn't known much longer than the rest of the population.

There had been whispers about something going on for a couple of days before her passing, but no longer than that.

The drive back to the palace passed just as quickly and quietly as the drive there.

Sitting in the back while someone else drove was a new experience for Madeleine. She had rarely taken a cab or ride share service, much less anything fancier.

Once the door from the portico closed behind them, obscuring them from the view of the outside world, Anthony's shoulders slumped. He tugged off his tie and went through a door Madeleine hadn't noticed. Likely, he needed time to process what had happened. She'd see him later. They were supposed to have dinner with the children this evening. He wouldn't leave her alone for that, would he?

She didn't think so.

More like he wouldn't skip dinner with his children the day after he married another woman and three days before Christmas. It had nothing to do with her specifically.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

The tree had been set up in the family living area but still hadn't been decorated. The rest of the palace looked like an HEA TV Christmas movie was having a rummage sale - but nicer.

It hadn't invaded her office or work rooms, but everywhere else seemed to be festive.

What happened to the little tree she'd had in her flat? Or any of her other things that hadn't already been put in her new residence? She still hadn't found any of her books or artifacts she'd obtained outside of her work. At least she had her Kindle.

After half an hour of sitting in her office staring at a spot on her desk but not really seeing anything, Madeleine had to admit she wasn't going to get anything else accomplished. Instead, she sent Liana a text and asked her friend to come by the palace if she wasn't busy. She'd already been added to the list of people allowed to visit without prior notice.

When she didn't get a return text, Madeleine figured her friend was on set or otherwise occupied. With a sigh, she decided to pack up the little she'd attempted to do and go back to the residence.

No one greeted her when she arrived. Not that she expected a welcoming party, but she had no idea what the schedule looked like for the rest of the family. Going into her dressing room, she found that the stylist had already started to fill it with articles of clothing Madeleine never would have looked at on her own. The styles, fabrics, colors - not to mention designers - were ones she would have walked right past. But the stylist had worked with the late queen for many years, and the queen had always been impeccably dressed. Surely the stylist wouldn't steer Madeleine wrong.

Instead of looking through all of the new clothes, she dug through her own things and found her most comfortable pair of yoga pants and an oversized long sleeved t-shirt. With her coziest pair of fuzzy socks on, she picked up her Kindle and tried to decide where she could curl up and read for a while. She looked at the sitting area where Anthony had slept in the recliner, but it only contained one other chair. If the Pixar movie *Up* had taught her anything, that chair belonged to his late wife.

If she broke both of her legs and needed a place to sit down while waiting for medical attention, Madeleine wouldn't sit in that chair.

And maybe she'd been reading too much drama lately and needed to go with something a little less prone to exaggeration.

Before she could decide where else she should look, the door to the Monarch's Suite opened, letting a worn out Anthony in.

He brightened a little when he saw her. "Hey. I didn't realize you'd be up here. I thought you'd go back to work."

"I did, but I couldn't focus." She took a couple of steps toward him. "How are you? I know this morning had to be hard for you, even if you expected it to an extent and the end result was what you wanted."

Tossing his suit jacket on a small side table, he undid the top couple of buttons on his shirt. "It was a little more contentious than I expected and a lot more than I'd hoped, but overall not too far off. You're right, though. It wasn't my favorite day ever." He tilted his head toward the sitting area. "Want to wait for me? I need to take a quick shower, then we need to talk."

Madeleine nodded, but fear began to coil inside. In the history of the world, nothing good had ever come from the phrase we need to talk.

When he disappeared into the bathroom, she went to the sitting area, but still refused to sit in the chair she believed to be the late queen's.

She also couldn't bring herself to sit in Anthony's recliner. Instead, she leaned against the frame of a window and stared out of it. The lights in the harbor beckoned to her. It had been a long time since she'd gone down and wandered along the pier. She suspected she wouldn't go anytime soon, not now that she was, technically or not, a member of the royal family.

Before she heard Anthony speak, she saw him in the reflection of the window.

"You can sit down, you know." He sounded bemused as he towel dried his hair. At least he was fully dressed, though she couldn't help but notice the t-shirt clung lightly to skin that probably wasn't quite dry.

And therein lay another problem she hadn't thought about.

She'd thought Anthony was cute when he first came into the public eye. If she stopped to think about it long enough, she would think that age had only enhanced the appeal. Attraction to the man she'd just married while he still mourned his wife wasn't something she'd thought about dealing with.

Maybe, someday, they would find that somewhere along the line they'd grown to love each other. Maybe then it would be okay that she thought he was attractive. Maybe he'd think the same about her.

In the meantime, Madeleine suspected things could be very one-sided.

She didn't like the thought of that at all.

Madeleine had surprised him when he saw her standing by the window. She could

have sat in either of the chairs, but she chose not to.

Why?

She shrugged. "I didn't want to take your seat and I certainly didn't want to..." She motioned vaguely toward the other chair. "It's not my place."

Her consideration for him made him smile - and would make this conversation a little more difficult. "The chair is new," he told her. "I had it brought in here a couple of weeks ago."

A look of relief crossed her face. "Okay then." Before settling in the chair, Madeleine picked up the blanket from where it was draped over the top then tucked it around her once she had.

Anthony took a seat in his own recliner and considered popping the footrest out but decided that was too casual for this conversation. "We do need to talk," he told her, hating the apprehension on her face.

Rather than responding, she waited for him to go on.

"First, I need to apologize."

Her head tilted slightly to one side.

"For what?"

"For getting you into this in the first place." He leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm still not thinking rationally enough to make coherent decisions in certain parts of my life. While I truly believe being regent is in the best interests of Kinsey and the country as a whole, I wish I'd found another way to go about it."

"Why is that?"

He couldn't read the look on her face. "Because in marrying me, you gave up not only your chance at your dream wedding, but also the romance that goes both before and after it." A smile crossed his face as he thought about the first time he met Caroline. "When you see each other across the room or literally bump into each other on accident." He and Caroline had done both. "The first date, first kiss, proposal, all of those things. I cheated you out of those."

Rather than the inscrutable look, her face softened. "You didn't cheat me out of anything. I've had the first dates and first kisses and meet cutes before. They're not all they're cracked up to be if it's not the right person. Yes, they can be fun, exhilarating even, but without the solid relationship to follow the initial rush of attraction, it doesn't matter."

"You're right," he agreed. "But you're married to me now, for better or worse, until

death parts us. That means you won't get the real proposal with an actual ring." She still wore only a simple band, which is how she said she wanted it anyway. "The nights talking on the phone - about anything and everything and nothing - until one of you falls asleep. All of those things. A real wedding." His voice gentled as he tried not to embarrass either of them. "A real wedding night. The discovery of new life on its way. I can give you growing old together, but that's about it."

"You're making some awfully bold assumptions." She pulled the blanket more closely around her, but still looked straight at him. "Who's to say we won't have some, or even most, of those things someday? We may not. We may grow old together as friends, enjoying companionship, laughter, video game nights where you always win, and card or board game nights where you never win..."

She made him laugh, something he hadn't expected from this conversation.

"Where we make each other laugh. Raise your children together. Celebrate birthdays and weddings and grandchildren together." She leaned forward, her hand reaching out from under the blanket to settle on his forearm. "And that would be lovely. Much nicer than some relationship based on fleeting attraction that doesn't stand up under the pressures of life."

She squeezed his arm lightly and withdrew back under the blanket. "And it's also possible that, one day, we look at each other and realize that somewhere along the lines, things changed. Maybe we never bring new life into the world, but that doesn't mean we can't have the rest of that. Some day. When you've had time to grieve properly, to mourn, to learn your new role as regent, and so many other things about adjusting to your new reality."

Those were things he hadn't really thought about. "You think that's possible?"

"Of course. There's no guarantee that it will, but I think the first scenario is extremely

likely one." One corner of her mouth tipped up in a half-smile. "And we can both choose to be very happy, very content, with that."

In a move that surprised him to his core, Anthony found himself looking at her mouth as she spoke, wondering what it would be like - someday - to kiss her.

He shook himself out of it. It wasn't something he wanted now. It might never be. But it was something that he would think about from time to time, and possibly act on eventually.

"All of that sounds lovely, Maddie." It was the first time he'd used the diminutive of his name to address her outside the presence of his children. "Can you really be content with that life? With not being a mother?"

"I'll never replace Caroline. I couldn't even begin to try, but that doesn't mean I won't be a mother to your children. I will be, even if I'm not their mother biologically or able to consider adopting them some day." She sounded sincere.

"You really mean that?" Unexpectedly, Anthony felt emotion begin to overwhelm him.

"I do."

It took some doing, but he managed to contain the tears to his eyes. Most of them anyway. "That means the world to me."

She took a breath. "My biggest concern in that regard would be if, God forbid, something happened to you while some of them are still minors. Five years from now, would I be able to retain custody? Would they be moved away from here, from everything they've ever known, and their quasi-adopted parent or would stability be possible? Who would become regent if Catherine isn't twenty-five yet?"

Another thing that he had never thought about. "I'll find out what we need to do for that to happen, for you to be considered their legal guardian should it be needed."

More of those tears slipped out. Crying hadn't been openly discouraged at his house growing up, but once he met Caroline, he was expected to be stoic. They all were. That needed to change. His sons needed to be able to express emotions like their sisters did.

Madeleine leaned forward and reached for him again. "We'll find a way to make it work, to be content, to be companions and co-parents. To support Catherine and the country to the best of our ability. Really, even if things were to change between us at some point, wouldn't those things be what we ultimately sought anyway?"

He reached over and covered her hand with his. "You make some very good points."

A twinkle in her eye matched the smile she gave him. "That's why you married me. To remind you of the good things."

Since she came into his life, he'd found himself laughing more than he would have thought possible in such a short time span since he became a widower. He felt lighter than he expected, too. It would be a long time before he could settle into a new normal that didn't include hourly pangs of sorrow, but already he'd progressed from sharp pain every minute. Over time, he would continue to progress.

Someday, maybe, he'd be able to look at his life and realize, somewhere along the way, he'd fallen in love with his wife.

What more could he ask for?

EPILOGUE

In a few days, it would be their anniversary. The firsts over the past year had been harder than Anthony could have imagined. Technically, it wasn't the first Christmas without Caroline, but in a lot of ways it felt like it. The year before had been filled with political maneuvering and getting married to Maddie. They'd enjoyed a low-key Christmas with her parents joining them at the palace. This year would be similar, though a few others would join them.

Given what he knew about Maddie, it shouldn't have surprised him that her parents immediately claimed his children as their grandchildren - and he knew it had nothing to do with their royal status.

They'd never even decorated the tree the year before. He'd enjoyed it with just lights on it, but his children had insisted they needed to go back to fully decorated.

In the new room he now shared with Maddie, they had one with just colored twinkle lights. When he came in the room not long after the staff in charge of decorating had started their work, they'd been almost offended when he asked them to take the ornaments off.

While he and Maddie shared a room now, and occasionally a bed, it had come from necessity rather than a conscious choice due to a change in how they felt about each other. They'd both been quite ill at the same time. Nothing overly serious, but fever and chills and it was much easier for someone to take care of them when they were in the same room - but not the Monarch's Suite. Often he fell asleep in the recliner moved into their new room, though those nights were becoming fewer and farther

between. If he fell asleep on the bed first, Maddie often slept on the couch in her dressing room, something he knew she'd requested for just that reason.

Maybe one day, soon even, that would come to an end.

"What are you thinking about?" Maddie flopped into the chair she'd chosen for her own. "Issy is finally asleep."

A sure sign Maddie had been accepted as part of the family came in the form of his children preferring her for bedtime routines at least a couple of times a week. Often they split the duties, but occasionally one or more children had a preference.

"Thank you for taking care of her tonight."

She smiled at him before yawning and pulling the quilt tightly around her. "It's why I'm here. Part of it anyway. I love that little girl."

"And she loves you."

"Something on your mind?" She reworded her question.

"Thinking."

"Sounds dangerous."

The humor in her voice had the desired effect and made him laugh.

Her tone turned more serious. "What have you been thinking about? Is the Council being stupid again?" Her brows pulled together, and her head tilted slightly. "Still? Is the Council being stupid still?"

"No more than usual. As an advisory member of the Council for a number of years, I already knew they would be. Fortunately, some of the terms are coming to an end early next year. That should help as they're replaced." He extended the footrest on his recliner and cross his ankles.

"Then what?"

When he'd arrived in their room, the lights had already been off except for the tree. He'd left them that way. It had the added benefit of being able to see through the window and watch the lights below. It gave him a minute to gather his thoughts. He probably should have made sure he was clear on them himself before broaching the subject with Maddie.

"Do you remember our first conversation sitting here? Well, in these chairs in front of the window in the other suite." Maybe he could ease into it.

In the window he could see her reflection, superimposed over the outside world, nod slowly.

"I do." She had to be wondering where he was headed.

"You said that we could be happy and content as friends and companions and co-parents."

"I did."

He knew her well enough now to detect the hint of fear in her response. He needed to allay that fear quickly. "You also said that someday, maybe, it could turn into something more."

"I did."

The fear toned down slightly, but he didn't hear any hope in there.

Yet.

"What if I said I thought I was ready for things to change?"

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:10 pm

In the last year, she'd not only taken care of his children but of him. He'd noticed how well she took care of all of them. He noticed even more how she made him laugh. How she offered opinions but didn't force them. How passionate she remained about the country's history, though she now had a full-time assistant since her schedule was considerably busier with other things.

And recently, he'd found himself noticing something the papers and other news outlets had a year earlier - how attractive she was. Different kinds of attractive depending on what she wore or what she was doing, but always attractive.

"You want things to change?" There was the hope he expected, though notes of caution remained.

He nodded in affirmation. "I do. I think I do," he quickly amended. "I'm pretty sure, but it's a big step to take. It's been over a year since Caroline passed. I think I'm ready, but I can't promise that I won't... regress, for lack of a better term."

"That's understandable. I'd be surprised if you didn't."

With a deep breath, he finally turned to look at her. "What would you say to a date with me? Not a real one out for dinner and dancing because of the attention it would garner, but we can do the same thing here in the palace somewhere for our anniversary?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea." She gave him the smile he'd long ago come to love. "I've never been on a first date in my own house. Can I wear my yoga pants?" The hopeful lilt to her question made him suppress a laugh.

"You can, but I'll probably be wearing a nice suit."

Giving a dramatic sigh, Maddie stood and tossed her blanket back over the chair.

"Fine. I'm sure I can find something in that giant closet of mine."

Anthony flipped the footrest down and stood, wanting to laugh but not at the same time. "Hey." He reached out a hand toward her.

She took it as he walked to stand in front of her.

"What would you say if we took some of the pressure off that date?"

Her eyes narrowed cautiously. "I'd want to know how you planned to do that."

Time to go for broke. "There's something I'd like to do before then, if that's all right."
He looked up.

So did she.

"Where did that come from?!" The accusation in her tone wasn't serious.

"I have no idea. I noticed it the other day, but I don't know how long it's been in here. It's never been here before."

"You didn't ask someone to hang it or hang it yourself?" Despite the half-hearted accusation, she took a small step closer to him, her hand coming to rest on his chest.

He clasped it to him. "No. I didn't, but I can't say I'm sad someone hung mistletoe in here."

Now he moved closer to her.

Close enough to kiss her.

"Would it be okay with you if I kissed you?" His voice had dropped to a husky whisper.

One hand continued to hold hers against his heart. The other let go and wrapped around her waist, resting on her lower back to pull her a little closer to him.

She didn't answer, aware that speaking would break the spell suddenly woven around them, but gave a nod.

Anthony leaned down, then hesitated as her eyes fluttered shut and her breath started to mingle with his. His closed in anticipation, and he finished the movement, brushing his lips lightly against hers. He moved a hair's breadth away before coming back in for a second kiss, firmer and with more intention than the first.

It couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but it left him breathless. He leaned his forehead against hers.

"That was... nice." Her ragged breath told him she thought it was more than nice.

Maybe he should think about sleeping elsewhere for the time being.

"I wish I could tell you I've fallen in love with you, Mads. I can't, not yet, but I'm on my way, and I do love you. You add so much to my life, to my children's lives. I'll forever be grateful I ran into you when I did."

In the space of a heartbeat, he found himself kissing her again - or she kissed him. One of the two. This one more intense than the first two, but they both kept it well under control.

"I love you, Anthony," she whispered when they separated again.

He suspected she meant it a little differently than he did, but it wasn't the time to quibble.

They loved each other. They were falling in love with each other.

And really... what more could they ask for?