

The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her POWER

Forget My Sister!
Turns Out I Was the
Real Saint All Along!

story by
Almond
illustrations by
Yoshiro Ambe

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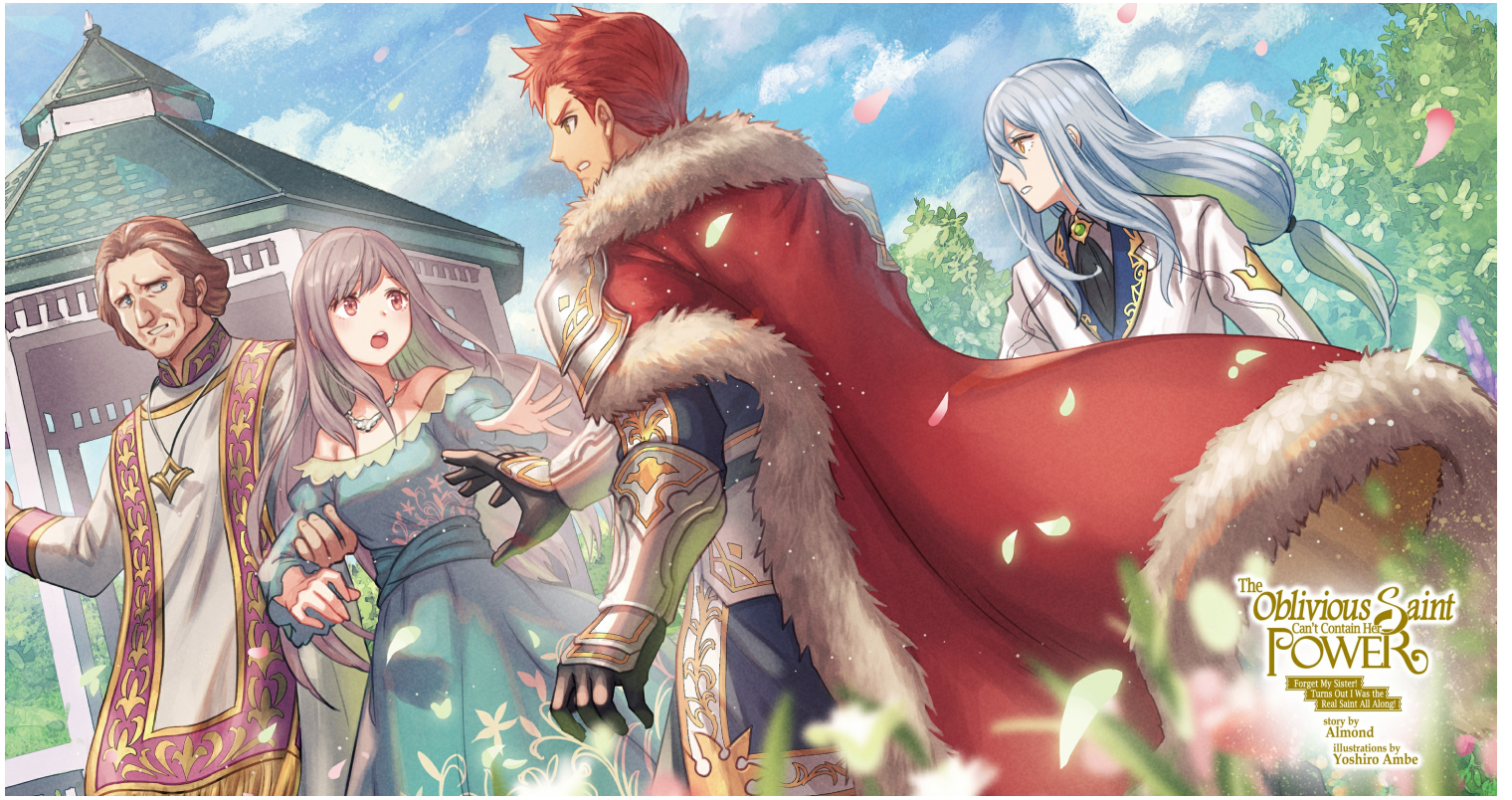
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"Your Imperial Highnesses.
I, Monica Arendt, am
honored to present myself at
your gracious service.
**What a delightful
surprise to encounter
you both here."**

As she drew closer,
flanked by her attendants,
Lady Monica's eyes
widened in recognition
before her expression
quickly smoothed into a
polite smile. She halted
before myself and Ed,
executing a flawless
curtsy.



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Forget My Sinner
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Real Saint All Along

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Characters



Carolina

Younger sister to Flora and now wife to Edward. She's finally coming into her own due to the love from Edward and his family.



Edward

Second prince of the Malcosian Empire and the commander of the Pyreborn. He loves Carolina deeply.



Marisa

Daughter of a count and Carolina's handmaiden. A cool and reserved beauty.



Owen

Former problem child. After causing a great scandal, he's reforming his ways. Carolina's personal bodyguard.



Raymond

Prime minister of the Kingdom of Celestia. Despite his lifelong absences and stoic nature, he actually cares a great deal for his daughter Carolina.



Gilbert

First prince of the Malcosian Empire. Previously homebound due to the symptoms of Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome, he has regained his life thanks to Carolina and consequently now calls her Mistress...



Vanessa

Empress of Malcosias. A wielder of frost magic. She is impassive but deeply loving.



Eric

Emperor of Malcosias. A spell-sword whose exploits are the stuff of legend.



Teodore

Edward's right-hand man, childhood friend, and vice commander. He's an intellectual marvel and prodigious mage.



Flora

Eldest daughter of ducal House Sanchez. Lauded as the Saint-to-be, she is a multitasking and accomplished young woman. Only her sister is privy to her cruelty.

S t o r y

Lady Carolina Sanchez spent her entire life enduring relentless bullying from her sister, Lady Flora Sanchez, until one day she was abruptly married off to Edward, the second prince of Malcosias. With the support of her new in-laws and her husband, Carolina begins to emerge from the shadow of her accomplished elder sister, leading the happy and fulfilling life that was previously out of her reach in her home country.

Despite the factional conflicts over the royal succession in Malcosias that led to attempts on her life, Carolina manages to marry Edward, and a genuine love blossoms between them. Believed to have been devoid of magical power for her entire life, Carolina unexpectedly discovers that she possesses a rare godly power known as Divinity. Its healing properties allow her to cure the first prince of Malcosias, who had long suffered from Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome, thus easing the factional strife. But as news of Carolina's latent power spreads, a plot unfolds for her home country Celestia to reclaim her.

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Chapter One

(Carolina)

Just days after the unfortunate situation with Prince Gilbert had been resolved, I found myself once again mingling with the Malcosian nobility. This time, it was at a tea party in the elegantly appointed salon of Countess Herbert. Her drawing room was a mosaic of ladies in dresses of all shapes and colors, buzzing with the honeyed tones of genteel conversation. I had a great deal of experience attending such events back in Celestia (though as an addendum to Flora, of course). I noted that the soirees of Malcosias shared a similar air—though perhaps one that was slightly more charged.

Countess Herbert, our esteemed hostess, publicly proclaimed herself to be a neutral arbiter in the ongoing succession debate, which meant that this gathering *should* have provided a reprieve from my usual fears of poison or covert assaults. (At least in theory.) The flip side of the coin, however, was that her stance of neutrality meant that the salon was a melting pot for the adherents of both the first and second prince's factions. Their thinly veiled hostility towards each other added an undercurrent of tension to the air, an almost tangible frisson that made me sigh inwardly.

It was amid this sea of veiled enmities that my gaze inadvertently locked with a certain lady's. She, for one, did not seem to appreciate the accidental eye contact.

"Goodness, Your Highness," she simpered in a tone laced with feigned surprise. "One might almost interpret your expression as shading towards confusion." She widened her eyes dramatically, a hand fluttering to her cheek in mock distress. "Oh, but how remiss of us! Only now has it occurred to me that our more localized topics of discussion might be a tad intricate for someone who has not been nurtured within the empire. It's quite an oversight on our part to have neglected to consider the Celestian in our midst!" Her words were coated in a saccharine sympathy, her smile exquisitely condescending. "My

apologies. We must seem so dreadfully insular.”

As if on cue, her retinue erupted in a symphony of polite yet unmistakably artificial laughter, which echoed throughout the room like a delicate, mocking breeze.

Her jabs, thinly veiled in mock politeness, were a none-too-subtle attempt to belittle my foreign origins, drawing a stark line between the lofty echelons of imperial society and an outsider like myself. Such a tactic was, in essence, rather juvenile, yet it wasn’t something I could outright dismiss—the speaker was none other than Lady Monica Arendt, the eldest daughter of Duke Arendt, one of the empire’s most eminent noble families.

The Arendt lineage had a storied history of producing valiant knights generation after generation, and for this reason the family was often referred to as “the sword of the empire.” The current duke exemplified this legacy as the leader of an order of knights known as the Scarletjade Kingdrakes. The household comprised several preeminent members of the first prince’s faction. The Arendts had supported Prince Gilbert even before Ed’s birth, which positioned them as a formidable force in the ongoing succession struggle. At this juncture, the extent of the Arendts’ involvement with the extremists remained ambiguous, but the possibility still demanded caution. One could never be too careful with such fervent supporters of Prince Gilbert, especially ones who had a less-than-stellar history with my husband.

The antagonism between Ed and the Arendts could be traced back to the ad hoc establishment and subsequent meteoric rise of the Pyreborn. Ed and Theodore, through their accomplishments, had inadvertently set themselves up as rivals to the Arendts, a family that had always taken immense pride in the martial prowess of their Kingdrakes. To them, the Pyreborn were nothing but a thorn in their side, a fly to be swatted in their pursuit of maintaining the emperor’s favor.

But did all that rivalry really warrant such blatant insults leveled towards me? Lady Monica certainly seemed to think so, as she pressed on undeterred. “That does bring something to mind that I’ve been so longing to ask you,” she mused with a sly tilt of her head. “I’m quite intrigued to learn more about your domestic bliss with Prince Edward. When someone manages to become so

renowned as the ‘Bloodthirsty Prince’ on the battlefield, it does pique one’s curiosity about the nature of his...gentlemanly virtues in home life.”

Her smile, now tinged with a hint of malice, hardly concealed her contempt. Her pale green eyes shimmered with unspoken amusement as she gracefully swept a lock of her emerald-green hair behind her ear. Her youthful features, rather than softening her demeanor, seemed instead to amplify her spite, leaving no room to interpret her attitude as the subtly seductive allure of an older woman.

But no, she’d slandered not only me but Ed as well. How unpleasant. Lady Monica could’ve been the empress herself for all I cared; I would not tolerate such flagrant disrespect towards my husband.

“Yes, well, to appease what I’m sure are your most refined curiosities, Lady Monica, let me assure you—*Ed* and I find our union to be quite harmonious,” I said.

Her eyes briefly betrayed a flicker of surprise; she clearly hadn’t expected to hear such familiar terms of endearment between myself and the prince. I was gratified to sense that my reply seemed to have effectively countered her presumptuous prying, perhaps instilling in her the future impulse to take a moment of reflection before daring to venture into the personal affairs of others with such flagrant intrusiveness.

The air around me was soon filled with a chorus of subtly supportive comments from those aligned with the second prince’s faction:

“It’s quite unseemly, isn’t it, to so openly inquire into the intimate dynamics of newlyweds?”

“Truly, such conversations are not appropriate in polite society.”

“And yet, it’s rather delightful to hear of such affection between Their Imperial Highnesses so early in their marriage.”

Turning towards me with a blend of curiosity and respect, one lady inquired, “If I may be so bold, Your Highness, what affectionate moniker has Prince Edward bestowed upon you?”

The majority of today’s attendees were unmarried, and their interest in my

marital life was apparent and not entirely surprising. While I hesitated to label their queries as impolitely forthright, they certainly bordered on being overly forward. Nevertheless, considering the relaxed atmosphere of today's tea party, a slight deviation from strict formality seemed permissible.

Once I'd arrived at that conclusion, I opened my mouth to respond to the inquisitive lady's question when Marisa suddenly materialized by my side and interrupted me.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness," she whispered close to my ear, her voice hushed but urgent. "A message from the emperor has just arrived. His Imperial Majesty requests your presence at the castle without delay."

The emperor? Her words arrested me completely, my brief moment of astonishment giving way to the gravity of her message. Quickly regaining my poise, I nodded. "Understood. Please have the carriage readied for our departure to the castle, Marisa."

"It shall be done, Your Imperial Highness," Marisa replied with her characteristic efficiency, bowing gracefully before turning to execute my command.

As Marisa disappeared from view, I rose, smoothing out the fabric of my dress. The room was abuzz with curious and confused murmurs. Addressing the gathered assembly, I offered my regrets in a composed yet apologetic tone. "Please forgive this abrupt departure. Duty beckons, and I must heed its call. I have thoroughly enjoyed our time together, and I wish you all the very best. Until we meet again."

Dipping my head in as much remorseful courtesy as propriety allowed me, I turned and made for the door. Countess Herbert hastened to join me, but I gracefully declined the offer of an escort to my carriage and stepped out into the corridor alone. Jitters overcame me as I clambered into the coach that awaited me, and this foreboding sense of apprehension was my stalwart companion on the entire journey to the royal castle. The anxious question "what could have happened?" echoed in my mind as Marisa and I alighted from the carriage and progressed down a winding castle corridor.

"How much further to the parlor?" I asked Marisa, the anticipation building

with each step.

“We’re close, Your Highness,” she said. “Not much longer now.”

As I was yet unfamiliar with the castle’s expansive network of hallways, I trusted Marisa’s guidance implicitly. We continued our silent progression, turning corners and moving through more deserted passages. Then, as we rounded another bend, a group of knights came into view, standing guard outside a door. This had to be our destination.

My eyes narrowed slightly upon noticing that the knights stationed outside the door were members of the Pyreborn rather than the emperor’s customary Imperial Guard. It seemed unusual (if not slightly disconcerting) for the emperor to be without his personal knights. But I pushed aside these thoughts; such concerns were beyond my purview. The knights straightened up, dipping their heads in a show of respect as I approached. With a reassuring gesture, I signaled to them to be at ease, and then I reached out and knocked on the door.

“Carolina Ruby Martinez, humbly presenting myself in accordance with the summons of His Esteemed Imperial Majesty,” I announced, my voice steady and clear.

The response from within was immediate. “Enter,” commanded a voice I recognized as the emperor’s. Turning the doorknob, I gently pushed the door open to reveal: “Ed?! And Theodore and Prince Gilbert too! And Her Majesty as well!”

Met with this unexpected gathering, I couldn’t contain my startled exclamation. With both emperor and empress, *and* their two sons, this made for a complete imperial family gathering—the first one I’d seen at that! Just what had occurred to warrant *this*?

“Your Highness,” Marisa’s quiet whisper urged from behind.

Immediately, I snapped myself out of my shock and curtsied. “Forgive the tardiness of my introduction. I am delighted to present myself, Carolina Ruby Martinez, at your most gracious service.”

“Please, Carolina, let’s dispense with formalities for now. We’re amongst

family,” the emperor said. “In fact, we wish to extend our apologies for the abrupt summons. Were you not at a tea party? Please, sit,” he added, urging me to my seat.

As I scanned the room for a suitable spot to settle myself, I noted the unexpectedly relaxed atmosphere among the imperial family, an ease that slightly assuaged my initial apprehension. The best choice of seating wasn’t immediately apparent to me in this distinguished assembly, but I soon found myself instinctively guided to the vacant seat next to Edward. It seemed the most fitting place, and I took my seat gingerly.

Immediately, Edward bestowed a cordial smile upon me and tenderly encircled my waist with his arm. Ever since our heartfelt disclosures to one another, he had developed an inclination for such open displays of affection, and it was both heartwarming and a little embarrassing.

“Oh dear, such a scandalous exhibition ignites within me a pang of envy,” Prince Gilbert quipped with a theatrical sigh.

“And what stops you from seeking a partner of your own, Brother?” Edward said brusquely. “Lina is spoken for.”

Prince Gilbert chuckled. “Your impudence towards your elders never ceases to amuse me, Edward. And to think you were once such an adorable lad.”

Ed, somewhat vexed, turned away. “Adorable? Hardly. I was never such a thing, neither then nor now.”

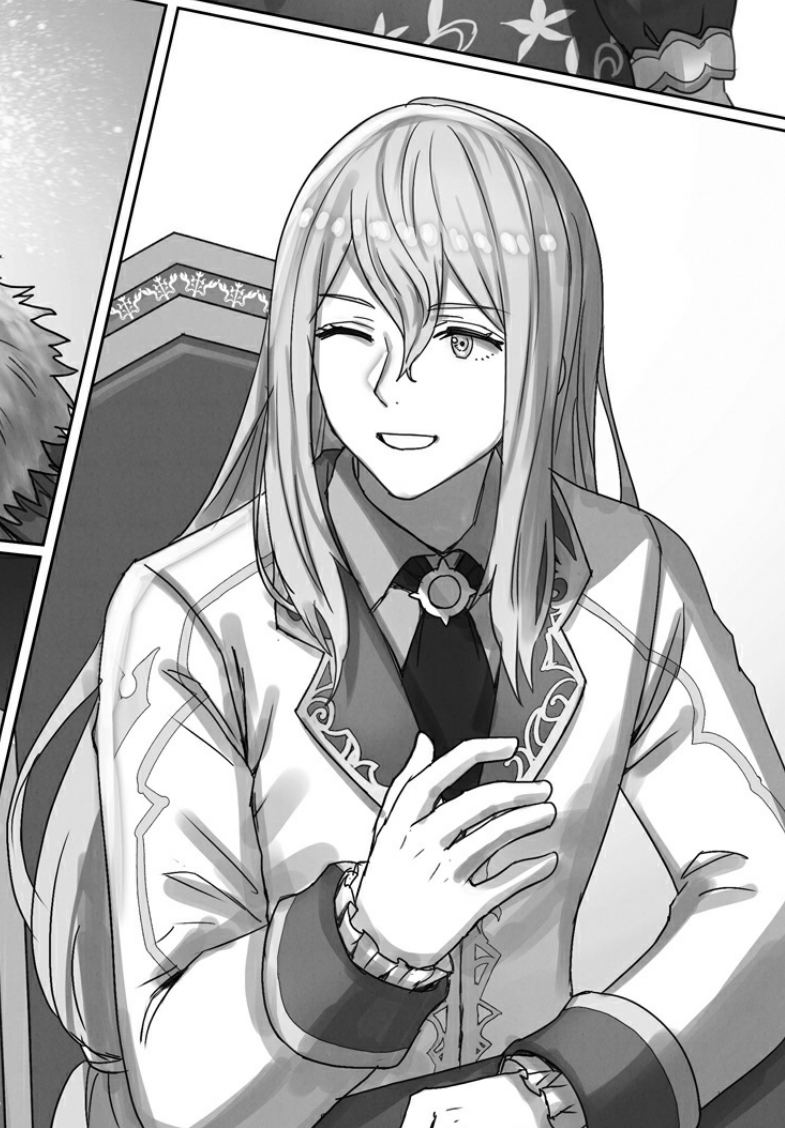
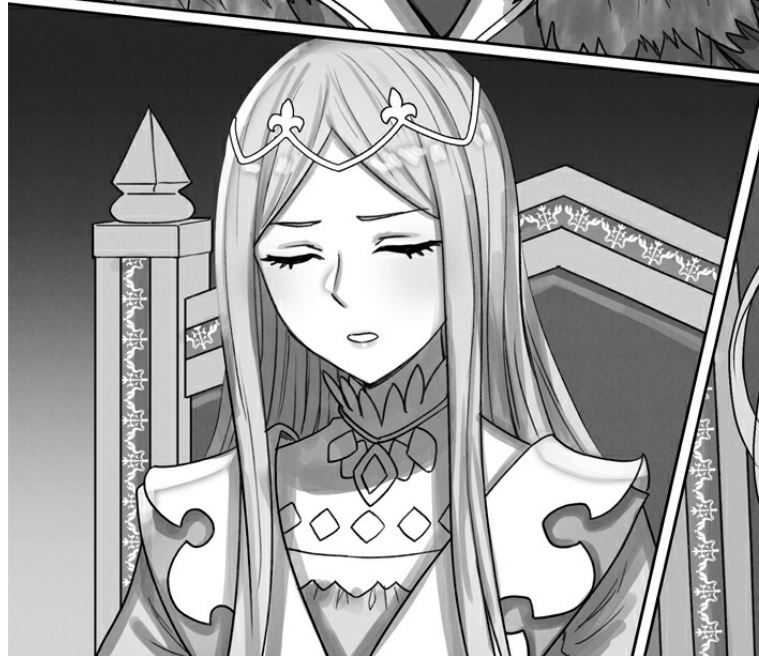
Though it was slightly childish, I couldn’t help but find his retort to hold a certain charm. His youthful defensiveness was strangely endearing.

“Lina, feel free to tell him off as well,” Ed encouraged me. “I’ll handle the consequences.”

“Ah, but what consequences could there be, being chastised by my esteemed Mistress of the Divine?” Prince Gilbert pointed out. “To me, that seems more a reward than a penalty.” He spread his arms in an exaggerated gesture of welcome, his eyes gleaming with expectation.

By contrast, Ed’s gaze glittered coldly. This...exchange, one that I hesitated to categorize as an innocent brotherly spat, seemed to greatly amuse the

emperor, and he bellowed with laughter. The empress, on the other hand, wore an expression of sheer exasperation. She let out a weary sigh. The juxtaposition of their reactions left me with nothing but a wry smile in response.



Setting aside this family repartee, the gravity of our summons lingered in my mind. Surely we were gathered here for something more pressing than fraternal banter. “Ed, Prince Gilbert,” I interjected, “I believe we have been convened for an urgent matter. Perhaps we might save this discussion for another time?”

The empress nodded in agreement, adding her voice to mine. “Carolina is absolutely correct. This is neither the time nor the place for such exchanges. Such rambunctious children,” she added in a low murmur, more to herself than to anyone else. Her words, however softly spoken, were enough to prompt immediate silence from both brothers.

When the matriarch speaks, everyone listens indeed...

“Now that our two spirited sons have at last found silence, shall we proceed, Eric?” the empress said.

“Indeed, we may,” concurred the emperor. With a subtle gesture, he motioned the maids who had been waiting behind us to a more discreet position along the wall, firmly signaling the end of our genial preamble. A heavy silence fell over us, so profound that the anxious ringing in my ears seemed as if it might become audible to the others in the room.

The silence lingered, stretching on for a moment longer until (thankfully) the emperor resumed speaking. “Before we delve into our primary discussion, there is someone else who must join us.” He directed his attention towards a door—not the one leading to the hallway, but one connected to an adjoining room. “Please, enter.”

The door slowly swung open, and I found myself instinctively holding my breath in anticipation. Emerging from the threshold was a figure I had not expected; it was my—

“Father?!”

My voice escaped me involuntarily, a mix of surprise and confusion. Seeing my father here amid such distinguished company was the last scenario I had anticipated. I wasn’t alone in my shock; both Prince Gilbert and Ed wore similar expressions of utter disbelief. It became clear that his visit must have been a

well-kept secret, one known only to the emperor and empress.

Father, meanwhile, was the epitome of diplomatic grace. He quietly shut the door behind him and executed a respectful bow.

But why is he here?! His presence here was a puzzle not just because he was my father, but because he was a Celestian envoy. Were any of the proper channels followed, there should have been formal notifications and extensive diplomatic preparations beforehand, should there not?!

But as I sat there with my whirlwind of questions spinning in my mind, it became apparent that Father was not about to offer any immediate clarifications. His demeanor was impeccably formal, his polite smile never faltering as he stood in silence, evidently waiting for the appropriate cue to speak. *Then is he here in his official capacity as prime minister and not as my father?* That would explain his silence and his reluctance to acknowledge me at all.

The emperor, sensing the room's growing curiosity, took the lead. "Although he is not unfamiliar to many here, allow me to formally introduce the duke and prime minister of Celestia, Raymond Sanchez," he announced with a diplomatic gravitas.

"Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty," Father responded with impeccable courtesy, his tone measured. "I bring urgent news that necessitated this swift assemblage. I beg your forgiveness for the abruptness of this gathering."

In this setting, Father's usual deference seemed amplified, perhaps attuned to the prestige of his company. He bowed once more, deeper and longer this time, and I took the opportunity to sneak a glance at Ed. He looked just as shaken as I did, his eyes steadily fixed on the top of Father's head.

Just how pressing could a matter be to necessitate such an immediate and unheralded audience? Especially considering that Celestia was an independent nation, not a vassal state obligated to share intelligence with Malcosias. In fact, I would've expected quite the opposite—wouldn't it have been more strategic for Celestia to reserve any such critical information for formal diplomatic channels, leveraging it to their advantage in negotiations?

Prince Gilbert, mirroring my confusion, was the first to break the silence.

“Father, I have several questions.”

“Not now, Gilbert,” the emperor replied. “We are in mixed company,” he added, his stern expression conveying the seriousness of the moment.

Prince Gilbert yielded, though his face betrayed his dissatisfaction. What else could be done in the face of the emperor’s direct command?

“The same holds for everyone here,” continued the emperor. “We will refrain from asking questions until after this matter is fully laid out before us. Let us extend our full attention to Duke Sanchez.”

All heads swiveled to my father as he prepared to speak. “Thank you, Your Imperial Majesty,” he said with another respectful bow. He stepped forward, and his expression sharpened. In the face of the imperial family’s scrutiny, he displayed remarkable composure, standing confidently with his shoulders squared and his head held high. Even the emperor seemed to regard his comportment with a hint of admiration, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly in silent acknowledgment.

I realized I was seeing my father in his element, as a man who regularly shouldered the responsibilities of an entire nation. Witnessing his ability to maintain such fortitude before the most prominent figures of the empire, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride. A warmth spread through me, my eyes softening with love and appreciation for the man who had always been first and foremost my father.

When he finally spoke, his voice resonated with authority and conviction. “With your attention most graciously bestowed, I must deliver a crucial report. To begin, I wish to address a matter concerning the Divinity of Her Imperial Highness, Princess Carolina.”

His face didn’t so much as twitch, his entire being a portrait of composure so complete that I almost doubted my ears; it came close to making me believe that he’d always known about my latent powers. *But he couldn’t have! How did he know? When did he know?! But wait, does that also mean that he knows I am the reason for all the calamities befalling Celestia? If so, then how could I ever—*

“It’s all right, Lina. Stay calm.”

In response to my husband's murmur of reassurance, a whisper of his name escaped my lips. His soothing voice broke through the din of my thoughts like a sunbeam through storm clouds. The steady pressure of his hand on my back anchored me, his presence a bulwark against the torrent of my anxieties. As I took a deep breath, his tender, golden gaze seemed to dissolve the tension so tightly coiled within me. A quiet mantra resonated within: *You're not alone*. Exhaling slowly, I allowed myself to lean into the security of Edward's embrace, and I allowed my focus to return to my father.

"Apologies for my lapse," I managed, regaining my composure. "Please, continue."

Father acknowledged my words, and I was sure I caught a flicker of relief passing over his features, but it was very swiftly replaced by his flawless air of professionalism. Clearing his throat, he resumed, "Now to the matter at hand. The recent discovery of Princess Carolina's Divinity has shed light on the true nature of the enigmatic force sustaining Celestia. I trust this revelation surprises none here?"

The certainty in Father's words sent a jolt through me, my gaze involuntarily drifting away from his. My silence, it seemed, served as conclusive confirmation.

Though I'd known for a long while now that my powers were the source of Celestia's misfortunes, I had kept this from my father. This didn't stem from any unwillingness to aid my home, but rather, it was an impossibility that I could do so. My status had changed; I was no longer bound to Celestia. The truth about my powers was tantamount to a Malcosian state secret, one that I had no right to disclose of my own accord. This wasn't just a personal interpretation; Theodore had explicitly instructed me to remain silent. How Father had uncovered the truth was beyond my comprehension, but I inwardly and fervently hoped that he didn't harbor any resentment towards me for keeping this information from him.

The guilt grew second by second, my lips pressed tightly together as if they might contain my inner turmoil. I feared that Father resented me as an ungrateful, insensitive daughter, but he only carried on speaking in a purely factual manner, his words neither alleviating nor confirming my apprehensions.

“The Celestian monarchy only recently uncovered the truth,” Father explained. “This revelation came to us during a midnight visit from Archbishop Jonathan Mills of the Celestian church.”

His words sent a ripple of surprise through the room. Archbishop Mills—the very same man known for using his ecclesiastical authority to make thinly veiled jabs at King Phillips? I’d always thought him unscrupulous, given my many encounters with him at various ceremonial functions, but even I didn’t know how to take this information. All I knew was there had always been something about his power-hungry and avaricious nature that had compelled me to maintain a cautious distance.

Father continued. “Archbishop Mills, after summarizing the situation, proposed the following: ‘Let the royal family and the church unite, aligned in an effort to take back what is rightfully ours.’”

Take back what is rightfully ours? The phrasing wasn’t just bold, but was in fact downright unsettling. What he was even implying with such a statement—that the church was his own personal domain? *And even supposing that the church did belong to one person, that person would be the high pontiff, not you, Archbishop Mills.* Each diocese within the church might operate semiautonomously, but such hubris had been the downfall of many greater figures than Mills.

Lost in these vexing thoughts, I hardly noticed how deeply my brow furrowed in displeasure. *Also, I am not some object to be claimed or reclaimed.* As this final grievance crossed my mind, Prince Gilbert began to speak.

“So how did the monarchy respond?” he asked, his brow knitted just as tightly as my own. “Surely you laughed him and his proposal out of the room immediately?”

“Indeed, such a proposal is unthinkable,” my father replied. “However, we have temporarily withheld our formal response. It’s a delicate situation—the monarchy must tread cautiously lest the church find an excuse to finally shake off the last shreds of our control.”

“In other words, your hands are tied,” Prince Gilbert said.

“That would be one way of putting it,” Father agreed.

Prince Gilbert responded with a contemplative “hmmm” as he studied my father with a piercing gaze. There was a sense that he was sifting for deeper truths beneath the surface of my father’s words, yet his demeanor suggested he was somewhat amused by this intellectual pursuit.

“But upon what grounds can you *really* reject the archbishop’s proposal?” Prince Gilbert asked, a cold smile playing on his lips. “After all, reclaiming my esteemed mistress—excuse me, Carolina—would offer the most straightforward solution to your predicaments, wouldn’t it?”

Father met Prince Gilbert’s pointed provocation with balance and restraint. “Your Imperial Highness makes a valid observation,” he began. “Indeed, the archbishop’s proposal holds certain advantages. However, the inherent risks far outweigh these benefits. With Princess Carolina now wedded to Prince Edward and integrated into the imperial family, Celestia has effectively relinquished any claim over her.” He paused, a trace of discomfort in his voice. “Furthermore, at present, our nation’s reliance on Malcosian support cannot be overstated.”

Father was absolutely right. Archbishop Mills’s proposal was utterly unhinged. *There’s recklessness, and then there’s whatever this is...*

There could be no worse outcome for Celestia than making an enemy out of Malcosias. In the most catastrophic scenario, armed conflict might even be possible, in which case Celestia would lose its cherished independence in *very* short order. To the advanced magical nation that was Malcosias, the conquest of Celestia would amount to nothing more than an afterthought.

Prince Gilbert continued in his line of questioning. “I’m chuffed to see that Celestian leadership has held on to its wits. But this then begs the question: why would Archbishop Mills propose such a perilous course? Is he so blind to the consequences of his own actions?”

As the prince ruminated rather pointedly on the archbishop’s apparent lack of foresight, my father looked conflicted. After a brief pause, one which was marked by a visible internal debate, he chose his words carefully. “Archbishop Mills did not come to us without forethought. His strategy involved invoking both prophecy and the historical context of the Saints to justify Princess Carolina’s rightful repatriation.”

“Prophecy and the historical context of the Saints?” Prince Gilbert arched a confused brow.

“Essentially, his plan hinges on the claim of divine revelation. He intends to assert that God has personally spoken to him, proclaiming Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez as the true Saint. He argues that she deserves to reside in a land befitting her sanctity—a place he defines as the Celestian diocese, with its rich history of Saints. His aim is to leverage this assertion to create international pressure, compelling Malcosias to repatriate her.”

Father recounted these facts with a noticeable restlessness, as if he were speaking of something deeply shameful. But considering that what he was describing amounted to no less than an attempt by the archbishop to set himself up as a false prophet, Father’s worry seemed perfectly understandable. In a country that deeply valued its holiness, the emergence of a false prophet would be a scandal of immense proportions.

“I see,” Prince Gilbert murmured, a thoughtful look crossing his face. “So the archbishop isn’t entirely devoid of reason.” He leaned back slightly, lost in contemplation.

In contrast to his pensive brother, Ed voiced his confusion. “How? Can’t we simply disregard him, Gilbert?”

Prince Gilbert smiled wryly. “If only the world were ever so simple, Edward. We could ignore *him*, but could we ignore the fervent believers who would see our dismissal of prophecy as the deepest sacrilege? Could we ignore the foreign nations just waiting for a chance to deprive Malcosias of even a fraction of its influence? Addressing the former might fall within the church’s purview, but the latter is a different beast entirely. This could very well be the prelude to a broader conflict.”

Momentarily at a loss for words against the cascade of counterpoints, Ed merely lifted his gaze towards the ceiling as if to say, *Never mind!*

I had to say I agreed with Prince Gilbert’s assessment. Angry believers were one thing; foreign nations smelling blood in the water were quite another. While most of them couldn’t stand up to the empire’s military might directly, would it really benefit the empire to solve all of its problems by force? I couldn’t

help but fear that this approach would only plant seeds of deep-seated resentment, potentially causing even greater problems in the future.

A pensive quiet settled over the room, one that was only broken by the emperor's voice as he addressed my father. "Thank you for your thorough report, Duke Sanchez."

"It is my duty," Father said. "I merely relay the message from our king. It is he who wished to convey this information, and it is he who merits your gratitude."

The emperor responded to Father's remarks with a hearty laugh, his amusement filling the room. "Like father, like daughter! Carolina's modesty clearly runs in the family."

His laughter grew, becoming so infectious that he started slapping his knee in delight. Father initially appeared taken aback, the laughter giving him a few moments' pause. Then, a subtle softening appeared on his face, hinting at a quiet sense of contentment, or perhaps even pride.

As the emperor's boisterous laughter gradually subsided, it morphed into a more measured, knowing chuckle. Regaining his composure, he leaned forward slightly, his expression turning serious. "Now, tell us, what does Celestia seek in exchange? I'm sure such valuable information hasn't been shared merely out of the goodness of your hearts."

Father responded to the emperor's pointed query with a solemn nod, silently acknowledging the shift towards the core issue at hand. He appeared momentarily contemplative, perhaps unprepared for the conversation to have steered so abruptly in this direction. Even so, he recognized the critical nature of the moment, and he seized the opportunity, well aware that hesitation could lead to the emperor reconsidering his willingness to engage. Father, despite his reputation as a masterful prime minister, seemed to acknowledge the limitations of his considerable abilities in this particular case when pitted against the formidable authority of an emperor. With a hint of meekness uncharacteristic of his usual diplomatic confidence, he finally gave voice to the heart of Celestia's request. "Our primary hope," he began, "is to garner your support in our ongoing reconstruction efforts."

The emperor responded with a sound of contemplation, a thoughtful "hmm"

echoing softly in the room. "Additional support on top of our current assistance? Very well then, Duke. However, let's reserve the details of this additional aid for a later discussion. I trust you'll find this agreeable?"

"That is more than acceptable, Your Majesty. I extend my sincerest thanks for your continued generosity and understanding." He bowed deeply, infusing the gesture with the full measure of his appreciation.

The emperor acknowledged this with a simple nod and signaled to one of his aides who had been discreetly positioned by the walls. "Escort the duke to his guest quarters," he instructed. "Ensure he receives all the necessary protections and hospitality. And do so with discretion; his presence here should remain confidential within the castle."

"At once, my lord," the aide replied with an elegant bow. He exchanged a few quick words with my father, who was still bent in his respects, before guiding him to a standing position and then out of the room.

It was only after the door had firmly closed, punctuating Father's departure, that I let out a discreet sigh of relief. The day had been a whirlwind of surprises, and my father's unexpected visit had not been the least of them. I felt a wave of exhaustion wash over me, but I knew well that there was no time for rest. The real work, the intricate dance of diplomacy and strategy, was only just beginning.

I glanced around the room, a wry smile tugging at my lips as I observed the scene of the imperial family immersed in their respective tasks. The emperor was deeply engrossed in reviewing documents that had been handed to him by Theodore. Across from him, the empress and Prince Gilbert were engaged in a hushed yet intense conversation. Theodore himself, ever the diligent adviser, was furiously jotting notes, his expression a mix of concentration and urgency.

As the room continued in its silent flurry of activity, preparing for the upcoming discourse, the emperor decidedly set his papers aside. He surveyed the room with a renewed focus. "With a clearer understanding of our current predicament, it's time we shift our attention to strategy. Our primary objective is the protection of Carolina. We aim for a resolution that is both discreet and amicable. I invite those with suggestions to raise their hands."

The first person to lift their arm and meet the sweeping gaze of the emperor was none other than Teodore. “Permission to speak, Your Majesty.”

“Granted,” the emperor replied. “We’re eager to hear your thoughts, Teodore.”

With a quick adjustment of his glasses and a swish of his golden locks, Teodore thanked the emperor and stepped forward. Even with the emperor as his audience, he exuded a confidence that seemed natural. Surely he could count himself among the few individuals in the world who could stand his ground so boldly before the emperor. *A prodigious mage, indeed.*

“My suggestion is a straightforward one,” he began. “I propose we bring Archbishop Mills’s unethical conduct into the light and leave him to face the judgment of a divine inquisition by the church.”

“A divine inquisition, you say?” the emperor murmured appreciatively. “Allowing the church to adjudicate one of their own using their canonical law... Yes, that could work. But do you believe this approach is viable, even with the backing of the high pontiff?”

“By all accounts, the archbishop is a covetous man,” Teodore replied. “He wields near complete influence over the Celestian church. With such unchecked power, there are bound to be hidden indiscretions. We need but uncover such misconduct, and then discrediting him will be an easy task, thereby eliminating the risk to Her Highness.”

In other words, Teodore advocated for eliminating the archbishop for daring to step in our way. The idea had merit, considering there had long been ample rumors of Archbishop Mills’s malfeasance, rumors that had swirled since before I’d been born—but they were rumors that had remained unprosecuted due to lack of proof. Though Teodore’s approach seemed a viable one, it did run the risk of antagonizing the entire church. Considering the general level of faith among Celestians, this could be akin to stirring up a hornet’s nest if poorly implemented.

“An interesting strategy,” the emperor mused. “But how would you propose we investigate a member of the clergy, and an archbishop at that?”

“We have boots on the ground in Celestia as we speak,” Teodore replied. “It

would be a simple matter to have some of them gather intelligence. As for initiating an internal investigation within the church, we would need the high pontiff's consent, but let us not forget we have Princess Carolina on our side. A request made by his beloved child of God would be difficult, if not impossible, for him to deny."

"Then it will only be a matter of time before the archbishop's downfall," the emperor said. "But Theodore..." He let his voice trail off here, almost deliberately. His gaze towards the blond adviser turned scrutinizing, the corner of his lips curling into a subtle yet ominous smile. This smile, one he no doubt slipped into only when he wanted to apply pressure, was terrifying to behold. "While this plan would indeed deal with the archbishop, it does not fully address the larger issue at hand—that of Carolina's safety. The archbishop may have been the first to perceive her unique power, but others will surely follow. There are already murmurs among our own aristocracy. They haven't connected the dots to Divinity yet, but that as well will be only a matter of time."

Teodore met the emperor's gaze steadily, his unwavering demeanor drawing a knowing smile from the monarch. "You seem quite unperturbed," observed the emperor. "Is there another facet to your plan that you've yet to reveal?"

"I wish I could say there is more to it, but at this moment, there isn't," Teodore admitted. "My strategy was to neutralize the immediate threat posed by the archbishop before addressing others."

"Fair enough. Then let us proceed under the assumption that the threat of the archbishop is removed. What next?"

The consensus in the room seemed clear: as long as the archbishop remained a looming threat, his imminent fall was imperative. His unchallenged presence was considered too significant a risk to ignore. Remarkably, no one around the table objected; there were only silent nods of agreement. While I couldn't muster any real sympathy for the archbishop, a part of me empathized with the daunting prospect of being marked as a target by the imperial family. Still, I reassured myself with the knowledge that this was a predicament of the archbishop's own making, and that his actions warranted such decisive countermeasures.

Suddenly, Prince Gilbert's hand shot up. "Father, if I may get a word in edgewise before we move on?" Smiling gently, he stepped forward and took Theodore's place.

The emperor turned towards him, signaling his attention with a simple "Yes?"

"Have you already decided who will lead the effort in incriminating the archbishop? While we do already have operatives in place, they will need someone to guide and coordinate their actions. I'd like to offer myself for this role. My involvement would streamline the process, and you can be assured of my discretion in handling sensitive matters."

I couldn't help but think him overhasty, volunteering himself for a mission that hadn't even officially been sanctioned yet. But perhaps there was more to his request. The emperor, too, seemed to sense this, and his eyes narrowed in contemplation.

"Typically, I would assign such a task to Theodore or Edward, especially since the Pyreborn are involved," the emperor said. "However, let's see what you can do, Gilbert. This mission could be an apt test of your capabilities, particularly if you aspire to someday sit upon my throne. I invite you to demonstrate your value, my son."

Well, that certainly explained Prince Gilbert's eagerness. Just like that, with no deliberation—no deliberation at all—the emperor had entrusted the mission to his hands. Returning his father's expectant smile, Prince Gilbert nodded, clearly satisfied. He exuded utter confidence, his shoulders squared, his chest puffed out.

"Now we can move on," the emperor said. "The next topic of discussion: how might we protect Carolina from foreign powers who might seek to claim her power for their own?" He scanned the room with his eyes, looking for someone willing to speak. Yet this time everyone seemed reluctant, keeping their gazes averted from his.

Everyone but the empress, that is. She sat with an air of unwavering determination, her gaze fixed forward. "At the risk of appearing overly confident, what more protection does Carolina require? Her marriage to Edward effectively aligns her with the imperial family. Surely that status alone is

a formidable shield against any foreign ambition?”

“While her union with Edward does afford a substantial degree of safety, we must not presume that it renders her invulnerable,” the emperor pointed out.

“In a hypothetical worst-case scenario, her marriage could even be leveraged against her,” Prince Gilbert observed. “Some might argue for divorce, citing the reasoning that a Saintly figure like Carolina should not be bound by earthly matrimony.” His lips quirked, only a little wickedly. “Of course, personally, I wouldn’t object to that notion.”

“Rest assured that Lina and I will remain married, regardless of any external opinions or pressures, Brother,” Ed growled. It seemed the word “divorce” struck a sensitive nerve. His eyes, narrowed and intense, were fixed on his older brother. I shivered. Even in its most subtle incarnation, a glower from Edward carried an air of intimidation potent enough to unsettle an orc.

Or perhaps just to unsettle me? Prince Gilbert, the recipient of this death glare, seemed to brush off the intensity as if it were nothing. It had me wondering of what material his heart was made, to be able to resist such scorn...

“But it’s indeed a thorny situation,” Prince Gilbert went on. “Besides the security marriage offers, what other forms of safeguard can we provide? Granting her a title or authority might be an option, but what could possibly carry more weight than the backing of the imperial family?” The first prince stroked his chin in thought. “A conundrum, indeed.”

Beside him, the impassive duo—Edward and his mother—appeared equally perplexed, their expressions solemn, lips sealed in quiet contemplation. And I was no closer to finding an answer myself. The idea of conferring a title seemed superficial. After all, titles often amounted to little more than ornamental accolades. We needed something substantive, a measure of protection that held genuine significance and power, something akin to the revered status of Celestia’s Saints.

Wait. Celestia’s Saints?

“I’ve got it!” I exclaimed, much more loudly than I had intended. “Why not have the empire adopt its own system of Sainthood, similar to Celestia’s?”

Protocol and formality momentarily escaped me in my eagerness to share the idea. The room's attention snapped to me as I felt a rush of excitement warm my cheeks, propelling my torso forward.

Celestia had the perfect model to work from—a union between church and state, with the Saint as a unifying emblem. It was no marriage to a prince, but it surely amounted to something! As former Celestian nobility, I would know—I'd seen their influence personally! My eyes, alight with enthusiasm, darted around the room; I was eager to see if my suggestion had resonated with anyone.

But nothing. The room's response was dishearteningly muted.

"The concept holds promise, but our focus is on international solutions," Prince Gilbert explained. "A purely domestic initiative like this might not have the intended effect beyond our borders."

"It might prove difficult to introduce a culture of Sainthood in the empire where none has existed before," the empress added.

Two rejections (albeit kind ones) in quick succession. But just as the disappointment was about to sink in, the emperor's expression softened into a warm smile. "But that's quick thinking, my daughter! I'm proud of you," he said, his tone seamlessly shifting from detached neutrality into one rich with fatherly pride. The ease with which he uttered words like "daughter" and "proud" seemed to touch the deepest parts of my heart.

Though it ashamed me how close I had been to feeling downcast over a mere pair of constructively critical comments, it almost embarrassed me more how easily the emperor's words seemed to buoy my spirits. Joy bubbled up within me, easing the tension in my jaw and inspiring the corners of my mouth to curl gently upwards. Ed, standing beside me, appeared to bask in my happiness as well, his eyes creasing with a shared affection.

"If I may." The moment was interrupted as Theodore raised his hand, this time with a somewhat less confident manner than before.

His serious demeanor seemed to drag the smile off the emperor's face. His Majesty cleared his throat to adjust his comportment and turned to face Theodore, his expression now matching the gravity of the moment. "Please," he urged.

As formal as ever, Theodore thanked the emperor, bowed, and stepped forward to speak again. “The idea only came to me after hearing Her Highness’s proposal, but what if we adapted the idea of Sainthood as practiced in Celestia, but implemented it on a grander scale?”

That initially struck me as a throwaway suggestion, something he’d voiced only to help me save face, but the seriousness in his expression suggested otherwise. But what did “a grander scale” even entail? Ed and I exchanged confused looks, silently questioning if the other had grasped Theodore’s meaning.

But even as we engaged in our little tête-à-tête of “Did you understand what he meant? No, did you?” the rest of the room seemed to buzz with a growing sense of understanding. Soft murmurs of “I see” and “interesting” filled the air, punctuating the pensive silence. The emperor and empress, in particular, began to debate the idea with genuine interest.

“Expanding the system of Sainthood onto the world stage?” the empress mused aloud. “A novel idea. It’s certainly worth exploring.”

“Indeed,” the emperor said. “A compelling proposition, but the role and definition of what a ‘Saint’ is would have to be redefined in this broader context. Insofar that other countries can perceive benefits for themselves as well.”

“What if we were to grant the Saint the honor of lighting the sacred flame during the Noel festivities?” the empress replied. “That is a role that currently lacks certainty as it is. While this isn’t something that would directly cater to international interests, it would significantly enhance the Saint’s stature and could elevate her to a symbol of unity and reverence.”

Even though the conversation wasn’t directly about me, the underlying implication was unmistakable—I was to be the designated Saint. Anxiety coiled within me, tightening its grip as the conversation veered further from my grasp. I fought the impulse to blurt out, *What exactly does a “system of Sainthood on the world stage” even mean?!* Instead, I flicked a desperate glance towards Theodore, silently pleading for some semblance of clarity. His response, a rueful smile and a gentle shake of his head, felt like the snuffing of a candle in a dark

room. With my one beacon of hope for immediate understanding flickering out, my spirits plummeted.

“But the greater the symbol, the greater power she must command,” Prince Gilbert interjected. “Any girl can carry a torch. We ought to declare her Divinity publicly, and in the grandest manner imaginable.”

My reaction outpaced my restraint, and despite a frantic attempt to stifle it, a startled “huh?!” echoed through the room. I felt the color drain from my face, shock waves from Prince Gilbert’s audacious suggestion rippling through me. But astonishingly, nobody seemed to spare a glance for my bewilderment, their focus steadfastly upon the unfolding discourse.

“Have you considered the perils of such a declaration, Brother?” Ed said.

“Certainly there is a degree of risk,” Prince Gilbert admitted. “Yet as Father pointed out, our current secrecy is tenuous. Sooner rather than later, the truth shall emerge. The question is whether we will be the architects of that revelation, or whether we will let it slip out of our control.”

“But Brother—”

“Of course, I am not asking we make the announcement right away. That must wait until Carolina has all the authority and protections that Sainthood has to offer.” As Prince Gilbert made this observation on the crucial need for proper timing, his lips slipped into a warm smile. Warm—yet beneath it lay an undercurrent of unyielding intent. “Edward, I understand. You wish to protect Carolina—as do I—but it shall be done in the open. Once the world learns of her powers, they will inevitably seek her out, and when that happens, it will already be too late. The bold and audacious moves we need to make in order to stay proactive cannot be managed under the veil of secrecy.”

Ed’s features tightened; he was visibly grappling with the unvarnished truth in his brother’s words.

“In fact, why must I speak of hypotheticals when the event described has already unfolded? Had Duke Sanchez not informed us of the archbishop’s plans today, we would find ourselves scrambling in the aftermath of his actions, rueing our unpreparedness. The element of surprise is not a luxury we can afford to let slip again.”

“A-All right, I concede,” Ed relented. “You’ve clearly given it more thought than me.” His voice was tinged with reluctance. His usual stoic facade crumbled, revealing a visage contorted with anguish and bitterness. It was a rare glimpse into the depth of his raw emotions, laid bare by the realization that the safety of the one he cherished was at stake.

Caught in the cross fire between the brothers, I found myself in a delicate position. Ed’s protective instincts were just as palpable as the strategic foresight in Prince Gilbert’s argument. Though torn, I recognized that both were rooted in a profound concern for my well-being.

Seeking to offer some solace, I reached out and gently rested my hand on Ed’s arm. I tried to smile with as much warmth and grace as I could muster in a silent show of my appreciation for his unwavering support. His gaze met mine, and in that brief exchange, a wordless understanding passed between us. His features relaxed, the lines of tension easing ever so slightly.

However, our private moment was abruptly interrupted by the deliberate sound of the emperor clearing his throat. “My intention was also to publicly declare Carolina’s Divinity, for many of the same reasons that Gilbert has shared. Yet the method of this announcement remains undecided. Mere presentation of facts would be dry and uninspiring. No, what we require is something more captivating—a vivid declaration that is both a definitive statement...and an unforgettable spectacle.”

A spectacle...

The emperor made an excellent point; facts and figures might sway the courts and councils, but they lacked the allure to enchant the hearts and minds of the masses. In which case, perhaps a dramatic display of my powers was indeed the solution? But how could we possibly convey the true extent of my abilities with a simple demonstration? A point of comparison was necessary.

Lost in contemplation, I found myself absently stroking my chin as a thoughtful murmur escaped me. My gaze drifted, seeking inspiration, only to land on the empress, who was clearly preparing to speak.

“What if we were to organize our own set of Saintly Trials?” she suggested. “We invite one representative from each nation to participate, and there, they

face off against each other—displaying their prowess in a grand tournament. This would not only showcase Carolina’s superior strength but also legitimize her ascendancy in a demonstrable and indisputable way.”

Her logic was sound. If I emerged victorious in this sort of public competition, it would quell the naysayers who might otherwise claim that my ascendancy was due to mere deceit or favoritism. This would also solve the point of comparison problem perfectly.

The emperor hummed in thought. “An excellent idea. Given the potency of Carolina’s power, her triumph in such a tournament would be unequivocal. And broadcasting the trials far and wide would solidify her standing beyond question. Indeed, it would be a spectacle fitting for the ages.”

“It frankly seems a little unfair,” Prince Gilbert pointed out. “I already feel sorry for the other participants. But I suppose it can’t be helped. Mistress shall have her foils.”

Foils. The word sent a shiver down my spine, despite Prince Gilbert’s seemingly innocuous demeanor. He wore the expression of a mischievous schoolboy concocting a harmless prank, seemingly insensate to any inner stirrings of guilt. He crossed one slender leg over the other. “So, with our course of action agreed upon, what shall we dub this whole magnificent affair?”

All present fell into a collective pause. So much had been focused on fleshing out the structural paradigm of the event that a title hadn’t been spared a single thought. Certainly it should be a central consideration! This was something we were setting out to unveil unto the entire world. Optics were paramount.

As I mulled over what singular phrase might succinctly encompass all that we planned, a task I’d never thought I might need to undertake, my mind frustratingly drew a blank. *Something saintly, perhaps?* I wondered just as Prince Gilbert let out what sounded like a very purposefully drawn-out sigh.

“Let us think this through,” he invited. “An event of this magnitude will require an organization behind it, and given that this concerns Divinity, such an organization can in turn only exist with ecclesiastical approval. This would make it, in effect, a division of the church. Given this, perhaps we can say that this tournament is spearheaded by...the Faith Council of Saints?” His words were

accompanied by a beatific smile, one that underscored the simplicity and elegance of his suggestion.

We all lent our voices in one accord almost at once. The name might have lacked flair, but it possessed a certain dignified directness that suited our purpose. As he observed the consensus, Prince Gilbert's smile broadened appreciably, a look of satisfaction spreading across his face. With a flourish, he relieved Teodore of the quill with which the vice commander had been so vigorously taking notes. Pulling a piece of parchment towards him, Prince Gilbert elegantly inscribed "The Proposal for the Faith Council of Saints" atop the document, lending the project a tangible sense of reality. *Well, someone is certainly eager to leave his mark.*

At this juncture, the emperor rose from his seat, signaling the end of the discussion. "I believe we have covered the essentials for now," he declared. "I shall oversee the finer details. However, be prepared for further consultations if the need arises. My dear wife, I entrust you with the task of convening the nobility. As for the rest of you, Edward included, you shall be responsible for the discussions with His Holiness."

"Yes, Father," Ed promptly replied.

"Understood," the empress said. "I will ensure that the aristocracy is prepared to gather at a moment's notice."

As they both respectfully inclined their heads in acknowledgment, a sudden realization spurred me into action, and I followed suit with a hasty bow. The emperor's directive had unmistakably included me in the crucial task ahead. It made perfect sense, leveraging my newfound connection to the church, especially considering the high pontiff's fondness for me. His cooperation in the matter would be indispensable. To that end, our negotiations *had* to succeed.

The weight of responsibility settled heavily upon my shoulders. I bolstered my spirits with silent affirmations, reminding myself that this mission was uniquely mine, one that no one else could do better. As I raised my head, my eyes met the emperor's. His smile, wide and encouraging, seemed to acknowledge my silent resolve.

"Now, go forth and accomplish your respective tasks. Dismissed!"



After the emperor had so firmly bid us farewell, we dispersed in silent accord. Soon Ed and I found ourselves hesitantly poised before the ornate door to my father's guest chamber. I stood there, momentarily rooted to the opulent carpet, my fists involuntarily balled at my sides.

Why am I here? Every spare moment ahead of me ought to be devoted to strategizing for the impending negotiations with the church. Yet here I stood, compelled by a different duty.

I *needed* to speak with my father—to explain why I had kept him in the dark about my involvement in the calamities that had befallen Celestia and to apologize.

Perhaps an apology wasn't strictly necessary; after all, much of it had been beyond my control. But still, I felt compelled to make amends, if only to ease my own conscience.

Buffeted as I was with these tumultuous thoughts as the backdrop to a meeting with my father, I found the circumstances to be far from ideal. With each passing moment, the weight of perceived ingratitude gnawed at me, deepening my unease. My heart was ensnared by fear; my hand trembled, hovering just short of the doorknob. The guilt, the regret, the shame—they contorted my expression into a grimace.

"Lina, does it have to be today?" Ed asked gently, a solid presence at my side. "We could return once you've sorted out your feelings. It won't be too late."

His eyes, brimming with love and compassion, met mine as he softly covered my quivering hands with his own, their warmth enveloping me. His words nearly swayed me, tempting me with the logic of waiting until my emotions had settled. But I knew myself too well—I knew that postponing this would only lead to avoidance. I couldn't afford to flee, not from the father I cherished so deeply.

With a surge of determination, I spurred my stiff, anxious body into motion, trying to cast aside my all-consuming fear. Briefly, I released Ed's hands, only to fumble for them once again, finding comfort in their enduring strength and affection.

“Thank you for your concern,” I said, steadying my voice. “But I’m all right, truly. So please—would you join me in meeting my father?”

“Of course,” he answered without delay. “I’d join you anywhere. Even off the ends of the earth if I must. So have no fear—I’m right here with you.”

A light giggle slipped through my nerves. “How poetic.”

I acknowledged his offer with a nod—what would be a flippant remark coming from anyone else was likely a deadly serious offer coming from him—and I returned my attention to the wooden portal before us. It was just a door, yet it loomed like a colossal barrier, stretching skyward, an ominous gate that seemed to shadow all that lay beyond.

It’s all right, I reassured myself. Ed is by your side. You have nothing to fear.

Gathering every ounce of courage, I kept one hand securely in Ed’s and knocked on the door with the other. “Father? It’s Carolina. Carolina Ruby Martinez. May I come in?”

I hoped my voice had been as composed as I’d tried to make it. To my surprise, the door swung open immediately as if on cue, revealing my father. It was as though he had been standing right there, anticipating our arrival, all along. A gentle smile graced his face; his eyes were alight with a tender spark as he welcomed us in. “Carolina. It’s good that you came. Why don’t we talk inside? Your Highness is most welcome as well.”

“Yes, thank you, Father,” I answered.

“Duke,” Ed acknowledged with a nod.

Stepping into his chambers, I quickly surveyed the surroundings. The room was pristine, not a speck of dust in sight—likely more a testament to my father’s recent arrival than any measure of his orderliness. In fact, the cluttered signs of his presence were already spreading, a pile of half-finished documents littering the coffee table. These were almost assuredly the reports on our meeting earlier today. Any sensitive materials not meant for our eyes would have been stowed away well before our entrance.

With a swift motion, Father swept the documents to the far end of the table and gestured towards the plush sofas that surrounded it. We accepted his

invitation, sinking into the luxurious comfort that I had grown to expect of any piece of seating in the royal castle.

“First, I’d like to thank you for entertaining us on such short notice,” I began.

“Nonsense,” he replied briskly. “My daughter needn’t arrange to meet with me. You’re welcome at any time.”

I laughed, a sound light and clear that echoed slightly in the grand chamber. “Why, thank you, Father.” His unchanged demeanor was both a comfort and a joy. As we navigated this gentle opening exchange, Ed remained a silent supporter by my side, his eyes reflecting a quiet tenderness.

The maids moved efficiently to serve us tea, and as Father reached for his cup, his features drew into a slightly more serious expression. “So, Carolina, what brings you here? You couldn’t have come to merely exchange pleasantries.”

His penetrating emerald gaze coaxed a rueful smile from me. *Oh, Father, your perceptiveness never ceases to amaze me.* He had likely discerned the true reason for our visit the moment we’d crossed the threshold.

In a quiet moment of appreciation for my father’s diplomatic touch, I took a sip of the aromatic black tea. Its mellow fragrance calmed my fraying nerves. As I stared ahead, I found my body tensing once again, only to relax slightly when Ed’s strong arm wrapped reassuringly around my waist. His gentle hold seemed to whisper, *You are not alone.*

I know, dear Ed, I know. I was no longer alone. With my husband by my side, I felt that everything might indeed in the end be well.

“Father, I came here today...because I need to apologize.” My voice was steady despite the roiling storm within. “I’m sorry for not revealing the truth about my Divinity, remaining silent all this time. Please, can you find it in your heart to forgive me?”

With a graceful bow of my head, I braced myself for his response, prepared to accept a scolding or a stern reprimand. Under normal circumstances, a member of the imperial family bowing their head to anyone, even a foreign prime minister, could be seen as a severe breach of decorum, but more than anything

I wanted to be forgiven just this once, child to father. Perhaps this was mere casuistry, specious reasoning on my part, but at this moment, I didn't want to be seen as Princess Carolina of Malcosias, nor as Carolina Ruby Martinez; I wanted to simply be Carolina, a daughter seeking her father's forgiveness.

This might have seemed unnecessary to an outside observer. My father had tactfully avoided the subject, which was perhaps his way of extending me an unspoken olive branch. But I couldn't accept it. If I did—if we made this silent pact to never discuss the matter ever again—I feared it would forever alter how I interacted with him, opening a perpetual gulf of guilt and resentment between us. I didn't want that. I wanted anything but that.

So instead, I apologized. Because this was about more than royal duties—this was about family. If there was anyone in the world with whom I needed to be able to share laughter and light moments, always and forever, it was my father.

"Carolina, raise your head," I heard him say.

I muttered a word of compliance and slowly, very cautiously, did as he asked. But as soon as I had cast my gaze high enough to catch a glimpse of his shadow, I diverted it again, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment.

But even as my soul tried to run far, far away from this confrontation, my father's voice, soft yet stolid, anchored me firmly to where I sat. "Look at me, my daughter."

The deepness of his voice, full of authority that was carefully tempered by warmth, took me by surprise. Once more, I cautiously lifted my gaze. This time, I managed to meet his eyes. There, in my father's calm and composed expression, I could see that not a trace of anger marred his features. His eyes crinkled at the corners, almost too much, as if to assure me through his very demeanor that his love for me was utterly unchanged.

"Carolina," he began, "I do not know if I'm a virtuous enough man to claim that this ordeal didn't upset me at all. But what I do know is this: I am not angry with you. You and I—we lead very different lives now. There will be plenty of topics in our future that we will be unable to freely discuss, but that does not weaken our bond as father and daughter. Nothing can change that. Nothing will. And I need you to understand this."

“Father...” I whispered.

“And besides, we all have a secret or two! There’s nothing wrong with a woman having a bit of an air of mystery about her.”

He said this with a playful shrug of his shoulders, the slightest hint of a blush coloring his cheeks. Which meant that this...was his attempt at humor? My own father, making such a lighthearted joke and then becoming flustered by his own slight impropriety... This was a sight I’d never imagined to see.

His words resonated deep within me. Nothing could or would alter our bond as father and daughter. Such bonds, though intangible, were indestructible. As I watched him sheepishly scratch his cheek, a surge of warmth flooded through me, easing the tension in my face and calming the crashing waves of anxieties and unknowns.

This warmth—like the sun’s glow on a placid sea—this must be how true contentment feels.

“Thank you, Father,” I said appreciatively. “That makes me feel so much better.” I was sure my joy was evident.

“Really?” He smiled back. “Well, that is gratifying to hear.” He nodded briefly, his eyes still twinkling with mirth.

As he signaled to a maid to refill our cups, I allowed myself to slouch with relief, sagging slightly against the plush seat. (Really only slightly.)

“Do you have time to chat?” my father went on, offering me a freshly poured cup of tea. “I’d love to hear all about how you’re getting along here in Malcosias.”

Grateful for his invitation, we delved into a delightful conversation that lasted about an hour before the time grew late. When I retired at last to my bed, the worries that had previously weighed upon my mind seemed distant and trivial, washed away by the warm seas of our mutual affection.

The next day, I was buoyed by a good mood as our royal carriage, trimmed in crimson and gold, clattered down the bustling streets of the capital. Our destination was none other than the central cathedral. After parting from my

father, we had promptly sent an urgent request for an audience to His Holiness, whose gracious agreement had been promptly returned. With time pressing down upon us, we had cleared our schedule of all previous commitments to prioritize this crucial meeting. Mingling with the nobility could wait. The Faith Council had to be established now.

I looked up at Ed, seated next to me. He looked entirely ready to nod back into sleep, rubbing blearily at his eyes as he peered out the window. Allowing myself a brief smile at his adorable antics, I returned my focus to the man in front of me—the studious silhouette of Teodore, backlit by the morning light, busily scanning through the veritable tower of documents resting on his lap. Even from my topsy-turvy perspective, words like “Saint,” “church,” and “Celestia” leaped forth from the papers, catching my attention.

“Oh. Are you studying the Celestian system of Sainthood?” I asked.

Teodore flinched a little—perhaps in distracted surprise, shaken from his scholarly reverie—then slowly raised his gaze to meet mine. Oh dear, the bags under his eyes were terribly prominent, yet I realized that this no longer seemed remarkable to me. Somehow, somewhere along the way, it seemed I’d grown accustomed to his tireless dedication.

“Yes,” he replied. “These documents detail the system of Sainthood in Celestia. I thought they might serve as a guide to us as we seek to establish our own. Duke Sanchez was kind enough to provide me with his written account.”

“Oh, I see,” I said, a little taken aback. So he’d asked my father to personally pen a dossier, not merely to select preexisting records for reference. Recalling the weary look on my father’s face this morning as he had departed via Teodore’s teleportation spell, the truth dawned on me: he had been up all through the night working on this very task. *Teodore, I do wish that you might on occasion manage to be just a bit less demanding*, I thought, a wry smile playing on my lips.

“So is it proving useful?” I continued. “I can’t imagine that the knowledge of the old power struggles between Celestia’s royal family and the ecclesiastical might of the church would prove to be terribly relevant here.”

“And you’d imagine right,” he replied. “The conflicts that led to the

establishment of the position of Saint offer little guidance to us at the present moment. However, the procedures of the trials and the societal implications do hold some value. But even then, adapting a domestic system to a global framework requires significant modifications.”

“Exactly,” Ed chimed in abruptly. “We need to show other countries the benefits, but not to the extent that we lose our leverage over them.” With a dismissive shrug and a carefree “Eh, sounds easy enough,” he turned his attention back to the scenery outside.

Teodore, too weary to summon even a modicum of frustration, simply let his shoulders slump a fraction more. *Lucky you, Ed. You’ve escaped a lecture this time.*

But my prince had indeed raised a valid point. The challenge lay in the delicate balancing act of providing enough benefits to entice nations to buy into our new paradigm while ensuring that the system wouldn’t allow them to gain so much autonomy that they could disregard the council’s directives. My worst fear was the possibility of a Saint being completely controlled by private interests, something that would completely undermine our objectives.

“Yes, well, to that end, I’m considering allowing each Saint to be counseled by their home country,” Teodore said. “Even matters of marriage could be left to the discretion of each reigning monarch.”

“That seems as if it would grant each autonomous nation quite a bit of power,” I countered, weighing his suggestion. “But I understand there’s a balance to be maintained. Do you genuinely think other nations will agree to be a part of this unfamiliar organizational structure, though?”

“The nations lagging in magical development might grumble a bit, but for the most part, yes, I think they will,” he replied. “I can almost picture their leaders now, salivating at the thought of having a Saint originate from their own lands.” His voice dropped to an amused murmur. “Of course, all support would evaporate in an instant if your true nature were to be revealed.” He then shrugged his shoulders dismissively. “But truly, there’s nothing easier to manipulate in this world than a fool sitting on a throne.”

The lack of sleep must have been getting to him; his tongue was unusually

sharp today.

“Though I’m not sure why we’re even discussing the possible opinions of state leaders,” he continued. “This is a church matter. Any lay opposition would be ineffectual at best.” His gaze drifted out the window. “Challenge the church at your peril, lest the faithful bite back,” he muttered wistfully.

With that, his little spiel drew to a close, and he stowed away his documents. Curious, I followed his gaze and realized we had arrived at the cathedral.

Already? The thought struck me with a twinge of panic. Being early was one thing, but the sudden realization that our all-important meeting was imminent sent a jolt of nerves through me. *You cannot afford to fail*, I silently urged myself, my fists clenched tight.

The carriage rolled to a gentle stop in front of the pristine white walls of the cathedral. As soon as the paladins flanking the grand entrance caught sight of the imperial coat of arms adorning our carriage, they darted inside, presumably to announce our arrival.

Had they gone to summon someone? My question was soon answered as they returned, accompanied by a clergy member. He wasn’t His Holiness, but perhaps he was someone who had been designated to guide us to him.

“Lina, your hand.” Ed’s voice pulled me from my observations just as the clergyman hobbled towards us. Startled, I realized Ed had already descended from the carriage and was extending his arm towards me, waiting for me to join him.

With Ed’s steady hand guiding me, I descended from the carriage just as the clergyman reached us. He appeared somewhat distressed, his shoulders rising and falling with labored breaths, sweat dotting his brow despite the chill of winter. “Your Imperial Highnesses!” he exclaimed, his voice shaky. “I am called David, and it is with great honor that I am appointed as your guide today. If you would be so gracious, I shall lead you forthwith to the esteemed office of the high pontiff.”

“Y-Yes, thank you,” I managed to respond, slightly taken aback by the intense formality. Observing the bowed heads of David and the paladins, I wondered if such reverence was owed to all who commanded audiences with the high

pontiff. Since they were stationed at the central cathedral, the ranks of these men were undoubtedly high, yet their deference was absolute. There was something slightly unsettling about it all.

At the reverential urging of David, our party began its trek through the grand cathedral, Ed and I hand in hand. As we traversed a pristine white corridor, more passing clergymen bowed deeply at our approach. I decided then to avoid dwelling on their reverent gestures any longer lest my thoughts unravel.

David halted abruptly in his tracks, turning to address me directly with yet more unexpected formality. “P-Princess Carolina!” he exclaimed, his voice filled with a panicked concern. “From here, we must ascend several flights of stairs. Does this suit Your Highness, or shall we summon a mage to assist?”

“Th-That’s quite all right!” I replied, my voice involuntarily echoing his anxious tone. “I am perfectly capable of climbing stairs myself!”

Internally, I bristled with indignation. What did he think of me—that I was so frail or unfit as to falter at the mere sight of stairs? His suggestion, though absurd, had been delivered with such earnest solicitude that I found myself unsure if he was genuinely concerned or if he was mocking me. Either way, my pride was decidedly stung.

“O-O-Of course, Your Highness!” David stammered back. “Then please, right this way. But should you tire, do let me know at once—I’ll summon a mage straightaway!”

That did little to clarify his opinion of me. Resigned to the mystery of his attitude, I uttered a simple word of gratitude as we moved up the stairs. After each and every step, I caught him sneaking glances back at me, as if I were some elderly woman liable at any moment to take a tumble. Or perhaps as if I were a naive toddler bumbling her way around the world for the first time. I couldn’t tell which was more patronizing, but *someone* was certainly amused by the entire ordeal, as I could clearly hear the stifled snickering of one Theodore Garcia.

I shot him a sharp glance. He struggled to compose himself. Clearing his throat, he managed to transform his laughter into an unconvincing cough, yet the grin lingered on his face, unabashed in his amusement. How dreadful of him

to take such delight at my expense!

“I can’t help but feel like a colossal joke,” I muttered under my breath.

“Don’t worry about Teo. I’ll have a word with him later,” Ed assured me.

“Oh? Before me stands a mighty prince who thinks his wit capable of contending with mine?” Teodore countered.

There was an indignant pause. “I’ll... I’ll win by attrition,” Ed finally replied.

“I appreciate the sentiment,” I said fondly, “but perhaps you should pick your battles, darling.”

Our whispered exchange seemed to go unnoticed by our guide. We shared a glance of mutual amusement, then a quiet laugh. Oddly, this small moment of levity made me feel more at ease, even with the weighty negotiations with His Holiness awaiting me just ahead.

My final few steps were light as we ascended the last flight of stairs and arrived before a grand set of double doors. A simple placard labeled “Office” was the only clue, but it was clear this was the high pontiff’s inner sanctum. As I gathered my thoughts for the weighty deliberations that awaited me, David rapped on the door three times. “Your Holiness, Princess Carolina and her entourage have arrived,” he declared, his voice resonating through the thick wood.

“Enter,” came the muffled voice from inside. With a deferential gesture, David promptly stepped aside, as if to say, *I can take you no further*.

Exchanging a glance with Ed, we moved forward in perfect unison. My heart thrummed with a mix of nerves and anticipation. Ed, appearing composed, grasped both doorknobs. After a quick confirming look at Teodore, who nodded slightly, Ed turned the handles. “Excuse us,” he announced as he pushed the doors open.

The doors swung forward, parting at the center, sweeping outwards in a graceful, mirrored arc to reveal—the high pontiff himself. He sat at his desk, adorned in his customary white cassock trimmed in gold, and he greeted us with a kind smile. Rising, he bowed deeply. “Princess Carolina, it has indeed been far too long. Prince Edward, Lord Teodore, I extend my welcome to you as

well. I have eagerly anticipated your visit. Please, come inside.”

As we stepped into the chamber, His Holiness immediately began bustling about, preparing tea. *Your Holiness, there’s really no need for you to fuss over such things!* I thought, tempted to give voice to my protests. Yet the genuine joy on his face as he moved around the room stopped me from doing so; it was clear he took pleasure in these gestures of hospitality. Allowing myself a soft smile at his warm welcome, I took my seat along with the others just as the doors closed behind us with a definitive click.

His Holiness spoke first. “May I start by expressing how pleased I am that you’ve made time to visit, Princess Carolina? I imagine your schedule has been just as hectic as mine. How have you been keeping yourself?”

“Thank you for asking, Your Holiness,” I responded with sincerity. “I’ve been doing very well, both physically and in mastering my Divinity.”

“Oh!” he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with admiration. “That is wonderful to hear. And please, do help yourselves to the tea and cookies. They are meant for you.” With careful hands, he arranged a place for each of us at the table, then fetched forth a tin of butter cookies from a nearby shelf, unwrapping it and placing it within easy reach. We each expressed our gratitude for his generosity as we selected a cookie.

The cookies were a delight—rich, crumbly, and sweetly fragrant, just as butter cookies should be. They were so delightful, in fact, that I was tempted to inquire where he had acquired them.

As we savored our first few bites and sips, His Holiness allowed the peaceful ambience to linger before broaching the subject of our visit. “Please explain how I may assist you all today,” he said after a pause, his voice carrying a hint of levity. “Given the distinguished company present, I can hardly believe this visit is merely for casual conversation.” He paused, then added as an aside, “But of course, I’d welcome a leisurely chat just as much as a consultation of consequence,” his eyes moving thoughtfully from one face to another.

His tone was light, his smile easy, but there was a palpable earnestness in his gaze that suggested he sensed the weight of the moment just as we did. After a brief, uncertain exchange of glances among us, as if we were silently

deliberating our next move, we came to a tacit and wordless agreement.

Standing and stepping forward with the practiced ease of a designated spokesman, Teodore left his pleasant teatime behind, his peridot eyes gleaming sharply as he prepared to address His Holiness directly. “As you’ve surmised, Your Holiness, our visit concerns a matter of great urgency. We felt it imperative to speak with you directly.”

“Very well,” His Holiness responded, his voice sonorant with contemplative interest. “If it’s assistance you seek, I will do what I can for you. What is the matter at hand?”

Teodore inhaled deeply, steeling himself for the gravity of his next words. “To speak frankly, Your Holiness, we are here to seek your aid in safeguarding Princess Carolina.” With this bold proclamation, he quickly bowed his head, acknowledging the audacity of our request.



A flicker of concern crossed His Holiness's face. "Does someone threaten the well-being of Her Highness?"

Teodore nodded solemnly and began to unravel an account of the recent troubling events. He detailed the actions of Archbishop Mills and our intentions to establish the Faith Council. Throughout the explanation, His Holiness maintained an intent focus, his gaze lowered, his posture rigid. Despite his efforts to grasp the full implications of Teodore's words, it was evident he struggled to keep pace with the unfolding revelations. The creation of a new church council was a daunting enough task, but the request to assist in addressing the clandestine actions of a high-ranking clergy member like Archbishop Mills undoubtedly complicated his involvement in the situation.

As Teodore finished his explanation of our presence here, Ed and I stood as well, offering our silent plea to His Holiness. He paused for a moment, deep in thought, before addressing the matter of Archbishop Mills. "On that matter," he began, "I am prepared to take action, provided of course that you are able to present sufficient evidence. However, regarding the establishment of this 'Faith Council,' I must reserve any commitment to such a project at this very moment. This will require discussion with other members of the clergy. While I promise to advocate for its merits, I must be clear that I cannot guarantee more than that at this juncture."

"Of course, Your Holiness," Teodore acknowledged with a nod. "Your cooperation is all that we seek. Given that the formation of the Faith Council could be seen as a blasphemous overextension of royal power, we anticipate some resistance from within the church."

His Holiness hung his head dejectedly, seemingly weighed down by the constraints of his position. In response, Teodore shook his own head slightly. Sensing the moment, both Ed and I expressed our gratitude for the willingness of His Holiness to go to such efforts on our behalf. We recognized that what we were proposing was akin to initiating a new religious movement, and that a degree of opposition from the established order was to be expected.

"Rest assured, Your Holiness," Teodore pressed on. "Should any member of the clergy oppose you, you need only call on me to handle them personally. I'm

certain that after a *brief conversation with me*, they can be made to understand the council's virtues. Civil communication is, after all, the virtue that elevates us above the rest of the natural order."

His words, though light, undulated with an unsettling sense of foreboding, one amplified by the width of his smile and the unnatural buoyancy of his mood. I couldn't quite pinpoint what Theodore had in mind, but I was certain that his idea of a "brief conversation" would be neither brief nor conversational.

Turning to Ed, I voiced my concern in a low murmur. "We're certain that we shall always keep Theodore on our side, right? I'd hate to make an enemy out of him."

"Probably," Ed replied quietly, his gaze lingering thoughtfully on Theodore. "It's hard to say what might lurk behind that dubious smile of his."

"Oh? My smile is dubious, is it? Certainly some would argue that any smile is better than none—wouldn't you agree, Princess? Since my face is actually capable of expressing a full spectrum of emotion (unlike some overly stoic princes I could name), I'd be happy to entertain any disparaging remarks about my smile at a later date."

"No, that's... That's okay," Ed said. Faced with the threat of a lecture, my husband surrendered at once. His eyes wandered, searching for a safe haven, and he found it in the gentle, understanding smile of His Holiness.

"You all seem to get along very well with each other, don't you?" His Holiness observed, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

"Well, Teo and I have been friends since childhood, and Lina is my darling wife."

"Ed!" I exclaimed, mortified by his casualness. "His Holiness doesn't want to hear such—"

But I was cut off by a deep, resonant laugh from the high pontiff, a sound so hearty and unexpected that it stopped me in my tracks. "Darling wife, you say! Well, isn't that wonderful. It brings me great joy to see such harmony between the young couple."

I could feel my cheeks burning, a flush of embarrassment warming my face. Hastily, I brought a hand up to shield my reddening cheeks. It was mortifying, yet undeniably sweet! Being called “darling wife” by Ed filled my heart with a bubbling joy, but I wished he had chosen a more appropriate occasion for such endearments. Right in the middle of an audience with the high pontiff was hardly the ideal moment to express private affections!

While I grappled with my mix of emotions, Teodore seized the moment to redirect our discussion towards our primary concern. “So, Your Holiness, may we interpret your reactions as support for our cause?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Whatever is necessary to safeguard our beloved child of God. This is both divine will and my most cherished wish.” Placing a hand solemnly over his chest, he nodded decisively, offering us his unwavering support.

A collective sigh of relief swept through our side of the coffee table, and with a profound sense of dissipating tension, we all eased back into our seats.

The first element of our plan had been set into motion, and with that, my portion of the responsibilities was complete. The burden of action now shifted to the high pontiff and Teodore, who would carry forward the negotiations with the clergy to forge a joint council between church and state. God knows I wouldn’t be useful there, not with my absence of charisma, inability to sway hearts and minds, and lack of cunning to influence the actions of others.

Teodore steered the conversation forward again. “We are set to present our plan to the aristocracy at a noble assembly in just a few days. Would it be possible for you to discuss it with the clergy before that time?”

“I will raise it at our upcoming regular meeting,” the high pontiff responded. “It is at that very meeting, however, where we will need to manage to convince a majority of clergy members.”

“I see,” Teodore replied thoughtfully. “Then we cannot afford to simply wait. Very well, leave it to me, Your Holiness; I will make the necessary arrangements before then.” As he spoke, the corners of his lips slowly drew up into a foreboding smile. By any definition of the word, his expression at that moment was most assuredly a smile, but his eyes... Those peridot eyes, glinting behind

lenses, resembled those of an apex predator on the prowl. I had to stop myself from clasping my hands in a silent prayer for the clergy members who might soon succumb to the venomous bite of Theodore’s rhetoric—and a prayer for me as well, so that I might never find myself in the clutches of his proverbial claws.

Teodore swiftly shot up from his seat. “Well, it has been an absolute delight, and while we would relish the opportunity to continue this conversation, we mustn’t overstay our welcome and detain His Holiness any further.”

Ed and I followed suit, smoothing down our respective attires and ensuring our appearances were beyond reproach. Facing His Holiness directly, I ventured, “Thank you ever so much for granting us an audience at such short notice, Your Holiness. Might we have the honor of hosting you at dinner in the near future?”

His laughter filled the room, resonant and sincere. “Indeed, I shall look forward to it,” he declared with such a genuine warmth that my casual invitation suddenly seemed a poignant gesture.

As we prepared to take our leave, each of us offered our parting words. “Farewell, Your Holiness,” I said respectfully, my voice carrying a blend of respect and gratitude.

“Our discussion has been a fruitful one. Until we meet again, Your Holiness.” Ed added his thanks to mine, his tone reflecting both deference and anticipation.

“With deepest appreciation for sharing your precious time,” Teodore concluded, his words measured and heartfelt.

Courtesy costs nothing but buys everything, as the saying goes, so we endeavored to leave a lasting impression of our respect. We bowed slightly, our heads dipped in veneration, while His Holiness regarded us with nothing but kindness and understanding.

“You are all most welcome to return whenever you wish. I eagerly anticipate our next meeting.”



After concluding our negotiations with the high pontiff, we made our way back to the royal castle. As we awaited the outcome of the church's deliberations, Theodore, Ed, and I dispersed, each dedicated to our individual duties. Three days passed in this manner. On the fourth, I found myself secluded in my chamber within the Emerald Palace, half-heartedly flipping through the pages of a history book I had borrowed from the palace library.

I let out a subdued sigh. The days had melded into a blur of dull monotony. Every plan I'd had was put on hold as we prioritized the looming threat of Archbishop Mills. Yet, truthfully, my own focus was scattered at best. This period had become less about strategy and more of a test of my patience, as I relied on those around me to shoulder the burden of action. In this need for patience, I felt myself faltering. A restless anxiety gnawed at me, intensified by a deep-seated sense of helplessness.

Confined to my room, my usual engagements with the nobility and efforts to forge new alliances were stalled. As I sat there, enveloped in the stately comfort of my surroundings, the luxury around me only sharpened the sting of guilt that stemmed from my enforced idleness. Outside my door, life moved relentlessly forward as everyone else actively contributed to our cause.

My cause, in fact. This whole debacle was because of me. That realization weighed heavily on me, and in an attempt to find some solace, I reached for my tea, hoping its fragrant heat might ease the tightness that had wound itself around my nerves.

"I hope this storm of danger blows over soon," I muttered to myself, the words barely a whisper.

The tea helped not a whit. My frustration deepened, my brow furrowing as I confronted my own powerlessness. In a moment of irritation, I snapped the book shut, the sound echoing sharply in the quiet room. At that very moment, a deliberate knock sounded at the door—three distinct taps, in keeping with proper etiquette. Whoever my mystery guest was, I knew that it wasn't Ed, as he only ever knocked twice.

But who other than Ed could visit the Emerald Palace without prior arrangement? I glanced towards Owen, stationed by the wall, seeking

assurance; he nodded subtly, signaling no concerns.

Well, if he didn't see a problem, then neither should I. "Enter," I called out. Handing my book to Marisa, I straightened myself slightly. As I prepared myself to entertain anyone and everyone who might walk in through those doors, they swung open to reveal...the exact opposite of anyone and everyone, the striking blond lord himself: Theodore.

Of course. Why wouldn't it be Theodore? Owen's lack of concern suddenly made perfect sense. Although I initially felt a pang of disappointment for having needlessly stirred my anxieties, my spirits lifted at the sight of him. Despite the circumstances, I found myself genuinely pleased to see him.

"Theodore, what a surprise," I said cheerfully. "I heard you've been terribly busy since our meeting with the high pontiff, so to what do I owe this sudden visit?"

I decided not to focus too much on the casual nature of his arrival. Theodore, of all people, wouldn't have come to see me without a compelling reason, and certainly not at the risk of committing a social faux pas. There was no need to lecture him on proprieties he already understood far better than I.

"Your Highness, it's good to see you," he said with a polite nod. "I apologize for arriving unannounced, and I thank you for your graciousness in receiving me." With his usual flair, he crossed one arm over his chest and bowed deeply. As he straightened up, that all-too-familiar dubious smile was back on his face.

"Yes, that's quite all right," I replied. "I had little in the way of prior engagements today in any case."

"Thank you, Your Highness."

Still he wouldn't let his sense of propriety drop away, which coaxed a rueful smile from me. Nonetheless, I gestured for him to come in and make himself comfortable. We settled across from each other just as Marisa, with her usual impeccable timing, served tea for us both.

"So," I began, "may I ask the reason for your visit? There must be one, correct?"

His smile broadened ever so slightly, an acknowledgment of my

perceptiveness. This dubious, no, this *striking* man, took a moment to lift his cup. “Yes, there is indeed a reason. And it’s a matter of great urgency, or I wouldn’t have knocked down the walls of the Emerald Palace to see you.”

“A matter of great urgency?” Confusion laced through my voice. It couldn’t have been *that* urgent, considering how relaxed he’d been when he’d walked in here, and how composed he still seemed to be.

“Yes,” he said again simply.

Urgent, but not pressing, perhaps? Was that even a distinction worth noting? Deciding to push for clarity, I asked, “Yes, then... Well, what is this important matter?” I brought my tea to my lips, my gaze fixed on him, waiting for his response.

His peridot eyes narrowed, just a smidgen, as if delighted the conversation was unfolding exactly as he had anticipated. “It appears,” he began, pausing for effect, “that Archbishop Mills has left Celestia.”

My cup nearly slipped from my fingers. *Archbishop Mills has left Celestia?* I thought, shocked. *For the first time since his assignment, if my memory serves? And so abruptly? But why?*

A whirlwind of questions raced through my mind as I struggled to keep my gaze focused. Across from me, Theodore seemed utterly unfazed by the gravity of his own announcement, casually reaching for another biscuit.

“You’re sure of this?” I pressed.

“Unfortunately, yes. If the reports from my men are to be trusted.”

“I see... But why?”

Theodore’s assurance about the reliability of his sources—direct reports from the Pyreborn—normally would have comforted me. However, in this case it only intensified the unease spreading through me. My eyes darted apprehensively around the room as I tried to process the implications.

“While we don’t have all the details yet,” he continued, “Prince Gilbert and I suspect that he may be seeking a meeting with you, Your Highness.”

My breath caught in my throat, a startled exclamation of “what?!” dying

before it could escape. I could only stare at Theodore in shock, grappling with the magnitude of his revelation.

The archbishop seeks to meet me? And he's left his bishop's throne in Celestia to do so? The suddenness of it all was disorienting, not to mention deeply puzzling. Why would he come here, poking the sleeping giant that was the empire, unless he...

...intended to attempt to persuade me to return with him?

The realization hit me like a physical blow, sending a chill down my spine. My eyes widened with concern. "He wants to turn me to his side," I murmured, half to myself, half to Theodore. "Make it easier to plead his case for my return."

"Most likely," he said, his own expression turning troubled at last.

Yes, his face seemed troubled, but at the same time, his demeanor remained composed, free of any visible anxiety or impatience. Accustomed to handling crises of this magnitude as the vice commander of a military order, he seemed unfazed. Observing his calm, I felt a twinge of embarrassment at my own reaction. *How naive I must seem to him, I thought, losing my composure like this.*

The embarrassment quickly overtook my initial anxiety. Seeking a moment of respite, I searched for it vainly in the depths of my teacup. "Assuming he has indeed left the country, and assuming his reasons are as we suspect...what should we do, Theodore?"

Archbishop Mills had not been formally charged with any crime, which left us without a straightforward justification to block his entry into Malcosias. Furthermore, we couldn't exactly deny an archbishop entry into the royal castle or an audience with me either. This was not to say that we couldn't come up with any number of reasons to deny his access, but it would hardly be strategic to do so. Rejecting his request could prompt him not to abandon his plans but in fact to pursue them more aggressively, perhaps even accelerating his timetable. With our investigation into his potential criminal activities still underway, time was our most valuable asset. Any rash action that might drive him to take drastic measures could undermine all our efforts.

A new sense of duty stirred within me, prompting a firm resolution to address

this threat effectively. Noticing my resolve, Teodore chuckled softly. “Your Highness, there’s no need to look so tense,” he reassured me, his voice carrying a hint of amusement. “We have countermeasures—or perhaps a work-around, to be more precise—already at our disposal.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes, really. So relax, Your Highness.” He gave an exaggerated nod of his head, as if to emphasize his words. (Which he truly didn’t need to do; advice from the esteemed Lord Teodore was, to me at least, as good as gold.)

He continued. “Our plan—though I hesitate to even call it that—is for you to meet with the archbishop.”

“What?” The words slipped out in a squeak of startlement. It was the only way I could contain the sheer bewilderment that had washed over me.

The esteemed Lord Teodore bestowed upon me a gracious smile. “When the archbishop requests an audience, don’t deny him—accept it. Treat him with all the respect due to a distinguished guest. And when he seeks your support, simply ask for some time to consider. If you can manage that, we will be in an excellent position. Ideally, we’d use this chance to gather more information, but I’ll refrain from asking too much. For now, our primary aim is merely to buy time.”

He was right to say that his “plan” barely qualified as something worthy of the term. This concerned me. From the sound of things, Teodore wanted *me* to be the cornerstone of his strategy. Yet, there was an underlying issue: it would be utterly improper for me to meet with a man who wasn’t my betrothed or a suitor in private. But perhaps an exception could be made? He was a man of the cloth, after all.

No, that is hardly the problem! Even if society might find this meeting to be an acceptable one, I certainly do not! How could I possibly engage the archbishop in conversation, even if my role was merely to serve as a diversion?

“T-Teodore, might there be...another approach?” I said. “Preferably one that doesn’t solely depend on me entertaining His Grace the Archbishop alone?”

I chose my words carefully. *Very* carefully so as not to provoke the beast that

lay within the blond man before me.

Teodore smiled. His mouth drew an elegant curve—stopping just short of his peridot eyes.

Oh, no, I thought. The counterattack was imminent.

“A *different* plan?” he repeated, his tone dripping with a peculiar emphasis. “I thought I could rely on you to simply meet with the archbishop, hear him out, and tactfully postpone any commitment. But apparently I was mistaken to think I could depend on you for something so straightforward.”

“Um, well, you see—”

“Am I truly asking so much? Have I misconstrued the utter simplicity of my request?”

“Um, um...”

Teodore’s menacing presence overwhelmed me, reducing me to an unresisting puddle. My eyes darted away, seeking any refuge from his imposing figure.

As tears welled up, threatening to spill over, I heard Teodore exhale a heavy sigh. “Your Highness, I have placed my utmost trust in your unique ability to handle this situation. Are you telling me that my faith is misplaced?”

Trust. Ability. Faith. Teodore words struck precisely where they’d sway me the most. I wrung my hands, wracked by a storm of conflicting emotions.

Don’t fall for his manipulation. Don’t let him sway you, I repeated silently, desperate to resist the guilt he was layering on me. But the pressure was immense. I couldn’t bear it!

Damn you, Teodore!

I faced Teodore with a look of protest, torn between my relief at having him on our side and my reluctance to feed his ego. Catching my indignant expression, he merely shrugged it off with an unfazed smile. “It seems you’ve made up your mind, Your Highness,” he observed. “So, I must ask you once more: can I count on you to handle Archbishop Mills?”

His relentless repetition of his request was inevitable. I sighed heavily, the

sound filling the room. Gathering my composure, I adopted a look of resignation and sat up properly. “Yes, you can count on my cooperation. When is he expected to arrive?”

It was an innocuous question, one I allowed him to mull over while I reached for a biscuit. Traveling from Celestia to Malcosias took at least a week, not accounting for any encounters with mana-beasts, bandits, or detours taken along the way. I assumed these factors might delay the archbishop slightly, though with the quality of guards he could afford, probably not by much. *At least, I thought, this might give me some time to prepare.*

Teodore considered my question for a moment. “Yes, well, the archbishop is traveling with a mage, so it’s conceivable that he could arrive as early as...tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow? I see. Then I will—” I blanched. “Wait, tomorrow?!”

My voice escalated well beyond the confines of polite conversation. *Tomorrow?!* The room seemed to spin as the reality of the urgency hit me.

Suddenly, leisurely snacking seemed absurdly inappropriate. I had to prepare for the archbishop’s imminent arrival! *Though...should I prepare? Would it be suspicious if I were too ready for his arrival? A balance! I have to strike a balance!*

Panic surged through me, sweeping away the dull monotony I had lamented just moments ago. Now I found myself longing for that simpler, quieter time. *Bring back my boredom! Bring it back now!*

Where do I even start?! I agonized, caught in a whirlwind of indecision as the reality of a looming confrontation pressed down upon me.



(Archbishop Mills)

I arrived in the grand Empire of Malcosias only two days after my departure from Celestia. I had chosen to travel in a carriage much less ostentatiously adorned than those favored by the nobility, and nestled within its confines, I watched a bustling avenue in the capital crawl by my window. Flanking the

carriage, my two hired mages marched solemnly (their services had expedited our journey quite remarkably). Their magic, though costly, had granted me additional time to indulge in the empire's luxuries. Given the considerable sum I had expended for their arcane skills, it would have been folly indeed to forgo even the least of such pleasures.

As I peered out the window, the formidable Ruby Imperial Palace loomed ahead, an edifice as majestic and daunting as the sovereignty it housed. Somewhere within its walls lay the singular, tantalizing purpose of my visit: Princess Carolina. If only I could secure her allegiance, my position and legacy would be as unassailable as bedrock—the exalted seat of high pontiff might even someday be mine to attain. With such power, I would have the entire church beneath my sway—and under my complete control!

Of course, that lofty plan hinged on the assumption that Carolina's return could be handled delicately enough to be considered legitimate. Since her union with Prince Edward, Carolina had ascended to the rank of princess consort, complicating her straightforward return to Celestia. In the most dire scenario, I might even need to see to her repatriation through rather...unsavory means—an act that would surely sever my ties with the church. But if it meant having Carolina and her Divinity under my control, I'd gladly cast the entire faith aside. Wealth would flow to me as easily as the tides flowed up a sandy beach, and nations would clamor to offer me refuge. Yes, as long as I had Carolina at my beck and call, it mattered little which way the coin of fate fell; my fortune was assured.

However, the pivotal question loomed: how could I sway Carolina to come to my side of her own volition? It was this critical inquiry that compelled me to visit her in person. I knew that this challenge would be made all the more difficult by the guile and mendacity of the Celestian nobility; I could not imagine that Carolina retained fond memories of her homeland. Nevertheless, a faint ember of homesickness might yet linger, one I could nurture into a leaping flame. Moreover, she had married into a foreign nation, accompanied by not a single confidant. Her isolation was surely all-consuming. Yes, it was this solitude that I needed to exploit—her loneliness, my foremost tool of persuasion.

My lips twisted into a wicked arc. A surge of anticipation filled my chest as I

leaned closer to the window, summoning one of the attendants who paced beside my conveyance. “Dispatch a messenger to the royal castle,” I ordered briskly. “Inform them that I seek an audience with Her Highness Princess Carolina.”

“At once, Your Grace.”

With a swift nod, he was absorbed at once into the bustling street scene. I reclined in my seat, watching his figure blend into the crowd and shrink into the distance. I knew that the earliest I could possibly hope to meet the princess would be tomorrow. Until then, I would secure lodgings near the castle and bide my time... After all, Malcosias had so many pleasures to offer.



The following day, as I had foreseen, I received word that I had been granted my requested audience, and I was escorted to the Emerald Palace. The residence of the princess was as resplendent as I had imagined, its grandeur far surpassing the humble adornments of Celestia’s royal castle—at least from the outside. For reasons that had not been revealed to me, my guide, a maid with jet-black hair, had led me not to the palace itself but to a gazebo in its secluded rear gardens. Perhaps the castle’s interior held secrets not meant for the eyes of an outsider like myself. Nonetheless, she had instructed me to wait, and so wait I did.

Eager to stave off the wintry chill, I reached for my cup of tea. As I did so, it occurred to me that the air within the gazebo was quite warm. Unusually so. It was as though I sat before a roaring hearth, despite the fact that I was irrefutably outdoors. Magic, undoubtedly. I dismissed the curiosity with a shrug, finding the warmth quite agreeable, and I settled in to wait.

I took a sip from the porcelain cup. The smooth, rich flavor of the black tea tantalized my palate. It was then that I caught sight of a solitary female figure emerging from the palace. A shawl lay draped on her shoulders, the breeze gently teasing her ashen hair, too dark to be called silver, too pale to be likened to a raven’s wing. *Could it be? My precious bearer of Divinity? Yes, it must be her—Princess Carolina herself.*

The rumors among the Celestian aristocracy had painted her as a rather plain-

looking girl, but the reality was quite different. While she lacked her sister Flora's flamboyant grace, there was a quiet, intrinsic beauty about her. In another life, absent her formidable sibling, she might have been widely celebrated by that very same aristocracy.

But such are the whims of fate, aren't they? I mused as I rose to my feet. Plastering a practiced smile onto my lips, I stepped forward, cloaking my sinister intentions in feigned courtesy. "Princess Carolina, it is indeed a privilege. My deepest thanks for granting me this audience. Do you know who I am?"

"Of course, Archbishop," she responded, her smile as pleasant as it was measured. "After all, Your Grace oversees the entire Celestian church."

I forced out a laugh. "I am most honored that I live within your recall, Your Highness. An honor indeed!"

Continuing to smile, I gestured for her to take a seat, and I settled down once again only after she had comfortably done so. An invisible barrier seemed to crystallize between us. Was she nervous—or was she wary of me? It was perhaps a natural defensive response to an unexpected visit from one of her former countrymen. Those spiteful aristocrats of Celestia—they'd alienated her with remarkable thoroughness. Eager to lighten the mood, I attempted to launch into some innocuous small talk.

"Your Highness, how are you finding life in the empire?" I asked her with an easy smile. "I myself am most certain that I would find such a transition quite challenging."

Her expression softened subtly, and the corners of her ruby-like eyes crinkled ever so slightly. "Yes, well, it has indeed been a bit of an adjustment, just as you say. The culture, the history, it's all so different. However, the imperial family has been exceptionally welcoming and supportive. Their warmth has made my days here truly gratifying."

Her response left me in a quandary. Either she was an incredibly skilled actor, or—and this was the more problematic conclusion—she was speaking from the heart. If she was in fact finding fulfillment in her new life, she might have little reason to entertain my propositions. Despite this, I reminded myself that in the midst of a hunt, only the foolish pause to take stock, thus losing their prey.

“That is sincerely wonderful to hear,” I responded, masking my concern with enthusiasm. “But I wonder. Do you truly never long for the familiar skies of your homeland?”

At the mere mention of Celestia, she visibly tensed, a faint “huh?” escaping her lips.



Perfect. Just perfect. It was clear to me that the seeds of homesickness still lingered within her; I was certain that I could coax those seeds into glorious blossom. Now was the moment to intensify my approach. “Your Highness, might I presume you’re informed of the ongoing crises afflicting Celestia?”

“I... Yes, I’m aware. Of course.”

“So tell me: has anyone yet informed you that *you* are the key to Celestia’s salvation?” I leaned in closer and lowered my voice. “I cannot speak at length of such things in our present company, but please, Your Highness, know that you possess a special power—a special power that is indispensable for restoring peace and order to your country.”

“My country? A special power?” Her voice was a soft murmur of confusion, her gaze fixed on me with a reserved but probing scrutiny.

It appeared that she was utterly unaware of her power. I reasoned that it would be in my best interest to not yet reveal its nature as Divinity. Should she inadvertently disclose this information to the Malcosians, it could spark considerable complications, especially if the imperial family were to catch wind of it.

“Yes, yes!” I continued, pressing on with fervor. “Celestia needs you—nay, *requires* you to safeguard it! Yet here you sit, restrained, held back by the bonds of the imperial family. But if you choose to stand up for your homeland, so direly afflicted by your absence, and aid us in our darkest hour, you need only speak the word, and the entire church will stand with you. Princess Carolina—what do you say?”

With a dramatic gesture, I clasped my hands before me as if in prayer. Carolina’s reaction was immediate—her eyes widened in alarm; her brows furrowed into a line of deep concern. Had I overplayed my hand? She had been oblivious to her own power just moments ago, and now I feared that perhaps I had pushed too forcefully too soon. I had in my impatience pulled on the line before the hook was set, and now she seemed on the verge of slipping away from my net.

I observed her closely, gauging what her next move might be, when she hesitantly parted her lips again. “M-My apologies, Your Grace. As you can see,

I'm a bit...at a loss. This is all quite overwhelming, and I don't believe that a decision of this magnitude should be made in haste. Could you...perhaps allow me some time to reflect?"

Her plea did indeed seem to be in earnest, her expression taut with genuine confusion and concern. *Very well*, I reassured myself, letting out a long, soft exhale. Quite frankly, I would have vastly preferred her to give me an answer here and now, but long experience had taught me the virtues of patience. A skilled hunter knows when to retreat—this lesson had been etched into me after my missteps with Claudia, the former Saint. That was not a disaster I was eager to repeat. With calculated perseverance, I would earn Carolina's trust and deftly puppet her as I desired.

Reassuring myself that her lack of outright rejection was a positive sign, I quelled my eagerness. "Of course, Your Highness. Take all the time you need. When you are prepared, please convey your decision by letter to the Celestian church. I eagerly anticipate a favorable response."

Mustering the most benign smile I could manage, I rose from my seat, smoothing the front of my robes in preparation to depart with all the grace that befitted an archbishop of the church.

Chapter Two

(Carolina)

I exhaled a long, slow breath. Only when Archbishop Mills's form had fully retreated into the distance did I allow myself a moment's reprieve, sinking deeper into the embrace of the ornate chair. My hands curled tensely around one another, the chill of apprehension still lingering in my fingertips. Despite the overwhelming nerves, I had succeeded—I had secured the time I needed without so much as a suspicious glance from the archbishop. It had been a blessedly brief encounter, lasting not even thirty minutes, yet it'd stretched on like an endless winter's night. The clergyman had been unexpectedly obliging, which had helped me avoid any blunders throughout the course of our exchange.

As I basked in the warm embrace of the gazebo, a wave of relief washed over me. Just then, two figures emerged from the palace, calling out to me.

"Great job, Lina," my prince said with a smile. "He swallowed your story whole."

"Yes, quite the feat of improvisation," Lord Theodore briskly agreed. "The only fly in the ointment was your apparent wariness, but it did in the end seem rather effective, so who am I to fault your methods?"

Ed, as always, was supportive and warm. Theodore, on the other hand, was about as accommodating as a biting frost. Would it be so difficult for him to offer praise as freely as my husband? Yet I knew it was futile to hope for what was not in his nature. A rueful smile found its way onto my lips as I pondered this enduring truth.

As they joined me in my little haven, Ed clasped my hands in his, enveloping my frigid fingers with the heat of his affection. "You're freezing," he said, his thumbs caressing my skin softly. "Was it not warm enough in here?" With a flourish reminiscent of a conductor raising his baton, he twisted his fingers,

summoning a surge of magic that enveloped the gazebo. The temperature rose, swiftly transitioning from a gentle spring breeze to the intensity of a midsummer's day.

I managed a wry smile, as touched by the warmth of the gesture as I was overwhelmed by the warmth of the air. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, prompting me to shed my shawl, yet I endured the swelter with a light heart, reluctant to dampen his spirits. "Thank you, Ed, but it's all right. Perhaps we should head inside before—"

"Your Highness," Teodore cut in, his tone a mix of amusement and exasperation. "This is precisely the moment to express yourself. If you don't tell this buffoon—pardon, His Highness—that he's overdone things as usual, then how will he learn from his mistakes?" He seemed more exasperated than upset as he said this, dramatically producing a handkerchief from his pocket and fanning himself with exaggerated flair.

A hint of a pout puffed out Ed's bottom lip. "I am perfectly capable of more subtly modulating the temperature if I care to do so. It was just that in this case, I didn't. Lina's hands were like ice, and I thought it better to heat them up all at once."

"And it is not your intent I question, but rather your methods," Teodore countered. "Surely there are more judicious ways of warming your princess than throwing her into an oven?"

In response to this last bit of flawless reasoning from Teodore, Ed clamped his mouth shut, not a whisper of retort breaking his resigned silence. With a slight wave of his hand, the magic encapsulating the gazebo dissipated, and the brisk embrace of the outside chill swept in. *Oh, Ed, trying to outwit Teodore is a fruitless quest, and I can't help but wish you'd spare yourself the effort...*

Nevertheless, observing their banter was undeniably entertaining, and I found myself not minding in the slightest if Ed continued to throw himself against the unassailable wall of Teodore's wit. A light giggle escaped me, a reflexive expression of the comfort their familiar camaraderie had brought me since our earliest days together. I took Ed's hand firmly. "Let's head inside now, before all of Ed's hard work in warming me is rendered moot."

Ed nodded, his earlier annoyance melting away as he synchronized his steps with mine. Theodore followed at a leisurely pace, and together the three of us made our way back to the palace, eventually reaching my chambers. We settled into the familiar comfort of the plush seats, and though there was no urgent matter demanding our attention, none of us seemed inclined to go our separate ways just yet. On a whim, we rang for tea. Soon enough we found ourselves clasping cups of Marisa's finest, our conversation meandering through light topics. Although we spoke of nothing of consequence, everything we discussed felt imbued with a subtle and comforting significance.

Perhaps it was the immediacy of my earlier meeting with the archbishop that lent an additional sense of solace to our gathering, or maybe it was simply the relative rarity of finding even a moment during which all three of us could be together like this, as we had so often been in the weeks leading up to my marriage. As the time slipped by, I found myself cherishing this reprieve, hoping that the complications with the archbishop would soon be behind us, allowing for more opportunities for idle conversation and precious moments with my loved ones.

"Ah, speaking of the archbishop, how is Prince Gilbert's investigation progressing?" The question slipped from my lips as suddenly as the thought had struck me. Theodore's gaze sharpened, a flicker of recollection crossing his features.

"It's rather premature to draw any conclusions, given that I dispatched His Highness to Celestia just the other day," he replied. "However, I wouldn't be at all surprised to learn that his mission has been a stellar success. Especially with our men by his side," he added.

Theodore seemed confident, which was reassuring, although that same confidence inspired him to begin worrying at once about next steps. He transitioned into a litany of murmured complaints about the logistical challenges ahead and the strain upon his magical resources involved in teleporting potential witnesses. "I'm already stretched thin as is," he concluded with a sigh, ending his quiet tirade. I responded with a polite smile. Perhaps I ought to have said something comforting, but the opportunity slipped away when Marisa returned, rolling a cart laden with additional treats.

My eyes danced over a sumptuous spread of cakes, macarons, other delicacies, and—a single letter. How peculiar. Could that be Marisa’s correspondence, set there for her own convenience? But I could hardly imagine she, of all people, would err by placing such a personal document so conspicuously. As I studied the letter intently, the raven-haired beauty rolled the cart to a stop next to the tea table. I watched as her hands reached towards the cakes—then passed them by and picked up the letter instead.

“Pardon me,” Marisa said. “This is a letter from the church, addressed to Her Highness Princess Carolina.”

“From the church? To me?”

Surprised as I was, I nevertheless found myself naturally gravitating towards the letter, my fingers closing over the smooth parchment. I glanced down at the envelope—in neat handwriting, the name flowed across the paper: Melvin Clark White. The wax seal was pressed into the angelic mark reserved for the personal communications of His Holiness. *Well, that confirms that.*

“A letter from the church at this time likely signifies one thing,” Teodore said. “It must be a report of the conclusions drawn at the regular meeting of the clergy. If memory serves, they convened just yesterday morning.”

“The church has reached a decision, then?” Ed added. “Go on, Lina, read it.”

“Right...”

Their sharp, curious gazes urged me on. With trembling hands, I delicately broke the angelic seal and unfolded the paper within. A wave of nerves engulfed me as I sat poised to peruse the message, my breath catching in my throat.

What I read shocked me.

“The church has voted to approve the formation of the Faith Council...by unanimous decision,” I breathed.

The emotions swirling inside of me as I announced the conclusion—the joy, the incredulity, the sheer relief—left my senses reeling. I slumped back into my seat, letting forth a breath I hadn’t even known I was holding.

Thank goodness. Honestly, thank goodness!

In my own estimations, the likelihood that the church would be willing to lend their assistance in the matter had been middling at best. While it hadn't been a complete shot in the dark, the risk of the vote failing and undermining our plans had been a very real concern.

"Well, that is indeed a relief," Teodore said. "I did what I could where I could, but my admittedly extensive influence was far from a guarantee."

Ed's release of tension was palpable as well. "And with that, we've accomplished Father's mission," he said, his joy bubbling up from within, enough to even crinkle his eyes into a genuine smile. "We're off to a good start. Now all that's left is to formally establish the council and consolidate Lina's position."

"And to do so," Teodore interjected, "we will need to pass the motion at the noble assembly next week. Let's try not to count our chickens before they hatch, Your Highness."

Teodore's words, though cynical, rang true. It was far too soon to lower our guard. The assembly would be convening as early as next week, a direct result of the empress's diligent arrangements. Our plan was to introduce the Faith Council as a last-minute motion on the day itself—a plan that would both prevent early leaks of information and catch the nobility off guard. By compelling them to render their judgment in haste without allotting time to grasp the full implications of the council's existence, we stood the highest chance of success...but the flip side of this coin was that we would be going into the assembly equally blind. Should any noble discern our motives and mount a challenge, we would need to be ready to counter swiftly. Teodore was correct: complacency was not an option, especially not at this nascent stage of our endeavors.

Fueled by the pressure of this critical juncture, a renewed resolve crystallized within me. My fists clenched in determination, bracing for any outcome, prepared to face whatever the future might hold.

(Prince Gilbert)

As preparations for the Faith Council's establishment edged ever closer to fruition, my illegal trespass into the heart of Celestia via Theodore's teleportation magic was just beginning. (Though it must be said that my entry was illegal only in the most pedantic of senses—King Phillips was aware of my presence and had sanctioned my clandestine arrival himself.)

Discretion was, however, paramount. In investigating the dubious dealings of an archbishop, there would be no better way to alert him and ruin everything than by parading the first prince of Malcosias across national borders. Now that I was safely ensconced within the secluded confines of one of the king's estates, I was devoting myself to the scrutiny of a voluminous stack of documents.

Ah, I sighed. *This is what I get for relying on the Pyreborn to get the job done.* This multitudinous legion of documents was not one born of necessity, but rather the result of those thickskulled, muscle-for-brain knights lacking anything close to finesse or discernment. A good half of this so-called intelligence was absolute junk. Under normal circumstances, I would delegate the tedious task of summarizing and sifting through these reports to a subordinate, but alas, the competence required was beyond any of my available attendants. Besides, these men were here to do battle with mana-beasts; this espionage business was merely a sideshow to them.

But alas, I suppose I should just take this opportunity to be honest and admit to myself that the reason I was doing this myself was because these were not my men, but Edward's. The mere thought of stretching too thin the soldiers under his command—and facing his resultant displeasure—was enough to make me shudder.

My shivers were not literal, of course, but the image of his stern, unamused expression was enough to coax a soft chuckle from me. I languidly reached for the next document in the pile, once again not expecting to find anything of use, but my eyes lit upon some altogether unexpected words.

“Hm? ‘The untimely demise of Saint Claudia’?”

A peculiar sensation stirred in my gut as I pored over the rest of the parchment. *“The Saint was a paragon of piety who rejected a royal courtship to serve the church”...“commemorated annually through a memorial*

service”...“loved and respected by the people”... The document offered nothing but laudatory epithets; the actual circumstances of her death were suspiciously sparse. A nagging feeling that something was amiss compelled me to read on.

Admittedly, I knew very little about Celestian culture and the reasons behind their reverence of their Saints. I understood only that they did revere them—almost suffocatingly so. Celestia handled the Saints with kid gloves, kept them captive in gilded cages like exquisite songbirds, and trotted them out for display only on the most necessary occasions. Consequently, most Saints passed from old age or the ailments that came with it. While it was true that a Saint suffering an early death wasn’t exactly unheard of...

“Dying at only twenty-nine years of age?”

The records made no mention of disease or frailty; on the contrary, they spoke of her vigorous health. Her cause of death was listed as an accidental fall from a second-story terrace—a tale that seemed dubiously thin. Indeed, while I acknowledged the existential fact that all members of the human race were but one misplaced step from our eternal reward, I found this particular explanation quite difficult to accept. In a case as high profile as this? The details—or the lack thereof—smacked of subterfuge.

I read aloud what few particulars there were to the empty room. “The Saint’s palatial residence boasted metal bars across every window, purportedly for her protection. The railings surrounding the terrace were uncommonly high, and a cadre of paladins was stationed vigilantly, both within and without. Given such fortified precautions, how could a tragedy so severe as this untimely demise occur? And yet for all this, what is most improbable is the delay in discovering her body—she was not found until the following morning.”

The inattention of the inhabitants of her palace in the immediate aftermath of her supposed fall perplexed me. The impact of a human body meeting the earth is not a subtle event. Yet according to the testimony of the staff, no one had heard a thing. Could the stillness of night truly muffle such a disturbance completely? With each subsequent document in the stack, the notion that this could be a mere misfortune eroded, replaced by a burgeoning conviction that foul play must have occurred. My instincts were alight with suspicion, and unanswered question after unanswered question burned within my psyche.

What if this hadn't been an accident? What if this had in fact been a meticulously staged murder? And what if the strings of this deadly cover-up could be traced back to the archbishop himself?

"Then a divine inquisition would have no issue finding him guilty."

As I realized the gravity of what I'd just stumbled upon, my lips curled into a wide, mischievous grin. Why waste my time begging for scraps of information about a pedestrian crime like embezzlement when I could focus on the murder of a beloved Saint instead?

Of course, I had not yet unearthed a single shred of proof tying the archbishop to this heinous act, but really, who else possessed the influence to obscure the demise of a Saint so completely? Even if he had not personally orchestrated the deed, uncovering evidence of his attempts to obfuscate a probable murder would suffice.

"And with my course now set, let us gather what information we can." With this decisive oath, I rose from my seat, grabbed the nearest Pyreborn member, and dispatched him with a swiftly penned message. I meticulously prepared the framing of my inquiries, and within the hour, the soldier returned, bearing news that the individual I sought was willing to meet with me as soon as I might wish, and indeed at this very moment if I desired it—perfect timing by any measure. Under normal circumstances, I might have approached such a request with greater tact, but the urgency of the matter allowed for no such delicacy at this time. Any breach of protocol on my part would be a small price to pay for the damning evidence that I sought.

And so, my face obscured by a hooded robe and under the dutiful escort of Duke Sanchez, I proceeded directly to the Celestian royal castle. There, in a drawing room adorned in gold and silver, awaited the man of the hour—King Phillips himself.

As we seated ourselves opposite of one another on a pair of sumptuous sofas, he jumped straight to the heart of the matter. "You called, and here I am. So what's the problem?" His lips drew into a glib smile, but his eyes—sharp, probing, and unmistakably cautious—betrayed his true sentiments.

I allowed myself a private smirk at his wariness, though I was hardly one to

talk, for the same suspicion played upon my own face. While we might have committed ourselves to a shared cause, both of us knew better than to equate that to anything approaching a genuine trust. It was only natural to remain on guard in case of an unexpected betrayal.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it a problem,” I replied, mirroring his seeming lightness with my own playful insincerity. “I merely had a few questions for Your Majesty. Some simple inquiries into the history of the Celestian church.”

“Questions? For me?” His surprise seemed genuine, but it quickly gave way to reservation.

I nodded affirmatively, and he averted his gaze as if his next words weighed heavily upon him. “Apologies, but I doubt I’ll be of much assistance. An imperial prince like yourself surely understands the history between the royal family and the church. Frankly, the clergy divulge very little to us. Why would they? We are, after all, their mortal enemies.” He shrugged his shoulders.

His words likely held truth. The Celestian church was notorious for its opacity—a veritable fortress with vigilant guards and stringent controls designed to shield their secrets from common and royal curiosity alike. But thankfully, my presence here was motivated by other concerns. “It is not the organization of the church itself that intrigues me,” I clarified, my voice measured and calm. “Rather, I seek insights into the plight of Saint Claudia, particularly the circumstances surrounding her untimely demise.”

At the mention of “Claudia,” King Phillips visibly tensed, every muscle subtly tightening, as if the very name were a specter he had hoped to banish from memory. Clearly there was something there, something he had never anticipated discussing again.

I sharpened my gaze and pressed the attack. “You see, my investigation into Saint Claudia’s death has unearthed some...rather disturbing discrepancies. The nature of this ‘accident’—excuse me, ‘incident,’ I should say—may very well be crucial in addressing our concerns regarding the archbishop.”

The king looked down and away, his hand instinctively rising to shield his face as he murmured, almost to himself, “It’s been twenty years. It’s impossible, what you’re trying to do. Please believe me when I say that it would be foolish

for you to make the attempt.”

His uneasy, wavering amethyst eyes evoked a bold laugh from me. Yet beneath that fearless facade, his dismissive and hopeless refusal bothered me more deeply than I cared to show. Despite my years confined within the walls of the Diamond Palace, I remained the first prince of Malcosias—no minor obstacle would see me falter. Determined not to be underestimated, I plastered on a polite smile and tightened the conversational reins. “Possible or impossible—that is for me to decide. Had I desired your opinion on the feasibility of my request, rest assured, I would have explicitly sought it. Let me ask you, my presumptuous king: do you look down on me?”

King Phillips tensed briefly, then slowly raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. “No, my apologies. That was not my intention. It’s just that I...get a little touchy whenever the church is mentioned, you see. All the bad blood and whatnot.” His expression contorted into something that scarcely resembled a smile as he attempted to mollify the situation.

Seeing his concession, I couldn’t press him further. I nodded, acknowledging his explanation. Had I asserted enough dominance for the moment? Since my arrival, I had sensed condescension from the king, but this exchange seemed to level the playing field, perhaps even tipping the scales in my favor. I would allow no one, not even a king, to look down on me. Until now, I had overlooked his attitude out of respect for my dear Mistress of the Divine and her homeland, but that tolerance was decidedly at an end.

I crossed my legs and offered him a congenial smile. “Now then, let’s turn our attention to the matter at hand. Your Majesty—what can you tell me about Saint Claudia’s death?”

There was a moment of hesitation, a spell of silence, then finally, a shake of his head. “I’m afraid I’m only privy to the public narrative, much like anyone else. However, what I can tell you is that Saint Claudia and Archbishop Mills didn’t get along.”

“Didn’t get along, you say... Do elaborate—I’m quite curious to hear more about that.”

Motive lies at the heart of any murder investigation, and this case was no

exception. Even the merest whisper of the slightest hint of animosity between Archbishop Mills and Saint Claudia could prove invaluable.

“Of course,” King Phillips began, his tone unsteady, as if he were setting out to navigate a treacherous path. “The two were...diametrically opposed, let’s say. The archbishop, what with his insatiable appetite for wealth and power, and Saint Claudia, whose compassion and selfless devotion to the people of Celestia knew no bounds. I only had the privilege of meeting with her twice every year, but it became very clear to me, even from those brief encounters, that she regarded Archbishop Mills with nothing short of revulsion.” He offered a rueful smile. Then with a resigned shrug and a shake of his head, he added, “Truly, the situation was quite a delicate one back then.”

A paragon of virtue opposing a bottomless pit of greed and veracity? I could see how such stark contrasts might breed contempt, but would a mere clash of personalities truly lead to murder? No, I needed something more tangible.

“Is it all but confirmed that the archbishop has long been implicated in various forms of misconduct?” I asked.

King Phillips paused, reaching for his tea with a heavy sigh. His expression, a mask of contemplation and weariness, revealed little. “He is alleged to be involved in many an unsavory affair, and those suspicions have lingered for quite some time. But he is careful, and he has always managed to avoid leaving a discernible trail. Regrettably, without solid evidence, we cannot proceed on hearsay alone.”

A clearer picture was beginning to take shape in my mind. Saint Claudia and Archbishop Mills had been perfectly antithetical. Everything I had gathered suggested she was a woman of unblemished character with a staunch sense of justice. How could such a person have endured the archbishop’s corruption passively...unless she hadn’t? Perhaps she had threatened to expose all of Archbishop Mills’s misdeeds, and in retaliation, he had orchestrated her demise? Ah, now that made for a much more compelling motive. To build upon this theory, however, I would need to delve deeper into the church’s internal dynamics.

However, my thoughts soon returned to my present company: the king under

whose reign all these events had transpired. My smile widened subtly as I prepared my final and perhaps most critical question. “One last inquiry, Your Majesty. Why has there been no thorough investigation into Saint Claudia’s death? It has been quite some time, after all.”

King Phillips’s eyes widened in shock. My words had left him no room to maneuver, no shadows in which to seek refuge. He averted his gaze, head hanging low, eyes drifting downward.

His silence was deafening. It revealed the truth even without him saying it. King Phillips had chosen the path of least resistance, letting sleeping dogs lie to avoid the disruption the inevitable scandal would cause. But now, his actions—or rather, his inactions—had come back to haunt him.

I would not allow him the comfort of feigned ignorance. “The events leading up to and directly after Saint Claudia’s death are steeped in subterfuge—a fact you must surely recognize. Yet you chose to dismiss it, to push it out of sight. So again, I ask: why?”

King Phillips let out a deeply laden sigh. He finally glanced up; he acknowledged my inquiries with a weary smile and a half-hearted shake of his head. “You certainly have a talent for striking where it hurts.”

I smiled back at him. “It’s an innocent question, Your Majesty. Nothing more to it. Answer it, don’t answer it—either option is at your discretion.”

Because I know whatever comes out of your mouth next wouldn’t hold any truth anyway.

Though I’d kept that last bit unspoken, he seemed to sense the thought in my silence. With a quiet murmur, he said, “Truly, you are relentless.” Gathering himself, he addressed me more firmly, his voice resonant in the quiet room. “Very well. If you’re so determined to uncover the most disgraceful chapter of my youth, who am I to deny you?” He paused, his expression clouding. “Though I must admit that I am deeply embarrassed by it, so may I trust you to keep this matter confidential?”

“Very well,” I agreed. “I promise to not tell a soul.”

My swift assurance seemed to bring him a fleeting moment of relief, yet it

ultimately served only to deepen the grimace on his face. *The death of Saint Claudia—it must really weigh heavily on his conscience.* He leaned back slightly in his chair, his gaze drifting towards the ceiling as he collected his thoughts. “Back then, I was a fledgling king, earnestly trying to consolidate my realm. I had a rough go of it at first—placating uppity nobles, outmaneuvering foreign threats. So when the news of her death reached me, it simply kind of...passed me by.” He chuckled wryly at himself. “No, that’s not entirely honest. It didn’t escape my notice; I allowed it to do so for the sake of my own ambitions.”

Every word he uttered was laden with remorse. His hands tightened into fists on his lap, and he let his eyes flutter shut—as if he were trying to hold back the tears that threatened to surface.

“At that time, my position was exceedingly fragile. I couldn’t risk antagonizing the church. To launch an investigation into her death would have been tantamount to declaring open hostilities against them, and, should it have proved fruitless, it could have jeopardized my entire reign. I faced the very real prospect of calls for my abdication, or worse, riots and civil unrest. In the interest of maintaining a precarious peace, I chose not to pursue the matter.”

The king’s brows furrowed in his discomfort, and after a moment, he slowly reopened his eyes. Before me sat a monarch burdened by an immense solitude, adrift on a vast sea of despair.

As a ruler, his intentions to prevent violence and unrest might have been rooted in a sense of nobility, yet they had been fundamentally misguided. And while it might have been justification enough to neglect an investigation of the Saint’s death then, it was now *twenty years later*. How could he condone leaving Archbishop Mills to his own devices for *this* long? Yes, confronting the church required a delicate approach, but there was a clear line between exercising caution and engaging in inaction that verged on complicity. Ultimately, this entire debacle stemmed from the king’s willingness to turn a blind eye to corruption for the sake of his own ease—a choice for which he earned no sympathy from me.

“I have a clear understanding of the situation now,” I stated firmly. “Thank you for your candor, Your Majesty. The insights you’ve provided today will prove to be extraordinarily helpful.” With that, I didn’t wait for his permission

to leave. Rising from my seat, I slipped back into a nondescript robe, ready to exit. King Phillips had exhausted his usefulness to me; he had divulged all he could. Lingering further would only delay my ability to make real progress. As I secured the hood over my face and strode towards the door, the king's sudden, almost frantic voice halted me.

"W-Wait!"

Annoyed, yet somehow compelled to stop, I turned and met His Majesty's earnest gaze. His eyes, usually so carefree and jovial, now burned so strongly with something akin to determination that it caught me off guard. Could this really be the same man whose lighthearted reputation was fodder for countless tales? Clearly the rumors did not tell the story in its entirety.

"Yes?" I prompted. "Is there something you wish to ask of me?"

"No. Not a question," he replied. "A plea."

"Oh? I'm listening." I said, my interest now fully engaged. How unusual for a king to debase himself so openly and seek aid from another royal.

King Phillips rose swiftly from his seat, his demeanor infused with urgency. "I implore you, investigate the circumstances surrounding Saint Claudia's death. Honor her memory! I ask this not as the sovereign of Celestia, but as Nathan Phillips—a man like any other, who seeks justice for a wrongful death."

A man like any other... The words echoed in my mind as I observed him. Here he stood, stripped of his regal bearing, presenting himself with the meekness and humility of an ordinary man. Yet his vulnerability, for all its incongruity with his position, lent him a sincerity, an earnestness, hallmarks of a plea made not from throne to throne, but heart to heart.

Honestly, I didn't know what to make of it. Even without his explicit request, I had already intended to investigate Saint Claudia's death—it was the clearest path to implicating the archbishop. Surely he realized this. So why debase himself before me? Why endure the humiliation of openly making such an emphatic solicitation?

Was he trying to cultivate a favorable impression? Outmaneuver me politically? Another angle I had yet to consider?

No, I told myself with a small shake of my head. This was something far simpler, far more *personal*. His actions could only be fully explained if his feelings for the late Saint Claudia were deeply felt, though I couldn't say whether they were of respect, admiration, or something more profound.

Suddenly, a piece of information I'd encountered earlier floated back into my mind. *The Saint was a paragon of piety who rejected a royal courtship to serve the church.* Could it be that King Phillips had been the royal engaged in such a courtship? *Hah*, I thought. *Something more profound, indeed.* While I hesitated to make definitive claims about another man's emotions, it was clear that to King Phillips, Saint Claudia had been more than just a pious figurehead.

This revelation, however, only deepened the mystery of his apparent indifference towards her death. It presented a conundrum so esoteric that it could perhaps only be solved by the man himself...in which case, it was time to set the matter aside and accept his plea at face value.

I glanced at his still-bowed figure, then delivered the assurance he sought. "I swear I will uncover the truth behind Saint Claudia's death—but let us be clear, my dear king: I do this not for you."

"Yes, that is perfectly clear," he responded, his head remaining lowered. "Thank you."

With those final words, I left him behind and exited the royal drawing room. As the door clicked shut behind me, I raised a hand to the bridge of my nose, pinching it slightly in a gesture of discomfort.

"It's like looking into a mirror," I murmured under my breath. "Disturbing as it is, we might be more similar than I care to admit."

My confession hung in the air, unheard by anyone but myself, as I continued down the silent corridor.



(Carolina)

The days passed, and the upcoming assembly of the Malcosian nobility drew ever closer. On one of those days, I found myself in the Garnet Palace,

performing my final perusal of the documents that had been drawn up for the forthcoming meeting. Ed and I were seated at a stately, elongated table, meticulously examining Teodore's proposal. The architect of the plan, Teodore himself, absolved of such a task by virtue of having written it all in the first place, lingered nearby, brewing tea.

As I concluded my review, I turned to address Teodore. "The proposal is comprehensive, but there is one detail that escapes me: on the eve of Noel, exactly how many sacred flames is the Saint expected to ignite? It is implausible to presume her presence in each country simultaneously, is it not?"

Teodore looked downright befuddled, as if this was a detail he'd simply forgotten. It seemed, to my surprise, that he *had* forgotten. I had to remind myself every so often that despite his usual preternatural precision, Teodore was only human. His lapse was likely more indicative of his extreme weariness than it was of any form of neglect.

He paused, lost momentarily in contemplation. "Indeed, you make a valid point. It would be not only exhaustively tiresome but utterly impracticable for her to visit each participating nation within such a limited frame of time. Yes, to eschew the embarrassment of arriving midcelebration, it would be prudent to determine a more feasible itinerary for her travels prior to the festivities."

With that, he lapsed into silence, absently serving us the tea he had brewed before sinking into a plush sofa nearby, deep in thought. Meanwhile, Ed, seemingly indifferent to the impromptu brainstorming session unfolding right before his eyes, contentedly reached for another chocolate-studded cookie. It seemed he had no intention of involving himself in intricacies that fell outside his domain of expertise.

We made eye contact. "Lina, try these cookies. They're delicious," he insisted, the offer slightly incongruous when accompanied by his usual stony expression.

"O-Oh?" I replied, a little taken aback. "Well, then I suppose I shall." With a nod, I reached for a cookie. Despite feeling a twinge of guilt for indulging while Teodore toiled over the Faith Council's success, I couldn't resist. I eagerly savored the treat.

My, they really are good. The doubled richness of the cocoa—both in the

dough itself and in the fragments of chocolate contained within—created a luxurious melding of flavors. “You’re right, these are exceptional,” I remarked, my palate delighted. “Where did these come from?”

“Do you remember the butter cookies we had at the high pontiff’s?” he replied. “You seemed quite fond of them, so I inquired with His Holiness for the name of the baker. Just recently, I sent someone to procure a selection of their offerings.” His expression softened ever so slightly. “I’m glad you like these too.”

Edward Ruby Martinez. For all the criticism the man received for his lack of awareness, his attentiveness towards me was undeniable, as was his thoughtfulness. In that moment, I couldn’t help but reflect on this remarkable man who had somehow become my husband. “Thank you, Ed. For thinking of me.” My eyes crinkled at the corners as I beamed at him, which seemed to uplift his spirits further. He nodded with contentment.

A profound and sudden sigh disrupted our affectionate interlude. Teodore sat still, his brow furrowed in displeasure. “By all means, continue flirting at your leisure, Your Highnesses,” he remarked dryly. “It’s not as if we are under any significant time constraints.”

His smile was broad, yet not broad enough to mask the burgeoning aura of strained impatience that seemed to emanate from him. Such moments with Teodore often presaged a prolonged lecture followed by subsequent days filled with his brutally effective and bespoke strain of passive-aggression. Sensing the impending storm, Ed and I promptly realigned our focus, nodding earnestly to communicate our understanding of the urgency of the situation.

Our swift compliance elicited another sigh from Teodore, but he appeared willing enough to let the matter slide. He cleared his throat, evidently ready to redirect the conversation. “Let us revisit our initial topic. What are your thoughts on limiting the sacred flame ceremony to only three nations?” he proposed, displaying three splayed fingers to emphasize his point.

“Sounds perfectly fine to me,” I replied quickly.

“If Lina agrees, then so do I,” Ed added.

With our consensus reached, Teodore resumed his work, his quill fervently

dancing along the margins of the proposal document. The scratchy melody of it tickled my ears as I took a sip from my cup. “I suppose the next question, then, concerns the criteria by which these three nations will be selected,” I mused aloud.

As one, both Ed and Theodore furrowed their brows in response to my observation. Theodore, who generally did all of the thinking for the both of them, lapsed deep into thought at once, whereas Ed, the one who provided the brawn...well, he appeared outwardly to also lapse into what I assumed was thought (but what that thought might have been was difficult to say).

The silence stretched, thick with contemplation. Unexpectedly, it was Ed who shattered it. His fist met his palm with a resounding smack, his eyes alight with epiphany. “I’ve got it! Why not let the countries draw lots for the honor?”

I didn’t know what to say at first. I found myself staring at him, indelicately slack-jawed, as I grappled with the implications of his proposal. After a moment, I managed to compose myself, then pursed my lips and shook my head slowly. *That can’t possibly be a good idea, entrusting such a significant decision to mere chance like that,* I thought. *Such a method would doubtlessly leave some participants dissatisfied with the outcome, perhaps even to the point of causing temptation to manipulate the process in unsavory ways...*

“Ed,” I began, trying to make my voice as gentle as I could. “Drawing lots, in theory—it’s a fine idea, but I think in this instance—”

“Well, I say why not?” a graceful tenor crooned.

“Huh?” I uttered in my confusion.

The unexpected support for Ed’s proposal came from a most unlikely advocate. Theodore, adjusting his spectacles with a gravitas that belied his next words, surprised me further. “I think it would be perfectly acceptable to determine one of the three nations by lottery. Certainly not all, but one selected by chance could add an element of divine randomness. We could frame it as the ‘ordained favor of Lady Luck,’ which ought to quell any naysayers.”

That...was indeed an interesting point. Given that the Faith Council was inherently a religious body, invoking the notion of divine intervention could

indeed sway the sovereigns to accept the lottery method. And with this ostensibly holy game of chance confined to just one of the three slots, the potential for controversy seemed somewhat minimal. *Well, there is still an inherent risk of fraudulent results, but I'll assume Theodore has an idea to head off such dishonorable behavior.*

"Very well," I agreed. "A lottery for one of three slots. What about the other two?"

Teodore interjected with another insightful idea. "I think we can go ahead and assume one slot will be granted in perpetuity to the country of the Saint's residence, which really only leaves us the one."

"Then let us think long and hard about what country should be granted the honor of the final slot," Ed added.

I nodded along to their discussion, yet my gaze drifted to my feet. It wasn't contemplation that distracted me, but rather an idea I couldn't quite muster the courage to share. As Malcosian royalty, the propriety of advocating for a personal cause seemed utterly inappropriate, yet the idea persisted, unwavering in my mind.

Suddenly, I felt the reassuring weight of Ed's arm around my shoulders. Only then did I realize that my hands had clenched into fists and that my expression had twisted into a grimace. "What's wrong?" he inquired. "Are you feeling unwell?"

"No, I apologize," I responded curtly, striving to mask my turmoil. "I was merely lost in thought."

Ed seemed to sense my discomfort, for he said no more; instead, he gently laid his hand against my back in silent support. His touch, warm even through the fabric of my dress, coaxed forth a sense of comfort within me, and I narrowed my eyes in relief. Gradually regaining my composure, I lifted my head and found myself meeting Theodore's patient peridot gaze.

Buoyed by their tacit encouragement, I resolved to share my thoughts. My suggestion deserved to be heard by them, regardless of their possible judgment or perceptions of my motives. I straightened my spine, threw back my shoulders, and fixed my gaze directly ahead. "Might we offer the final spot to

the country most devastated by natural disaster in a given year? A nation that could truly benefit from our support?”

My proposal hung precariously in the air, feeling more like a fragile wish than a firm suggestion. As the words lingered, a tremor took hold of my hand and the dryness in my throat intensified. Uncurling my tightly clenched fingers, I reached for my tea, swallowing it hastily in a single, desperate gulp.

The source of my turmoil was clear—my suggestion clearly revealed my lingering attachment to my homeland. There was no doubt about it: the country most desperately in need of aid this year was Celestia. Should my proposal be accepted, it would mean lighting the sacred flame there—a gesture laden with personal significance but fraught with political implications. The thought that either Ed or Teodore would think less of me for prioritizing Celestia over the interests of Malcosias terrified me.

As the silence dragged on, I instinctively shrunk smaller, my face tightening with apprehension. It was then that the first reassurance came, not as a bold declaration but through the calm and tender voice of my husband: “I, for one, agree with Lina. Wanting to help those in need is a noble sentiment indeed.”

Ed’s kind words were followed swiftly by the lighter tenor of Teodore: “I see no issue with the proposal either. Considering the church’s mission is to aid those who are destitute and suffering, I’m sure they would have a thing or two to say to us if the Saint visited only affluent nations.”

Both Ed and Teodore concurred, tactfully sidestepping the deeper implications of my proposal. Overwhelmed with gratitude, I felt tears threatening to spill over onto my cheeks. With my eyes warm and shimmering with the unshed deluge, I nodded emphatically. “Thank you... Thank you both!”

Thank you both for pretending not to realize the true nature of my request!

Their understanding nods in response to my gratitude nearly pushed me to the brink. *Hold it together, Carolina!* I admonished myself. *This was meant to be a moment of joy, not one for weeping! Keep your composure; you owe them that much!*

Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced the tears back, blinking rapidly until I could regain control. As I contended against my emotions, Teodore stretched forth a

helping hand in the form of a distraction. “Apropos of nothing, where are Owen and Marisa?” His glance swept across the room, subtly highlighting their absence.

“They requested some personal time, and I granted it,” I said in as neutral a tone as I could muster given my emotional state. I reached for my teacup again, but this time I found it empty; Theodore swiftly moved to refill it.

It was in moments like these that Marisa’s absence was particularly felt; she would’ve never let my cup run empty. Silently appreciating her diligence, I thanked Theodore and took another sip. I breathed in the relaxing, floral aroma of the black tea, and I released the lingering stress in a sigh. “I received their requests immediately after the date of the assembly was confirmed,” I continued. “Whatever it was for both of them, I’m sure it was important. Naturally, I respected their privacy and didn’t inquire further, yet I must admit to a twinge of curiosity.”

Now that I thought about it, it was a little peculiar that they had asked for personal time simultaneously. As I pondered this, I gazed out the window, taking in the snowy glory of Malcosias in winter.

Marisa and Owen—I wonder what they’re up to at this very moment.

(Marisa)

Upon receiving permission for a two-day leave from Princess Carolina, I wasted no time in arranging a meeting with someone I’d hoped to avoid forever. Now, seated across from one another in this high-class restaurant, we occupied a narrow, two-person dining table. There was no casual banter, no warm recollections of past encounters—just two women who appeared to be complete strangers, deliberately avoiding each other’s gaze.

I was the first to cave to the suffocating silence, and my gaze lifted to meet hers. It had indeed been years since our last meaningful interaction. Aside from the occasional fleeting eye contact at social gatherings, we had not spoken directly for a long time.

Noticing that I’d finally granted her my attention, she seized the opportunity

to speak. “My my, stare at me like that and you might just burn a hole right through me,” she teased with a playful lilt. “If you have words, then let them flow freely. There is no need for shyness between us, Marisa; I am your sister, after all.”

Maria Blake, my eldest sister and now the esteemed wife of Duke Blake, offered me a beguiling smile. Born a Kissinger, she shared responsibility with Marielle for the years of torment I’d endured. (Though I had to admit that, to her credit, Maria’s torments had never reached the hysterics of Marielle’s, and she had left me to my own devices since her betrothal, so perhaps it was somewhat unjust of me to suggest their culpabilities were alike.)

Clad in a gown befitting her status as a duchess, her glossy black locks shimmered as she narrowed her vibrant emerald eyes, which were a legacy from our mother. “You called me out here because you had something to discuss, did you not?” she continued. “I can hardly imagine you seeking me out otherwise.”

“Indeed, my time is not so unoccupied that I would willingly invite the company of a past tormentor without good reason,” I said, emphasizing the word “tormentor.”

Maria shifted uncomfortably in her seat, averting her gaze from mine as she muttered more to herself than to me, “You’ve stopped holding back, I see.”

Her reaction stirred a sense of foreboding within me; I’d never once put Maria on the back foot before. Typically, she would have already retaliated with a sharp retort or two by now. It had been some time since I’d last seen her—had age mellowed her out? But...no, it seemed unlikely to me that someone’s personality could change so dramatically. Her newfound passivity unnerved me to no end, and I studied the depths of her emerald eyes keenly, looking for any flicker of something that would give away her intentions. But she offered me a weak smile, remaining silent.

“You’ve changed,” I observed after a pause. “Have you stumbled upon enlightenment in your married life?”

“Enlightenment?” she repeated, visibly startled by my inquiry. She pondered for a moment, then slowly nodded. “Yes, I suppose you could call it that. The

past few years have indeed profoundly altered my perspective.”

As she delivered this wistful admission, she took up her wineglass and peered into it. Her expression softened unexpectedly, revealing a sense of contentment and fulfillment that I had never before seen within her. Her gaze seemed to penetrate well past the contents of the vessel in her hand—it almost seemed as if she were diving deeply into a pool of cherished memories, a sight that both puzzled and disgusted me.

Did this mean that my sister was living a fulfilling life as the Duchess Blake? As I absorbed this understanding, emotions welled up from within me. Rather than the single-minded resentment I had expected to feel with the knowledge that my former tormentor was thriving, I instead experienced a poignant mix of emotions—some of the resentment I’d anticipated, yes, but also a dash of empathetic joy. Could it be that I, as a victim, harbored a desire for her to suffer for her past cruelties, but as her sister, I wished for her a life of significance and happiness?

“As her sister.” The thought almost made me scoff aloud. The old me would have scorned such a sentiment and fervently wished for Maria’s downfall. But that was just it—I was no longer who I had been. My own cup was now brimming with such abundance that I found myself capable of caring for those I had once despised.

The catalyst for this profound change was unmistakable. Princess Carolina, with her inherent kindness, her pure heart, and even her gentle smile, had profoundly influenced me—she had shown me what a fool I had been to live all this time with such enmity in my heart. Her Highness never did anything explicitly for me, nor did she need to. Her detached fairness allowed her to see me not as a pretty face, not as a lady with a troubled past, but simply as a person—free from the prejudiced notions that had followed me around for my entire life. It was then that realization struck: if someone like me could have changed so profoundly from an encounter with a single person, who was to say my sister couldn’t have done the same?

Driven by a burgeoning curiosity, I ventured a personal question with an ease that startled even me. “How is your new home with the duke? How is married life treating you?”

A delicate blush colored her cheeks at the mention of “married life,” her expression softening like she was a lovestruck maiden lost in fond imaginings of her beloved. The transformation was so striking that I found myself hesitant to believe my eyes.

She stumbled a little over her words, grasping for a way she might articulate her overflowing feelings. “I... I must confess, it’s been...wonderful.” Her voice lowered to a whisper, imbued with a blend of shyness and joy. “The servants, they’re all quite nice and treat me ever so kindly. And Fin is, well... Our circumstances were orchestrated, weren’t they? A match of convenience, and yet”—she paused, a tender smile touching her lips, her eyes twinkling with affection and reverence—“he is a gentleman of the truest sort. Honorable, noble—everything one could ever wish for, really...”

Despite her efforts to corral her bubbling joy within the constraints of propriety, her emotions inevitably broke through the dam of decorum, particularly when she affectionately referred to Duke Finley Blake as “Fin.”

Pet names! Well, I never...

There was no longer any room for doubt.

My sister, Maria Blake, was truly in love. And this deep and genuine affection seemed to have prompted a reevaluation of her entire past. I had always heard that love had the power to change a person, but to witness it transform a vile, petty woman into a tender, besotted fool was nothing short of astonishing.

Not to mention a bit terrifying.

This revelation was an unexpectedly sweet twist of fate. I had also heard that Duke Blake was, as Maria had so mawkishly described, an honorable, noble gentleman—a man of principle known for his intolerance towards any form of harassment or bullying. *How would someone of his character react to hearing the decidedly less-than-savory past exploits of his beloved wife?*

I was certain that the duke had encountered rumors of Maria’s past behavior, but they had been just that, rumors. Maria could easily dismiss them as lies, and that would be the end of it. Yet what if I, as someone who had directly suffered from her actions, were to confirm these rumors? While the arranged nature of their marriage meant a divorce was unlikely, such news could very well kill any

love that had blossomed between them.

Although I had never once considered blackmailing my sister as revenge for the torment I'd endured, I would do it gladly; I would without hesitation embrace the onerous role of the villain if it meant repaying the profound debt I owed to Princess Carolina for her kindness and the change she had inspired in me.

I refocused my attention on Maria; she was still babbling on and on about the duke. I smiled, and her voice faltered and faded into silence—I'd be struck dumb too if it had been the first time I'd experienced my own sister's smile.

"Perhaps we've indulged in enough pleasantries," I interjected firmly. "I invited you here today because there's a favor I need to ask of you."

"A favor?" She arched a perplexed brow.

"Yes, a favor. One only my dear sister, Duchess Blake, can fulfill."

Upon hearing the words "Duchess Blake," her face slackened once more, but this time, she quickly caught herself and cleared her throat to regain her composure. "Please, don't take this the wrong way," she began cautiously, "but while I am genuinely open to hearing your request, even if only as a means of making amends for the way I once treated you in the past, I must frankly express that I cannot make any definitive promises. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Yes, that's quite acceptable," I replied with a nonchalant ease. "By all means, exercise your good judgment. However, I think it's only fair that you are fully informed before making your decision. Know that, should you decline my request, I will feel compelled to discuss your past behavior with the duke in detail."

My words hung in the air, too vague to be a threat, yet too pointed to be anything but a warning. Maria's reaction was instantaneous—her eyes widened in alarm; her gaze conveyed a mix of anger, bitterness, and fear. It was as if she wanted to scream, *You wouldn't dare!* The profundity of her reaction confirmed everything I had surmised about the duke's character—in which case, our negotiations should be short and fruitful.

"Sister, my request is straightforward," I pressed on. "There is an important

assembly of the nobility approaching. At that assembly, you must ensure that Duke Blake supports the proposal that will be presented. It is imperative that he votes in favor. Make sure that he does, because should you fail in your attempts to persuade him, know that I will still bring the matter of your past behavior to his attention.”

“Y-You can’t!” Her voice broke through in a frantic plea. “If you do something like that, he’ll never look at me in the same way ever again!”

I could see I had struck a nerve; her eyes now shimmered with more worry than anger.

“Please...” she whispered, her voice trailing into desperation.

I let out a dismissive chuckle, unable to hold back my contempt any longer. ““Something like that,’ you say? Need I remind you, Sister, that you have committed far greater betrayals in the past? Would you stop pretending that you hold any claim to the moral high ground? It’s pathetic.”

Maria inhaled sharply, her bangs casting shadows over her eyes as her head drooped slightly. Those emerald orbs shimmered, seemingly awash with a tangible regret.

If only regret could scrub clean the stains of the past.

Duke Blake might have reformed my sister, polished her tarnished soul until she gleamed with pride at her own transformation. But what of me? I, who had borne the brunt of every cruel gibe, every venomous taunt and assault—each one burning in my memory, as fiery and fresh as if they’d happened just minutes ago? Was I expected to simply erase all grievances, to absolve and forget, just because she had decided to turn over a new leaf?

No. Never. But if she had truly changed, then I was at least prepared to offer her a chance to demonstrate it—and to earn my forgiveness.

“However, if you fulfill my request, Sister, I will forgive you. I will keep the horrors I endured to myself and reveal them to no one, neither the duke nor anyone else.”

If you succeed, this will be the first and last time I ever threaten you.

I stared straight ahead at Maria, my resolve burning bright. She met my stare, her expression hesitant, searching for any hint of deceit or a hidden snag in my offer.

“Do you promise?” she asked, her voice laden with a mix of hope and skepticism.

“I promise,” I replied without hesitation. “I’m even prepared to sign an affidavit if my word isn’t enough.”

On cue, I slid the contract I had prepared in advance across the table towards her. My signature already adorned the bottom in a firm, bold scrawl. Maria’s eyes widened at the sight of my thorough preparation and the tangible evidence of my determination. For a moment, she said nothing, her gaze locked on the document that lay starkly between us.

Minutes passed. Finally, she lifted her eyes to meet mine. “Very well,” she said quietly. “I will help you. But you must never, ever bring up our past—especially not to anyone associated with the duke.”

“That goes without saying,” I replied. “If you would please sign here.”

However, as I nudged the contract across the table—the very agreement I’d crafted as insurance for *her* benefit—she pushed it back towards me. “That won’t be necessary,” she said with a shake of her head. “I’d rather not leave a paper trail. If Fin somehow got ahold of something like this, I...” She trailed off, her gaze dropping momentarily as she considered the implications. Gathering herself, she looked up at me with a renewed sense of determination. “And...you may be surprised to hear this, Marisa, but I do trust you. I always have. I might have found you an enigmatic and challenging figure at times, one I could never quite understand, but you were always a woman of unwavering integrity and honesty. That’s something I could never overlook.”

I couldn’t find the words to respond. I had braced myself for numerous scenarios, the many paths that this meeting might take, but a heartfelt recognition of my integrity had certainly not been among them. Overwhelmed, I grappled with a mix of emotions—my sister’s apparent naivete, doubts about her judgment, and an unexpected, faint flicker of joy.

For a brief, intensely real moment, I entertained the thought, *Marielle might*

be beyond reach, but perhaps there is hope for Maria and me to mend our relationship—that was how much weight the words “I trust you” seemed to carry.

“Is...that so?” I finally found my voice. “Then you needn’t sign. That is all I wished to discuss, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

Our entrées hadn’t even arrived yet, but I stood from my seat with a haste intense enough to turn heads. As I tried to calm the pounding in my chest, I summoned the nearest waiter and asked for the check. But in my frantic rush to escape the overwhelming atmosphere of the restaurant, Maria’s voice halted me in my tracks. “Don’t worry about it. I won’t let my little sister treat me to a meal. And another thing, Marisa...”

Her words faltered, and the next sound I heard was a poignant snuffle. Despite myself, I turned to face her—only to be confronted with the tear-streaked visage of my eldest sister.

“I’m sorry, dear sister, I really am,” she said, her voice strong despite the tears. “Blinded by envy and jealousy, I wronged you deeply, leaving scars on your heart. For this, there can be no excuse. For what I have done to you, I am ashamed to call myself your sister. You have every right to despise me for the rest of your days, yet I implore you to believe that my remorse is sincere.”

She gave no excuses, offered no justifications—her apology was a raw and open wound. The walls around my heart trembled, shaken by the force of her words.

Why are you apologizing? I wanted to scream. *I want to hate you. Why won’t you let me hate you?!* Yet...seeing her so vulnerable, so genuinely distraught—my resolve collapsed. I had intended to put her in her place, to remind her that she wasn’t invincible...but not to see her like this, so utterly broken over her past mistakes.

The choice was now mine: forgive Maria, lifting the corrosive shroud of guilt that had been eating away at her heart, or withhold absolution, condemning her to grapple with her demons alone.

I chose honesty. “I accept your apology, Sister, but forgiveness...that will need time. If you truly seek to mend what’s been broken, honor my wishes, and then

we'll see where we stand.”

Leaving her with a glimmer of hope that perhaps, in time, things could be healed, I strode silently away from the restaurant.

(Owen)

I gingerly picked my way through the commoners' district of the capital, following the directions of a crumpled, damp letter that led me towards an unfamiliar destination. Feeling nervous for the first time in an age, I hastily smoothed out the tattered paper to double-check the address.

I didn't recognize the name of the place—a restaurant located in this district called “Restaurant Lazeez.” At the bottom of the letter, a familiar seal and the rushed signature of Drake Klein confirmed my appointment. Yes, I was about to meet my half brother, the current Baron Klein, for the first time since I'd disowned our family name. We had been estranged for years—he'd become a diplomat and I a knight. Our only form of communication had been the few letters he sent each year: letters which I'd invariably shredded and burned without even breaking the seals on the envelopes, so perhaps it was a bit inaccurate of me to even call that communication at all.

This time, however, I'd opened one of his letters—because now I finally had a reason to do so. Initially, I'd been astonished by the letter's absurd brevity, offering nothing more than a meeting place and a time. But in the end, as I had intended to write back and arrange a meeting anyway, I'd chosen to see it as a fortuitous time-saver and stopped dwelling on it.

One thing did catch my attention. He had written to me twice every year; had all those letters, now destroyed, carried the same simple message? If so, he was every bit as ineffective a communicator as I. With years of unanswered correspondence, one might expect him at some point to have tried a different approach. But then again, considering how I had treated his attempts, I was probably not one to criticize.

With a heavy sigh, I found myself standing before Restaurant Lazeez. I stuffed the letter back into my pocket. Despite its location in a commoners' district, the establishment drew a surprisingly well-dressed crowd, their refined attire stark

against the modest backdrop of the neighborhood. *Tsk*, I clicked my tongue. *Can't a man walk anywhere in this city without getting assaulted by the presence of the gentry?*

This egalitarian notion rang with a false tone coming from me. Here I was, technically an aristocrat by birthright, though I'd inherited none of the privileges that came with the title. Just a name, I reminded myself bitterly, a mere technicality that held no real weight in my world. Even the nouveau riche nobility, with their bought titles and lavish lifestyles, far outstripped me in terms of status.

Dragging my scornful gaze away from the hedonistic elites, I set foot into the restaurant, where I was immediately accosted by an impeccably dressed man. The maître d', perhaps? *Ah yes*, I realized. No doubt the types of customers to whom this establishment catered just loved having a maître d' hold their hands and kiss their asses the second they walked in the door.

"Welcome, welcome to Restaurant Lazeez!" he exclaimed. "May I have the name of your reservation, please?" He rubbed his hands together expectantly as he approached, his sycophantic smile stretched wide above a three-piece suit whose stitches strained over a slight paunch—it was almost like he was the embodiment of the indulgent nature of the establishment.

"My party's already here," I replied flatly. "It should be under Drake Klein, I believe?"

The maître d's eyes shot open then narrowed in scrutiny. "So you're the much-anticipated guest of Baron Klein," he muttered, clearly intrigued. "I had thought for certain that you would be a woman."

"What?" I retorted. "Much-anticipated guest? What are you talking about?"

Off duty as I was, my tone was sharper than I'd intended, catching the maître d' off guard. Quickly, he waved me over to the wall, away from prying eyes and ears. "You didn't hear this from me, but Baron Klein reserves a table here twice every year. Each time, he orders for two, waits at his table until closing, pays, and leaves without saying a word."

"What?!" I exclaimed. I froze, emotions welling up within me as an anxious, restless amalgamation that I didn't know how to describe.

Drake does this twice every year? Just how much of his time has he wasted here?

He was a diplomat, often traveling the world, away from home for months at a time. Yet he consistently made it back to the capital, always finding his way to this spot? It wouldn't surprise me if these semiannual visits were the only times he could manage, and this realization... I didn't like the way it made me feel.

What the hell is he thinking?

Unable to discern his motives, my brow furrowed in concentration. The thought that this might be a trap, that I should perhaps leave and return another day, flickered through my mind, but I dismissed it. I had hurried to this meeting today exactly because time was a luxury I couldn't afford.

For now, I'll meet Drake. See what he has to say.

"I think I understand," I said to the maître d'. "Please, take me to him."

"V-Very good," he replied.

He led me up the stairs, away from the bustling dining area to a quiet corridor lined with doors, clearly the domain of VIP guests.

Not averse to excess, are we, Drake? I mused wryly as we came to a stop in front of a nondescript door.

The maître d' knocked three times. "Baron," he announced, "Your guest has arrived."

There was a sound from the other side; something moving, bumping, I couldn't tell.

On the other side of this door is Drake... I thought to myself. It's been years since we last met. I wonder how he's changed...

Memories of the cold, indifferent boy I once knew filled my mind as I inhaled deeply, my body tensing with the anticipation of confronting our shared past. A response finally came.

"Let him in."

It was a deeper voice than I remembered, but I recognized it immediately as

Drake's all the same. Even muffled by the door, it carried a familiar tone that stirred both nostalgia and an unexplainable sense of relief within me.

"Very good, my lord," the maître d' said; he turned his attention to me. "Well, in you go. I sincerely hope this long-awaited reunion proves fruitful—for both of you." He dipped his head in a respectful bow as if to say, *I'm not so obtuse as to intrude on a touching family reunion!*

At his urging, I gripped the knob with a trembling hand. I felt a sudden reluctance to open the door, and in that moment, a part of me wanted to turn tail and run. Yet I stood my ground, my feet anchored in place by a stronger resolve.

I reminded myself of my purpose for being here. My debt to Princess Carolina was still outstanding, and my quest for redemption because of my actions against her father had not yet been fulfilled.

Compared to what she's done for me, me having to reunite with my brother is nothing!

"Excuse me," I muttered, my voice oddly flat as I turned the knob.

Leaning forward, I pushed the door open to reveal Drake. He was noticeably larger and more mature than he'd been when I last saw him, yet it was unmistakably still him. It was like staring into a mirror, beholding his sunstone eyes; they crinkled slightly around the edges—a subtle hint of a smile playing across his face.

"Owen, how long has it been?" Drake greeted me with a warmth that seemed genuine.

"Long enough," I mumbled back quietly.

This was the first time I'd ever seen him smile. I felt awkward and exposed, and I was certain it showed. I had hoped that seeing his face and observing his expressions would clarify his intentions. In fact, it only deepened my bewilderment.

Drake is inscrutable. Seriously, can he even have human feelings like the rest of us peons? Just what is going on in that head of his?

“I’m glad to finally see you after all this time,” he continued. “There’s so much I want to discuss, but first, please, have a seat.”

His continued friendliness as he gestured to the seat across from him awakened an old irritation in me. Was it his intention to piss me off? Acting as if nothing had happened between us, as if we could just resume our relationship as...old friends?

My thoughts raced, spiraling out of control, until one escaped my lips unbidden. “What is this? Are you pretending to be friendly now? Just like the way you pretended to see nothing back then?”

The raw truth sprang forth like a concealed dagger, and I saw it strike Drake squarely in his chest. His expression tightened, a look of sudden realization, before his eyes dropped.

His silence sent a wave of panic through me. *Shit*, I thought. *I screwed it up already!* The truth was out now; he knew exactly how I felt, and there was no retracting what I had said. This wasn’t supposed to be some reunion to dig up old family wounds—I just needed a favor. If he was upset now and said no, then I’d already lost, and this would all be for nothing.

Quickly, I tried to backtrack, hoping to alleviate the tension. “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean that,” I stammered out. “I just—”

“No, it’s all right. It’s the truth, after all,” Drake interrupted, his voice steady.

He shook his head firmly, his sunstone eyes filled with such profound sorrow and regret that I had to look away to avoid being overwhelmed by my own emotions.

The room fell silent again. Gently, he motioned me towards my seat once more. This time, I complied, realizing how rude it would be for me to remain standing. My seat was right by the window, and I could see the brilliant blue sky stretching out above the city.

“First of all, thank you for coming,” Drake began anew. “To be honest, I had almost given up any hope that you ever would.”

“Don’t mention it,” I responded, my tone perhaps more distant than I’d intended. If I seemed aloof, it was only because I was unsure how to handle my

brother's sincere expression of gratitude.

I felt like I was constantly reminding myself of something I'd already known, but I truly felt out of my element around Drake. His expressions were disconcerting in the range of their spectrum, a far cry from the detached indifference he had displayed in our youth. If he had remained the cold, unfeeling boy of my childhood, I might have navigated this conversation with ease. But unfortunately for me, he had changed.

It's like he's a whole different person, I thought, scratching at my cheek uncomfortably. *Maybe there is something to the idea of enlightenment.*

Just then, a server entered, wheeling in a cart. He quickly arranged an array of dishes on the table and left as promptly as he had appeared. The food was served family style, in large portions meant for sharing—perhaps another sign of Drake's thoughtfulness?

"What timing," Drake muttered. "No matter, let's talk and eat. Help yourself to anything; today, it's all on me."

"R-Right..." I replied. Unable to bring myself to utter that dreaded six-letter word of gratitude, I simply nodded and reached for some bread to begin. Drake, on the other hand, didn't seem like he had much of an appetite, opting to sip from his wineglass first.

The tension in the air was stifling. If I didn't lighten the mood, even small talk would be a struggle, let alone discussing anything significant. *But how do I do such a thing?* Considering all the time I'd spent learning about magic and history, you'd think I could've devoted even a fraction of it to learning some basic interpersonal communication skills. I silently berated myself; my past as an uncouth loose cannon was coming back to bite me in the ass.

As I broke off pieces of bread, my mind desperately searching for any viable fragment of small talk, I suddenly caught sight of a familiar, lightly colored stew on the table. Steam curled up from the bowl in ethereal tendrils, the aroma wafting over and stirring up a surge of nostalgia within me. It was cream stew, a dish that had once brought joy to my mundane days.

Without realizing, I found myself pulling a bowl towards me, spoon poised for the first taste. The silky texture hit my tongue, and a floodgate of memories

burst open with that single spoonful.

“I see your favorite dish hasn’t changed.” Drake’s voice cut through my reverie. I looked up to find his eyes on me, a mix of warmth and unsettling intensity in his gaze as I cradled that bowl of delicious stew.

A knot tightened in my stomach. “How do you know what my favorite dish is?” I asked, my voice a mix of curiosity and suspicion.

His smile didn’t reach his sunstone eyes, which narrowed with a fondness that seemed almost painful. “Why wouldn’t I know?” he answered softly. “I always watched over you, at least during the time you lived at the estate.”

His words hung between us, heavy and bewildering. *He always watched over me? But I was only ever a contingency, a backup plan. Why would he...?*

Drake’s expression darkened, his gaze dropping to the floor as he sensed my unspoken but all too obvious confusion. “I’m sorry, Owen—for everything that happened to you there.”

His apology tumbled out, just like that, and unexpectedly, I found myself accepting it without hesitation. I felt no undercurrent of doubt questioning his sincerity, no need to utter a bitter retort and dismiss it as too late. Though an apology from him had been the last thing I’d expected to come out of this meeting, it resonated deeply, settling into the recesses of my heart with a surprising rightness.

“But why are *you* apologizing?” I hissed quietly.

His answer came with a long breath, weighed down with remorse. “Because I witnessed my mother’s cruelty towards you all those years, and I did *nothing*.” He paused, his voice cracking. “I should have been there for you—as a brother—instead of standing by as she tormented you.”

The silence stretched as he struggled to maintain his composure, his face turned away to hide his grief. I knew, even without seeing, that tears were brimming in his eyes.

“I know this might sound like a mere excuse to you, Owen,” he continued, his voice steadier yet thick with emotion. “But back then, I was utterly powerless. Intervening would have only escalated her wrath, perhaps to lethal ends. That’s

why I waited until I had the power to truly protect you. I'm deeply sorry."

I absorbed his apology in a reflective silence, my brow furrowed deeply as I pondered his apparent sincerity. Although in this present moment there was a complete lack of concrete evidence that his words held any weight, recollections of my childhood began aligning like pieces of a puzzle. The books he'd passed down to me, the lessons he'd cut short so I could have my turn with the tutors—the hints had always been there.

At the time, I hadn't been capable of interpreting his actions, but now, reflecting back for perhaps the first time since those distant days, I understood the incongruence of his generosity. Why would he hand me his books instead of discarding them? Why share his precious tutoring time unless he meant to offer me something more? The realization dawned on me with startling clarity—he had been trying to support me in whatever small ways that he could.

And then, more recently, there were the letters—each one a biannual dispatch filled with genuine concern, all of which I had callously destroyed, refusing to believe in the possibility of their sincerity. As this revelation settled in, my heart began to throb with pain.

All these signs had been right there, and I had turned a blind eye to all of them. Why hadn't I realized? The negative emotions I'd harbored towards Drake turned inwards all at once, flooding me with guilt and self-reproach. My gaze dropped to the floor as I voiced a trembling question: "I see. But why care for me at all? Was my existence not an inconvenience to you?"

I was a bastard child, but even if I hadn't been, I was a potential male heir, just like him. Even though I'd never considered taking over, I might have had every right to make the attempt. He might have been the eldest son, but had my existence truly never given him any cause for worry?

Drake looked up at me. He met my gaze firmly and shook his head. "An inconvenience? Never," he declared firmly. "Succession, inheritance—I never once thought of you in those terms. It was my father's work that interested me, not his title. As long as I could follow in his footsteps and become a diplomat, that was good enough for me." He paused. "Though if I'm going to be completely honest, I only grew to respect you after I saw how diligently you

applied yourself.” A soft smile touched his lips, his eyes narrowing with fond remembrance. “You threw yourself into your studies with no obligation to do so, setting aside all pride in your quest for knowledge. I still remember the astonishment I felt the day you asked to join me in my lessons. Here was someone, a member of my own family, who pursued his goals with relentless drive—a true ‘workhorse.’ Your commitment stirred something within me, compelling me to support you in whatever small ways I could. Though it was distressingly little, and certainly not enough, I tried to do what I could to help.”

As his smile faded into a wistful, bitter curve, a pang of regret shadowed his features. I yearned to shout, *You did more than enough!* But the overwhelming surge of gratitude constricted my throat. Startlingly intense feelings stirred within me, and I fought back tears, clenching my fists tightly to hold back the flood.

I was sure that I would never forget the vindication I felt in that moment for the rest of my life.

All my efforts—they hadn’t been in vain.

Since my departure from the estate, I’d convinced myself that my rigorous academic pursuits had amounted to nothing—time utterly squandered. Or so I’d thought.

But I’d been wrong. So grossly wrong. My efforts had touched the heartstrings of my brother, and that was something. That was more than just something.

“Drake,” I finally managed to choke out. “You’ve done so much for me—as my brother, more than you’ll ever realize. So please, don’t you dare harbor any guilt.”

Admitting this and addressing Drake as my brother after so much time had passed—it filled me with a mix of embarrassment and profound relief. I was overwhelmed with joy, knowing that I finally had someone I could truly call family.

“I don’t hate you, Brother,” I continued, my voice steady. “In fact, I’m grateful. Thank you—for caring about me for all this time.”

The letters he'd written to me every year, come rain or shine, flared brightly in my mind. Raising my head, I offered my brother the brightest, most genuine grin I could muster, a smile that showed all my teeth, my eyes squinting from the force of it.

Because of our parents, we had been needlessly kept from each other. But no longer!

Drake's eyes mirrored the depth of my feelings, glistening with unshed tears. He broke into his own heartfelt smile, squeezing his eyes shut in a valiant effort to hold back his emotions. "No, thank you, Owen!" he exclaimed with a heartfelt burst of energy. "To think the day you called me brother would ever arrive—I am overjoyed beyond measure."

That was when my brother—the dignified diplomat, the respected baron—broke down in tears before my very eyes. Soft murmurs of "thank God" slipped from him intermittently, his smile enduring amid the downpour of mingled grief and joy. Silently, I thanked all the forces that had guided me to seek him out. Had I continued to disregard his letters, tearing them apart without a second thought, our estrangement might have persisted for the rest of our days.

Of course, the most significant share of my gratitude went to Princess Carolina, for without her existence, I would have never even considered coming here in the first place. Without her influence, I might never have chosen to set out on this journey.

Damn it, I cursed softly to myself, half in jest. I'd come here to settle a debt, yet I'd found myself incurring an even deeper one. Acknowledging that the grace and kindness of the princess surpassed mine in countless ways, ways I could never hope to match, I watched tenderly over my brother as he embraced his vulnerability and wept at our unexpected reunion.

I allowed my brother to weep his fill, pushing my now-cold bowl of stew aside. I reached for the fruit platter. Eating quietly, I finished my portion just as Drake's tears subsided. His eyes were red and swollen, yet at the same time, they sparkled with the brightness of sunlight after a heavy rain.

"If you could forget you ever saw me crying like that, I'd appreciate it," he said a little sheepishly.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I responded archly. “Didn’t we just sit down to lunch?”

He paused, then a soft smile broke out onto his face. “Right, right...”

There was another moment of silence. Then, suddenly and without warning, laughter erupted between us, sparked by our absurdly stilted yet friendly exchange. Our interaction had been far too formal for brothers, but far too warm for strangers. Overwhelmed by our clumsy attempts at communication, we laughed and laughed and laughed.

“God, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this,” Drake finally managed to choke out.

“Me neither! But I kinda like it!” I replied.

“Me too...Brother! Me too.”

Taking advantage of the relative seclusion of our private dining room, we laughed loudly and without restraint. As our laughter finally faded into wide smiles, Drake reached for his wineglass. “So, let’s get down to business. What brings you here, Owen? What on earth compelled you to seek me out after all this time?”

His tone was formal, but the warmth from our earlier laughter lingered. His choice of phrasing seemed to indicate his certainty that I’d come here with a purpose, even though I’d never explicitly stated what it might be.

Well, he is indeed every inch the diplomat, I thought wryly. And here I was, preparing myself to leave gracefully without bringing up my initial request. It felt almost disingenuous to follow through on it after everything that had transpired between us. But of course, Drake saw through this hesitation as well, and he gave me an encouraging nod to continue.

Guess I have no choice but to proceed with my original plan, I thought. “The truth is, Drake, I...came to you today because I need a favor.”

His eyes widened in surprise. “There’s something I can do for you?”

I nodded. “You’re aware of the upcoming noble assembly, aren’t you? I need you to vote in favor of the proposal that will be presented. I can’t divulge any

further details at the moment, but it's very important to me, which is why I'm asking you to—"

"Understood," he said firmly, cutting me off.

He gently set his empty wineglass on the table, then reached for a new bottle. As he twisted the corkscrew, the stopper burst forth with a resounding pop. The unexpected sound unleashed the heady scent of the wine's spirited bouquet, which permeated the room with a degree of intensity that echoed my astonishment.

"'Understood'?" I almost shouted. "Just like that? This is a noble assembly! What happens there could change the course of the entire empire, and you're willing to agree to blindly support an initiative just like that?!"

Drake's response was calm and composed. "Proposals of great significance are brought to the assembly all the time. The vote of a single baron might not be the silver bullet you think it is. This is not to say that I take my responsibilities lightly, it's just...I can make a single exception to fulfill a request from my beloved younger brother, can't I?"

He took a swig of wine straight from the bottle. Frankly, I couldn't help but find fault in his logic. It seemed to me that he was a bit too eager to please. Nevertheless, I found that I was perfectly content with the situation.

"Thanks, Brother," I said. "I knew I could count on you." I flashed him another broad, toothy grin, feeling the wall that had stood long between us crumble yet further.

For the rest of the meal, our conversation flowed seamlessly. We meandered from one subject to another: the brutal nature of my training, the incessant headaches of his work as a diplomat, even the topic of our retired parents—we talked about anything and everything, as if we were trying to make up for all the time that had been lost. But as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end, and before we knew it, the clock had struck five. With our various responsibilities beckoning for our return, we agreed it was time to part ways. But not before one last exchange...

"Is your intention to walk incontrovertible?" Drake asked. "I don't mind giving you a ride to the castle. If you don't want to ride with me, I could easily arrange

a separate carriage for you.”

We’d settled the bill, bid the maître d’ farewell, and we now stood outside the restaurant. Under the light of the setting sun, the intense orange color in his eyes seemed to concentrate further. A moment earlier, I might have taken a moment to admire their beauty, but at this juncture, I found their sincerity provoking. His concern seemed to indicate that he saw me as a helpless child. *Overprotective much?*

“I appreciate it, but I’ll be fine, really,” I assured him.

“Are you certain? What if you’re accosted by a band of hooligans on your way back?” he persisted.

“Drake, I’m a knight of the Pyreborn. Do you really think I can’t hold my own against a few thugs?”

“Right. Of course.”

He gave me a nod to assure me of his trust in my skills as a warrior, but damn if he didn’t otherwise still seem like he was worried to death. If my status as a capable knight couldn’t assuage his concerns, I doubted anything could. Anxiety and worry rarely listened to logic and reason, after all.

I can already tell. I heaved a resigned sigh. *Drake’s going to be such a handful —this overprotective brother of mine.*

But my annoyance was just a front, a little act I put on to deceive my ego. Truthfully, I relished the concern, happy beyond words to know that someone cared for me so deeply. Struggling to keep a grin from spreading over my face, I ushered him towards his carriage waiting by the roadside. “I repeat: I’ll be fine, so you get going. Come on, the sign says ‘no loitering’; how long you gonna stay parked here for?”

“Oh, right, right,” Drake replied. He still seemed like he had more to say, but this time he held it back, offering me a rueful smile instead.

“All right then, take care,” I said. “I’m, uh, glad we met today.”

“And I as well. Perhaps we could do this again sometime?”

“Sure. I’m looking forward to it.”

With a final exchange of smiles, our short and sweet farewell came to an end. An odd thought crossed my mind—this would likely be our last meeting for months. I shut the carriage door behind him as he climbed in. With a gentle clunk, the coach began to move, setting Drake forth on a journey to somewhere far, far away. He peered out from the small window to give me one final look, and I waved.

“Take care, Brother,” I said softly, mostly to myself.

My final well-wish to him chased after the carriage as it pulled away. The conveyance merged into the rest of the traffic clopping over the cobbled street, leaving behind a gust of wind and a lingering feeling of loneliness in its wake. I continued to wave until the carriage made a left, rounded the corner, and disappeared from sight.

There he goes, I thought with a sigh. Truthfully, I would’ve liked to talk with him for a bit longer, but I reminded myself we’d given each other all the time that had been allowed us today and then some. I also had to reiterate to myself that the only reason I’d been chosen as Princess Carolina’s guard in the first place was because of my lack of personal ties or attachments. I resolved to keep my meetings with Drake infrequent, lest the extremists catch wind of the connection and seek to use him against me.

“I better be careful, just like the vice commander said,” I muttered under my breath.

“Did he also not tell you to keep your private thoughts to yourself rather than murmuring them aloud?” an unexpected voice teased.

Startled, I whipped around to see the figure of one Marisa Kissinger emerging from the milling crowd going about their business. Since she was on personal leave just as I was, she wore a plain dress instead of her usual maid’s uniform. *And here I was so sure she was born wearing that black-and-white ensemble...*

I found myself staring, utterly intrigued by the sight of Marisa in a normal gown. It wasn’t the flashiest outfit in the world, but it nevertheless managed to accentuate her beauty. (Not that it took much to accentuate something that was already so flawless.)

If only I could say the same for her personality, I mused wryly. “Diligent” was

the word that others generally used to describe her, but “uptight” was the one I preferred. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to like her; it was just that our differences were so vast that we struggled to find common ground.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” I said casually. “Is it okay for a count’s daughter to wander the streets of the capital alone?”

“Okay or not, sometimes I want to wander alone, and so I do,” she retorted. “More to the point, how did your appointment go? Is the baron in on the plan?”

As always, Marisa was all business, her expression unchanging. I couldn’t discern any emotion dwelling behind those ocean-blue eyes, just a raw and intense sense of purpose. I certainly hadn’t shared my reasons for requesting personal time—she’d just guessed it without me having to say a word. Then again, I shouldn’t have been surprised, really; I’d surmised she’d taken time off for much the same reason. I could hardly imagine someone so meticulous taking a break during such a crucial time unless it was something that might benefit her lady.

“My brother’s entirely on board,” I assured her cheerfully. “It was a productive meeting, in more ways than one. What about you?”

My question had been an expected one, or so I’d thought, but the mask on Marisa’s face faltered just for a second—a tiny flash of indecision—before resuming her accustomed expression of perfect neutrality. “Good, I think,” she began hesitantly, stroking her chin thoughtfully. “My father is...most likely on board, even without my persuasion. He owes too much to Lord Teodore to do anything but support him. As for my sister, I’m honestly not quite sure. I’m not convinced she has what it takes to persuade the duke.”



Ah, right. Marisa has another sister besides that pest Marielle, I thought, remembering the slightly older, more mature-looking raven-haired individual. Though I had to admit that it was more the headlines on the day of her marriage that I remembered than the girl herself. “Difficult Duke Finally Settles Down!” the papers had crowed—how could one forget an uproar like that?

But wait a second, did that mean Marisa had actually gone out of her way to meet one of her former bullies? If so, I had to admire her. That must have taken significant courage; the scars from past wounds weren’t easily overcome. Suddenly, my respect for Marisa surged, and I found myself commending her for her strength...silently, of course. I knew better than to act too friendly around her.

It certainly wasn’t my place to offer praise or comfort, or to reassure her of her capabilities. That role, if anyone’s, belonged to her fiancé, the vice commander. Yet I could hardly see that sadistic lordling providing any such support.

“I see,” I responded neutrally. “Well, it sounds like you’ve done what you can. What more can anyone ask for? And, um, if you’re headed back to the castle, why not join me? We’re going the same way, after all.”

I gestured down the avenue that led to the royal castle, then started walking. It would be a bad look for me to abandon the daughter of a count alone on the bustling streets of the capital. It might’ve been only five, but five o’clock in winter was equivalent to ten o’clock in summer. The city streets after dark were no place for a lady unescorted.

Marisa seemed to perceive my intentions, and she fell into step a few paces behind me, maintaining just enough distance so any onlookers wouldn’t mistake us for lovers—quite the Marisa thing to do. But then, borne upon the cool breeze in the fading light, a gentle whisper of “thanks” fluttered from her lips to my ears. I couldn’t help but smile in response. While I harbored no illusions of an easy camaraderie blooming between us, our small interaction today had softened my perception of her—a subtle yet significant change. This experience hadn’t engendered a desire to delve deeper into her essence or anything, but it had rather inspired an acknowledgment of a respect of sorts—

an unspoken recognition of her resolve and mine, united in service to our princess.

With these reflections accompanying my steps, Marisa and I continued our quiet return to the royal castle, each lost separately in our thoughts, yet together in our purpose.

Chapter Three

(Carolina)

Days passed in a blur, and before I knew it, the day of the noble assembly was upon us. The Ruby Imperial Palace was alive with a palpable buzz, teeming with members of the aristocracy from every corner of the empire, all of whom had convened for the occasion. As the proceedings got underway, I found myself somewhat detached from the fervor, secluded in the Emerald Palace as the assembly's deliberations unfolded without me.

I cast yet another anxious glance at the nearby clock, my finger absently tracing the delicate rim of my teacup. Were Ed and the others making any headway at this critical juncture? With Theodore and the emperor at Ed's side, there was no logical basis for my worry, yet it incessantly nagged at me regardless.

If only I could have been there to witness the debate firsthand. Unfortunately, the assembly was (with a few notable exceptions) exclusively for men. Hereditary peeresses and the empress could attend, but wives of peers and princesses were typically barred—a stark reminder that politics was still very much considered a masculine domain.

Despite the fact that I had little more to add to the conversation, I couldn't shake off a sense of injustice, being excluded from a process that was, in every essential way, centered around me. But alas, that had been their reasoning for disallowing the exception in the first place. The members of the assembly weren't supposed to know that the Faith Council proposal concerned me directly. It would've raised more than a few eyebrows in the opposition if I had been present. "Foolish" would've been the kindest word to describe me if my unneeded presence had jeopardized the very proposal meant to benefit me, so I'd chosen to wait patiently, albeit with a heavy heart.

My anxiety surged, and a small bit of it slipped through my lips as a quiet

murmur of “Oh, I just hope it’s going well...” Owen and Marisa, who had been silently standing by the wall, seemed to stir at my words. After a brief, knowing glance between them, both stepped forward.

Owen was the first to speak. “If I may, Your Highness.” Marisa seemed to silently echo his plea, her gaze fixed earnestly on me. Though her impassive visage generally gave away little in the way of emotion, at this moment it betrayed a very palpable sense of determination.

Their formality (not to mention their apparent nervousness) had me at a loss, which prompted me to encourage them to speak freely. They nodded gratefully, and as they prepared to speak, the tension in their faces tightened further; their nervous gulps were the only sounds in the otherwise silent room. *This is...some atmosphere*, I thought.

Bravely, Owen broke through the silence once more. “I hope you’ll excuse my impertinence, but I’d like to speak regarding the personal time you recently granted us. The reason Marisa and I both took time off before the assembly...was to meet with our respective siblings.”

The revelation struck me like an icy shock. “What?” I whispered. *Owen and Marisa met with members of their families—the very people they most loathe. But why?*

My bewilderment was impossible to conceal as I blinked rapidly, my gaze darting between the two in search of an explanation. Marisa stepped forward to provide one. “We approached Baron Klein and Duchess Blake with the intention of soliciting their aid for Your Highness. We convinced them to vote for the proposal that’s being presented at the noble assembly today.”

My astonishment soared to even greater heights. “You both met with your family for *my* sake?!” I almost shouted. “And even took personal time to do so?!”

“That is correct,” Marisa replied, her nod devoid of any emotion. It was as if she were merely recounting some distant, impersonal event rather than a potentially traumatic chapter from her own life.

“But why?” I stammered. “Why would you go to such lengths to...?!”

I was touched—incredibly touched—by their actions yet simultaneously consumed by concern that they might have reopened old wounds. They were my comrades in arms, my partners in a shared history of familial strife. Their pain was my pain, and the last thing I wanted was for them to suffer further, particularly on my behalf.

Torn, I struggled to find the right words. Should I praise their courage for so boldly facing their past, or should I apologize for the emotional toll their actions had undoubtedly exacted? Their welfare was paramount, and I found myself at a crossroads, uncertain of how to express my gratitude and concern.

I thought and thought and thought, but before I could settle upon the best course of action, Owen flashed me a wide, toothy grin. “Oh, don’t look like that, Your Highness! I’m absolutely elated to have met my brother. We’ve reconnected and reconciled! All those years, it turned out he felt truly sorry for what happened to me, and we’re even pen pals now, if you can believe it. Who would’ve guessed this would end up being the outcome? Helping you seems to have helped me, you know?”

The old Owen, the devil-may-care Owen, burst forth with astonishing vigor as he detailed his unexpected reunion. He looked so innocent, so proud, so happy—and I knew that these were three emotions that were not easily faked.

“If it weren’t for you, I might’ve gone my whole life without knowing the truth,” Owen continued, his voice warm with gratitude. “I don’t think I would’ve ever thought to seek him out on my own. Which makes you, Princess Carolina, the, um, springboard, I guess, for healing the rift between my brother and me. I’m grateful—truly. So there’s no need for sadness, Your Highness, not when I don’t feel even close to the same way. Quit draggin’ me down with you, you know?”

With a flourish, he produced a letter from his breast. The seal was already broken, and the envelope bore the name “Drake Klein.” He brandished the letter above his head like a trophy, a proud child showing off the proof of his new brotherly bond. I had no idea how it had happened, but if I’d been the “springboard,” as Owen had put it, for this unexpected reconciliation, then it was a role I embraced with joy.

That made one joyous reunion, but what about the other? My attention naturally drifted towards Marisa. Now that I looked closer, she wasn't completely expressionless. Her sapphire eyes roiled with some intense emotion, one that I wasn't sure I could name.

But that was it, the only hint of her internal turmoil. Besides that tiny spark, she was terrifyingly composed.

"I met with Duchess Blake—that is, my sister, Maria," she began, her voice hitching with noticeable hesitation. "I have no regrets, but on the other hand, I cannot honestly say I feel positively about the interaction. She was one of the tormentors of my youth. I loathed her. Yet for all that, seeing her now, so changed from before... It has transformed that feeling of loathing to something far more complicated, far more...nuanced."

She clasped her hands to her chest, her expression unreadable, then continued in a cautious tone. "What I mean by that is that because of Duke Blake's influence, Maria seems genuinely committed to changing herself for the better. She expressed real remorse and regret for the pain she caused me. Watching her grapple with her guilt, I'll readily admit that part of me felt a sense of vindication. Yet there was also a part of me—a quieter voice—that wanted her to forgive herself. I'm still trying to understand these mixed emotions, but what I can say with confidence at this moment is...I am glad that I had the chance to see her as she is now."

And then, as if to punctuate that eloquently poignant remark, the most beautiful woman in the empire graced us with her most beautiful smile. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of it; I had to admit that it was one of the loveliest things I'd ever seen. Marisa might have still been conflicted about the meeting and what it meant for her own peace of mind, but even I could tell that at the very least she didn't regret it, not one bit—and that was enough to set my mind at ease.

Rising from my seat, I felt a curious mix of wistfulness and joy stir within me, inspired by the courage of these two individuals who had boldly stepped beyond their past traumas. I crossed the chamber to stand in front of them, my face breaking into a gentle, understanding smile.

“Owen, Marisa...” I began, my voice calm and sincere. “You have both rendered me a great service, and for that, I am deeply grateful.” My formal tone softened, giving way to a more playful note. “I couldn’t have asked for a better bodyguard or a more capable handmaiden.”

At my heartfelt declaration, their expressions transformed. Their eyes widened as one, a glimmer of emotion shining briefly in each face. After a beat, Owen and Marisa broke out into simultaneous happy smiles.

“Anytime, Princess, anytime,” Owen said, puffing out his chest. He corrected himself swiftly. “I mean, Your Highness.”

“It is a privilege to serve, Your Highness,” Marisa added, her features softening with a graceful elegance.

Their cheerful moods were infectious, and a light giggle escaped me. “I would like to offer you both a gift for your services,” I proposed warmly. “Owen, for you, I shall finish the incomplete handkerchief I presented to you some time ago. And Marisa, what if I knit you a scarf, or... Oh no, perhaps you’d both prefer something finer instead? If there’s anything your hearts desire, gemstones, fine clothes, anything at all, I’ll arrange it for you. Price is no object!”

Goodness, I almost made a fool of myself with such notions! How conceited was it to think that my humble handicrafts could compare with the works of master artisans? I might have been royalty, but even if handmade goods had been made by a princess, they were still handmade goods—crude, basic, and unsophisticated. Discarding the idealistic notion that a handmade gift was the ultimate expression of affection, I prepared to offer them something more traditionally valuable—only to find myself being corrected by their earnest responses.

Owen and Marisa shook their heads emphatically, as if to say, *Not at all, Your Highness!*

“No gemstone can rival the significance of your handkerchief!” Owen passionately proclaimed. “It is a symbol of my honor as a knight, evidence that I have come into my own!”

“I, as well, would prefer a scarf knitted by Her Highness’s hand above

anything else!” Marisa added, displaying a fervency I hadn’t known she was capable of mustering. “As rare and exclusive as gemstones and gowns may be, how many people in this world can boast of a scarf crafted by Princess Carolina’s meticulous hand? There’s hardly a choice to be made.”

My. Neither of them needed to be so vehement in their refutations; a simple “no” would have sufficed, I thought, my cheeks warming. I nodded quietly, confirming that I would provide their gifts exactly as requested, eliciting another set of smiles. Admittedly, it did feel rather good to hear that my modest efforts were valued beyond the allure of rare stones and elegant dresses. But now, their praise had placed upon me the pressure to create things truly worthy of such commendation. With determination, I clenched my fists and set my mind into a whirl of activity, considering various threads, yarns, and design possibilities. Lesser functions like maintaining my dignified composure faded into the background. My face slackened, and I barely registered Owen pressing his half-finished handkerchief into my hand.

Lost in thoughts of deadlines—perhaps I could have both gifts completed by Noel—I was jolted back to my senses by a brisk knock on the door. A glance at the clock sent a wave of alarm through me; the hands pointed insistently at half past four. *Is it this late already?!* I thought, my composure slipping further into slight disarray. If it was truly that time already, then that likely meant my visitors were...

I looked at Owen hopefully; he confirmed my suspicions with a small nod. Quickly, I hastened back to my seat, carefully pocketing the handkerchief. Once I was settled, I called out for the visitors to enter.

“Excuse us,” two familiar voices chimed in unison from beyond the door—a familiar baritone and tenor. As Marisa and Owen returned to their respective positions, the door swung open to admit none other than Ed and Theodore. Both were clad in their formal attire, evidently having come straight from the assembly without bothering to change. Ed was dressed in a flamboyant red ensemble, while Theodore sported a more subdued suit in navy blue—his choice of a cool, dark hue likely intended to complement and enhance Ed’s fiery presence.

I greeted them warmly and motioned towards their accustomed seats. By the

time Ed took his place beside me, Marisa had nearly finished preparing the tea. Theodore, ever concerned with formalities, waited until his lord was comfortably settled before sitting down himself.

“You’ve both finally returned,” I noted, eager to hear about their experience. “How did the meeting go?”

“It went well,” Theodore answered with an exhausted exhale. “Longer than expected, but well.”

“You must’ve been getting impatient, Lina. Sorry about that,” Ed added. He glanced at the clock, frowning.

I shook my head gently. “Meetings drag on; that’s hardly unexpected. It’s all right. I’m just glad to hear it went well.” Since they’d hurried to meet me without even bothering to change, there was no need for such apologies; they had come to me as hastily as they could. I offered them a reassuring smile, acknowledging my appreciation of their efforts.

After a moment, the atmosphere seemed to relax enough so that we could move on to answering the questions in the forefront of my mind. I reached for my cup of tea and skipped without preamble to the heart of the matter. “So, what’s the verdict on the Faith Council?” I tried to sound as casual as possible, but I ended up sounding almost indifferent instead—the anxiety that I’d banished moments earlier seemed to rush back in all at once. The silence lingered, second by agonizing second, until finally, Theodore’s lips quirked upwards, ever so slightly.

“I suppose there’s no point in dragging this out. The motion to establish the Faith Council...was passed.”

I gasped. My eyes widened in shock. A wave of relief washed over me, so profound that my body went limp, and I slumped back against the sofa. The sensation overwhelming me was more a release of tension than a feeling of joy, and I absorbed Theodore’s announcement in silence, grateful and quietly astounded by the outcome of the assembly.

Thank God, I thought. Then, with even greater fervency, *Thank God!*

If the gathered aristocrats had voted against the motion, it would’ve put an

end to our plans then and there. And the soonest it could've been brought up for reconsideration would have been far too late to further our purposes. To call this assembly had already been a rushed affair, and it would've been nigh impossible to convince the scattered and disparate nobility to gather again anytime soon.

But there was no point in even considering such hypothetical difficulties; after all, the motion to establish the Faith Council had passed! All that was left was to organize the execution of our plan: selecting participant nations, initiating formal dialogues, and other tasks of that sort. These steps seemed trivial in comparison to the monumental effort of obtaining the approval of the noble assembly.

We did it. One giant step closer to our goal! Yet, as I relished in the sweet success, I momentarily let my guard down. Theodore's next words considerably tempered my elation.

"The motion passed," he continued, "but not without considerable opposition from the nobility. As a result, we had to incorporate several compromises into our proposal."

Jolted from my victorious reverie, I bit my lip. "Compromises? What compromises?"

Teodore's half smile morphed into a half frown. He didn't respond immediately, instead sitting in a contemplative silence that sent waves of anxiety crashing over me again.

Slightly panicking now, I shot a glance at Ed for reassurance; he was sipping away at his tea in a most leisurely fashion! He didn't seem particularly worried—in fact, he appeared utterly unconcerned. Now I didn't know what to think!

At last, Theodore adjusted his glasses, signaling he was ready to elaborate. "Most changes are minor, and I won't concern Your Highness with such trivialities—but there is one thing." He raised a single index finger, a cryptic smile overtaking his face. "At the end of a lengthy, spirited, and I shall repeat, *lengthy* discussion, it was agreed that an additional trial should be instituted to select the candidate to be Saint."

A trial to select the candidate to be Saint? An additional trial? As in, a round of

preliminaries to determine the Malcosian candidate before they're pitted against the candidates from other nations?

"But I thought we were going to propose that the emperor would choose the candidate?" I asked.

"Right," Teodore acknowledged. "Unfortunately, that was the aspect of the proposal that stirred significant dissent among the nobility. They were up in arms, demanding a fair and transparent process to determine the candidate, so here we are. Initially, we staunchly defended His Majesty's prerogative and countered their objections, but ultimately—"

"You're plenty powerful, Lina," Ed cut in, his smile widening reassuringly. "Powerful enough to face any challenger. So we accepted their terms. What's another trial before the real competition, anyway?"

So that was why Ed was so unperturbed; he had the utmost confidence in my abilities. The happiness his trust instilled in me was palpable, but so was the pressure. Strangely, however, the pressure wasn't as smothering as I'd expected it to be. An equal force of resolve seemed to well up from within me, and it pushed outwards against this pressure, countering it, creating a potent and steadying equilibrium.

My hands balled into tight fists. *You can do this, Lina!* I reassured myself. *Prove that Ed's faith in you is not misplaced. Crush the preliminaries; become the candidate!*

Opposite me, however, Teodore didn't look quite as enthused. "I, on the other hand, do have some concerns about the outcome of this preliminary tournament," he confessed, his tone not as bright as before. "I fear that if you wield the full extent of your power, your true nature will be revealed before we are ready for it to be widely known." He met my gaze squarely. "Unless you can promise me that you'll be able to hold back for this tournament?"

I let out a feeble squeak of a response. Never once in my life had anyone ever asked me to "hold back." I turned away from Teodore's earnest gaze, my mind swirling over the implications of that foreign two-word phrase. Throughout my life, I had always operated at full capacity, striving relentlessly to catch up to Flora. Moderation was an atrophied muscle I had never exercised, and I

couldn't help but wonder if it could perform as needed without any prior training. And another concern nagged at me: could the power of Divinity even be controlled in such a way? By its very nature—a miraculous power that responded instinctively to my desires—it seemed a daunting and perhaps impossible task to rein it in.

“Teodore,” I began cautiously, “I’m not sure I can promise you something so —”

“You can, Your Highness,” he interjected firmly, “and you will. My trust in you is unwavering.”

Again throwing out words like “trust” as if they are meaningless platitudes, I silently grumbled as I returned his sincere, pleading gaze. That sly fox. He knows full well the effect his words have on me.

I let out a deep sigh, wondering when I would become accustomed to the expectations of others. It was almost concerning how easily I could be manipulated. A wry smile crept across my face, directed at no one but myself. “All right,” I said. “I promise to temper my power. When is this selection slated to occur?”

Teodore’s face lit up with a broad, gratified smile at my quick acceptance. He paused to take a sip of tea and gather his thoughts before replying. “With the timing of the main trial itself and the date of Noel to be considered, it was decided that the selection trial will take place in five days’ time.”

“Five days? I see. Then—” I blanched. “Wait, five days?!”

I’d anticipated a rushed schedule given the urgency of our endeavors, but five days? Five days was nothing short of a cruel joke! *Forget my own preparations, will they have enough time to secure a venue, prepare the event, or even come up with a shortlist of candidates by then?!*

As these uncertainties spiraled into a dizzying tornado within my thoughts, Ed’s voice cut through the chaos, calm and reassuring. “There’s nothing for you to worry about. My brother will handle the event preparations. Though it galls me to admit it, Gilbert is extremely capable. He’ll get everything sorted out.”

“Ed...”

After all that had happened between us, Ed seemed to view Prince Gilbert in a decidedly less than positive light. But even then, despite his reservations, Ed confidently vouched for his brother's competence—albeit through gritted teeth and knitted brows.

Very well, then I will trust in his ability as well.

But could Prince Gilbert *really* manage such a monumental task? He was still in Celestia, investigating the archbishop, and now he was expected to organize this event as well? It seemed an awful lot to ask of someone who had only recently recovered enough to resume an active participation in society.

I found myself offering a silent prayer for Prince Gilbert's health as I turned my gaze to the window. Outside, gray, oppressive clouds cast a gloomy shadow over the land beyond, stirring within me a deep sense of unease.

(Monica Arendt)

Yesterday, the news had reached me that something called the "Faith Council of Saints" was to be established forthwith. Naturally, I'd been invited to the preliminary trial as a potential candidate, but that was days away—hardly a matter requiring my immediate attention. At the moment, I found myself blissfully alone in the vast Arendt estate, luxuriating in a perfectly leisurely teatime. The snowy landscape outside presented a sublime vista, the perfect accompaniment to the heady fragrance of my exquisite herbal brew. However, my serene repose was abruptly shattered by a clamorous bang as the door to the room crashed open. My father, true to his usual intrusive manner, barged into the room.

"Monica," he barked, his voice rough as gravel. "The selection trials for the Saint of Malcosias are in mere days. Shouldn't you be preparing?"

Ricardo Arendt, Commander of the Scarletjade Kingdrakes, advanced towards me. His emerald-green hair was the same hue as mine, but it was there our physical similarities ended: his bulky, muscle-bound figure and deep-set eyes were polar opposites to my slim grace. He stood with his hands on his hips, towering over me. To the untrained eye, his stance might suggest annoyance or even anger, but I knew him best, so I could see past his intimidating exterior to

the true sentiments reflected in his lapis lazuli eyes. Within their depths a glimmer of concern and affection shone for me, his cherished daughter.

“Goodness, Father,” I said, my lips slipping automatically into a smile. “Why, it almost sounds like you’re worried I might fail. Pray tell, who, according to all who know me in our vast empire, is the most renowned and capable wielder of holy magic?”

Father’s stern demeanor hardly fazed me. I responded with all the confidence and pride that befitted my illustrious status. The eldest daughter of Duke Arendt might have lacked martial prowess, but let it not be said that she was anything less than a masterful mage, peerless in her manipulation of holy magic. (And just to be perfectly clear: this wasn’t merely my own grand opinion; it was an indisputable fact.)

I had no idea why the imperial family had decided to establish this Faith Council or whatever, but I would graciously accept their inadvertent offering of a throne for me to ascend. Once I claimed the title of Saint, the path to becoming empress would be but a mere stride away! Surely Prince Gilbert would see that only someone as intelligent and beautiful as I could ever hope to be his equal, his consort. He would have no logical choice but to take the Saint of Malcosias herself as his bride.

Just wait for me, won’t you, my beloved Prince Charming? I simpered silently, my easy smile curving into a smirk. Meanwhile, Father seemed slightly perplexed by my evident delight.

“I do not question your awe-inspiring magic, Daughter,” he said. “But Princess Carolina will also be a contender at the trials. That one possesses unknown power, so you’d do well to be cautious.”

“Her?” I snorted dismissively. “Why is *she* participating?”

My expression soured into a frown. Carolina Ruby Martinez—her very name twisted my insides. If it wasn’t clear, I *hated* that woman. Not because she was wed to Prince Edward—I held no regard for that brute—but because her sudden rise to favor had been like a slap to my face. Once merely the daughter of a middling duke from an insignificant nation, she now dared to outrank me!

Utterly unconscionable. While both of us were daughters of dukes, it would

be utter folly to assume that a duke from a trifling realm like Celestia could possibly hold the same prestige as one from the mighty empire of Malcosias. By every measure—ability, birth, status, rank—I eclipsed Princess Carolina by far, yet by some cruel twist of fate and a simple marriage, she now presumed to look down upon me! I had tolerated this indignity solely because it was the boorish Prince Edward she had ensnared. Had it been my beloved Prince Gilbert, I would have orchestrated her demise in the blink of an eye. Since she'd now dared to step directly in my way, however, I was left with no choice but to thoroughly humiliate her in order to show her the stark disparity in status between us. The delightful image of Princess Carolina collapsing to her knees in utter despair as she witnessed the sheer splendor of my power danced in my mind's eye, coaxing a wicked grin to my face.

"I appreciate your concern, Father, but rest assured, it's unwarranted," I declared. "No matter what powers she may wield, she cannot surpass me." I gazed at him firmly, with the unshakable confidence of someone who had never once been bested in a contest of holy magic.

My father's brow knitted with worry, yet he uttered no further objections, nodding in resigned agreement instead.

Oh, Father, I mused inwardly with a playful giggle, I truly am the apple of your eye, aren't I?

"But since you're here," I continued aloud, smoothly transitioning to another subject, "why not join me for tea?" My eyes drifted to his arm. I raised an eyebrow. "Oh my. What happened there?"

A deep wound marred his skin—fresh enough to remain vivid, yet congealed enough that the bleeding had ceased. It was merely a flesh wound, unlikely to cause any lasting disability, but it was certain to leave a gruesome scar. While I understood that such marks were viewed as badges of honor among warriors, I could not allow my father, the esteemed commander of the Kingdrakes, to parade around like a human cutting board. It would simply not do for our family's reputation, especially when things were already bad enough with all the whispers comparing the Kingdrakes to the Pyreborn.

"It's nothing," he responded with his typical stoicism. "Had a bit of a training

mishap.”

He averted his gaze with the attitude of a sulking child, but I was familiar with this particular quirk of his. I could already guess what had happened. More likely than not, he’d been coaching an overly nervous and zealous cadet who had accidentally inflicted the wound. Unlike those boorish Pyreborn, the Kingdrakes recruited solely those of purest noble blood. Previous experience wielding a sword was an unnecessary requirement. Skills could be trained; heritage could not. Accidents such as a sword being clumsily thrown or dropped were not uncommon.

“You must take greater care of yourself,” I scolded. “You’re not nearly as young as once you were, Father.” Extending my hand, I softly touched his forearm, amassing energy within me. With one spell, I cleansed his wound; with another, I sealed it completely. “There. As good as new,” I declared, patting the healed area lightly, my posture swelling with pride.

Father’s face broke into a warm smile; he was evidently pleased by my display. “Thank you, darling. Your magic never ceases to amaze me.”

I preened and let out a playful giggle, placing a hand over my heart. “I know that. As we have already established, I *am* the empire’s most powerful wielder of holy magic.” It wasn’t boasting if it was simply the truth.

My father’s smile mirrored the confidence radiating from me. Despite the time elapsed since I’d last wielded my powers in earnest, they’d returned to me as naturally as breathing. *Perhaps I was wise to prioritize my well-being over frivolous practice and unnecessary expenditure of my stamina*, I mused. The embarrassment of failing the trial due to something as trivial as fatigue was unthinkable. While the title of Saint was all well and good, what I *needed* was to see Princess Carolina’s categorical defeat, her drowning in her own incompetence as she acknowledged my greatness.

Some might call such thoughts petty, but I have always found tenacity in the force of my spite. Until the day of the preliminary trials, I would lie in wait, preserving my strength and biding my time.

(Archbishop Mills)

“What? A ‘Faith Council of Saints’? What is this nonsense...?” I snapped, the words barely escaping from between my clenched teeth. The opulently appointed sitting room in the hotel was usually a place of luxurious comfort, but now it felt suffocating as I held the latest report from my subordinate. “This cannot be,” I murmured, eyes scanning the same lines repeatedly in disbelief.

An unwelcome voice shattered my contemplation. “I trust this intelligence, Your Grace. It was procured directly from one of the empire’s own nobles.”

I glanced at the subordinate in question before me, cloaked entirely in black. Although he knelt in front of me in respect, his back was ramrod straight. His eyes pierced brightly through the folds of his attire, mirroring the certainty in his voice and challenging my incredulity with silent audacity.

How could this have happened? I lamented, wringing my hands. The news struck with the unexpected force of a thunderclap on a clear day. *What am I to do now?*

“Princess Carolina... She isn’t participating in the trials, is she?” My voice faltered as I asked, clinging to my last shred of hope. Despite knowing the likelihood of her involvement, I couldn’t help but grasp at this frail possibility. I implored the heavens in a voiceless prayer: *Please, Lord, let it not be so.*

The reply was unwavering. “The informant has confirmed that Princess Carolina is indeed slated to participate.”

With those words, my fleeting optimism was dashed to the ground, a cruel return to reality. I slumped back into my chair, a picture of defeat.

Princess Carolina’s presence as part of the trials could only mean one thing: the Faith Council was being established to elevate her stature and legitimacy, which suggested that the imperial family had already recognized her divine potential—and my scheming. Surely she hadn’t betrayed our secrets during our last encounter? *No*, I reassured myself, *things are moving too swiftly for that. They must have prepared this move well in advance.*

Yet this realization only spawned a swarm of new questions. How had they anticipated my plans even before I had arrived? Had there been a leak from within my own circle? But if so, who could it have been?

Suddenly, my mind lit up with a vivid image of the glib, knowing smile of a certain king. “Don’t tell me it was Phillips, that cur...”

The clergy in Celestia were clenched too tightly in my iron fist; they were unable to betray me, even if they dared to consider it. But that king—that insufferable king—certainly could. His mocking laughter seemed to echo in my mind, causing my brow to furrow deeply in vexation.

If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even understand the source of the tragedies befalling your own country! I cursed, my teeth grinding in mounting frustration. The surge of rage threatened to boil over; I felt myself teetering on the brink of a destructive outburst, but I managed to restrain myself before I fell into the blind void of anger. *Flying into a rage won’t solve anything*, I told myself.

You haven’t been defeated yet. Think, Jonathan, think!

If the empire had indeed sniffed out my maneuvers, I could ill afford any blunders. Opting to lie low would be prudent to preserve my liberty for now, but it would be a temporary measure at best. Carolina, considering the extent of her powers, would shine peerlessly in any competition of Divinity; the trials were as good as a sham. If I remained mired in torpidity for too long, she would undoubtedly rise to Sainthood. Once that had happened, any opportunity for me to act would vanish into thin air.

This meant that my only viable course of action would be an attempt to thwart Carolina’s victory. Direct interference in the trials? No, that was a possibility fraught with peril, too likely to spiral out of control. Yet what alternatives remained? It was already too late to plant my own agents or secure loyalties through bribes...

“But perhaps I could still sway one of the other participants?” I wondered aloud.

I expelled a resigned sigh. Engaging in such tedious manipulations had never been my preferred tactic, but my viable options were dwindling. Annoyed by the necessity of this less direct approach, I returned my attention to the man kneeling before me. “Did you bring *it* with you?”

He deftly reached into his pocket, and after a brief rummage, he produced two small pearl-like objects—one black, the other gray. “Here, Your Grace.”

These seemingly innocuous beads were, in fact, potent pills designed to dramatically amplify one's magical abilities (at the cost of a few measly side effects). Prior to my taking an interest in the potential of this serum, the consequences of consuming the concoction had on occasion been known to be as severe as death. But thankfully, through rigorous research and refinement, we had managed to mitigate the more extreme risks. The colors indicated their potency; the black one, while more powerful, also brought with it more severe side effects. Probably best to avoid its use in the trials. (Not that I cared about its user's safety in any way, but it would be an utter waste of time if I were to go to all the trouble of planting my own candidate only to have them die on me after the fact.) *Yes, for this delicate task, the gray one will suffice.*

I selected the gray pill from his hand as I ruminated over the next critical decision in my mind: to whom should I entrust this dangerous advantage?

This hypothetical candidate would not only need to have a naturally high chance of winning already, but more importantly, the requisite...*moral flexibility* to knowingly partake in my schemes. The entire plan would disintegrate if they turned informant upon first contact.

"A talented mage who can also keep a secret..." I murmured, sifting through the mental roster of known capable magic wielders within the empire. Several names floated to the surface, but only one seemed an ideal match for my requirements.

"Lady Monica Arendt, you just might be the one for me," I declared, stroking my chin in contemplation.

It grated on me to be forced to depend on such a spoiled brat of a girl for my plans, but circumstances being what they were, I had little choice. Without delay, I sent my man with a message to Duke Arendt's estate, requesting an audience with his daughter.

To my surprise, the reply came swiftly. The rapid consent caused me to raise an eyebrow, but with time pressing against me, I shelved my suspicions and made for the Arendts' lavish residence. Upon arrival, a maid promptly escorted me to the drawing room. There, Lady Monica awaited me, the very embodiment of elegance as she delicately sipped her tea.

“Your Grace, hello,” she said as I walked in. “The house of Arendt warmly welcomes an archbishop to its halls.” She smiled gently, fixing me with a neutral gaze as she reached for a cookie. Despite the warm words, she didn’t deign to stand, or even so much as tip her head to me in respect. An ember of irritation already smoldering within me, I reminded myself of the necessity of her cooperation and plastered a smile on my face.

I spoke as obsequiously as I could manage. “Your Ladyship, it is indeed an honor to be received by you. Do allow me to communicate my deep appreciation of your willingness to accommodate this visit on such short notice. Many of your standing would not be so gracious.” Though it pained me to grovel thus, the stakes were too high for pride to stand in my way. A small humiliation was a trivial price for eternal victory.

Lady Monica responded with a light giggle, seemingly pleased. “Yes, well, sit wherever you like, or stand, as you prefer.”

“I thank you for your hospitality.” I managed a polite nod as I moved to the sofa opposite hers. Settling down with an inward sigh, I positioned myself directly across from her.

She casually stirred her tea. “So, what brings you here, Your Grace? Oh, but please be brief. I am a very busy woman.” Her mouth slipped into a smile that reeked of self-importance. “I certainly hope you didn’t come all this way just to bore me...”

The sudden desire to wipe the smugness off that proud little face surged through me, but I restrained myself.

This bitch. She thinks she can make a fool out of me... She’d better relish the taste, because once Carolina is mine, this little tyrant will be the first to feel my wrath.

Revenge would come. With that thought, I managed to suppress my irritation and responded instead with a calm nod. “Of course, Your Ladyship. However, I must ask for a moment of your patience. The matter I need to discuss requires a bit of context to fully grasp the implications of my request.”

From there, I launched into an explanation of Carolina’s Divinity, emphasizing repeatedly the sheer scale of her power, all the while carefully observing

Monica's reactions. As expected, she took the news less than gracefully. Her lips protruded slightly, her demeanor unmistakably unimpressed.

Her brow crinkled into deep furrows of skepticism. "That girl harnesses the same power as the high pontiff?" she asked incredulously. She didn't even notice that she had ground the cookie in her hand into smithereens; her focus was entirely on me, her eyes wide with a mix of shock and reluctant recognition. I could tell that she wasn't nearly as disbelieving as she pretended to be. The establishment of the Faith Council had doubtlessly raised questions—questions that I had just answered for her.

"All right. Suppose I believe you," she continued. "Say Carolina really is this bearer of almighty Divinity. What do you want me to do about it?"

Ah, yes. There it is—the opening I've been waiting for.

"I hope you don't misunderstand, Your Ladyship. I harbor no designs for any harm to befall Her Highness—nothing so crude as kidnapping or assassination. No, I merely wish for Her Highness to...see the merits of my argument that it is her sacred duty to return to Celestia. And for that, I seek your invaluable assistance."

"Yes, we've already established you want my help. Tell me what exactly it is you *want*," she snapped, restlessly twirling a lock of her hair around her finger.

So impatient, I thought. And perhaps even a touch disappointed? Was she hoping the plan would escalate to kidnapping...or worse?

"No murder. What a bore," she muttered, almost too low for me to catch.

She *was*. I tried not to think too deeply about the implications of this and forged ahead.

"While my request might not meet such...thrilling expectations, Your Ladyship, it does involve you stepping into a role of great importance," I continued, choosing my words carefully. "What I want is for you to triumph in the preliminaries and become the empire's representative in the Saintly Trials."

Now that the request was out in the air, a strange nervousness overtook me, prompting me to idly twiddle my thumbs. Two options lay before me as I continued in these negotiations. One path challenged her pride, potentially

spurring her into action through a provoked response, while the other route lavished her with praises, enticing her to accept my offer through flattery.

As I weighed my choices, Lady Monica's impatience manifested itself in her sharply crossed arms. "And how do you propose I do that? You just spent precious minutes explaining how terribly divine Carolina is and how I therefore don't stand a chance." She arched a dubious brow. "And now you're telling me to bridge that insurmountable gap?"

Perhaps her pride *was* the key. It clearly stung her to think she was inferior to Carolina in any way. Seizing the moment, I reached into my pocket and retrieved the capsule my retainer had provided to me. "Indeed. As things currently stand, we have no chance. But with this..."

I placed the pill wrapped in a handkerchief on the table, letting the shape of it press against the fabric. With a calculated flourish, I unfolded the cloth, revealing the small gray orb nestled within.

"What's this? A gemstone?" Monica inquired sharply, her gaze narrowing at the pill. "This better not be what I think it is."

If you think it is a bribe, my lady, you could not be more mistaken.



I offered her a reassuring smile. “This is...an alchemical supplement, designed to enhance your magical abilities. Simply swallow this pill as you would any medication, and you’ll experience a significant increase in your arcane prowess. The only side effect is a mild fever that may persist for a few days—a small price for such considerable power, wouldn’t you think?”

I crafted my words carefully, occasionally pausing, perhaps faltering slightly, but I believed my offer was a compelling one. Monica scrutinized me, her eyes sharp and calculating, clearly attempting to discern what crucial details I might be omitting. “Truly? Well, I doubt I’ll have a need for such a thing, but perhaps I’ll hold on to it for now.” With a nonchalant air, she picked up the capsule and tucked it into her pocket.

This is why I can’t stand these spoiled noble brats... I seethed internally, bristling with irritation. She didn’t press for further information, seemingly indifferent to the potential of the advantage I had handed over to her. Was she underestimating the value of my offering, or did she genuinely believe she wouldn’t need it? Either way, I could only hope in earnest that this evidently unshakable confidence of hers would not be her downfall.

Monica’s gaze snapped back to me, a flicker of amusement crossing her features. “Since you were so kind as to gift me this little trinket, I suppose it’s only fair I share something of interest in return: the imperial family has been mentioning you quite often these days. Are you certain you haven’t done anything to draw their attention?” She casually raised her cup, taking a sip with a poised calmness. “I’m not so sure I could be quite as relaxed as you appear to be if I found myself in such a position.”

Her lax attitude irked me to no end, but her words sent a chill down my spine. *The imperial family discussing me? Are their machinations unfolding so rapidly? Am I already in peril?* Despite my efforts to remain composed, I could feel a clammy shade of pallor creeping over my face, betraying my alarm at my new knowledge of this swift turn of events. I cursed internally, wishing I could confront my past self, an overconfident man who had naively believed there was still plenty of time to set his plans into motion.

Noticing my discomfort, Monica’s lips curled into a subtly satisfied smirk. It

seemed that to her, witnessing others' discomfort was as delicious as the sweetest nectar; her mood visibly brightened at my unease.

"But you know," she cooed, leaning forward slightly with a glint in her eye, "I'd gladly offer you protection if you care to tell me a bit more about how this little gray pill works."

This conniving little... Had this been her plan all along?

"I think it would be fun to see if I could replicate its effect," she added playfully.

It almost sounded like she was approaching this as if it were an inconsequential hobby of mine rather than a subject of intense research and trial and error. My inner fury surged at her casual tone and the dismissive manner in which she seemed to regard me—as if I were little more than a passing amusement. She had me cornered, bound to taking whatever terms she offered, knowing full well that I was powerless to resist.

My teeth clenched in silent frustration. However, her little quid pro quo, as galling as it was to accept, wasn't entirely disadvantageous. What was revealing some details of my years of research compared to securing my freedom and safety? Besides, I could easily omit the most critical information—she would be none the wiser.

What great foresight I had to have brought only the gray pill today, I thought. The more potent black capsule remained my secret, hidden safely away. As I reminded myself of this, a smile began to form on my lips. With each passing moment, the balance of power seemed to shift subtly back in my favor, and by the time I opened my mouth to accede to a full embracement of her proposition, my smile had blossomed into a smug expression of satisfaction.

"Very well, Your Ladyship. I agree to your terms," I conceded, maintaining my composure. "I'll prepare a document detailing everything you need to know about the pill."

Her eyes briefly widened in surprise at my acquiescence, then settled back into their customary nonchalance. "How boring. I thought he'd put up more of a fight," she murmured with a shrug and a hint of disappointment in her voice. "It's agreed, then," she said. "I will discuss your arrangements with my father."

We have several safe houses that may be suitable to your needs.”

Without further ado, she rose and strode towards the door with an air of urgency. “Better hurry before the imperial family catches him,” she muttered under her breath, in a tone that seemed to carry the lighthearted cadence of a child rushing to play with a toy before it was snatched away.

So I’ve been reduced to nothing but a spoiled girl’s plaything, I reflected, sinking back into my seat as the clicking of her heels faded down the hallway.

I suppose I shouldn’t be so morose, I admonished myself. Indeed, I had in the course of a single teatime managed to secure my involvement in the trials and arranged a safe haven to shield myself from immediate danger. Now, freed from the constant pressure of having to look over my shoulder, I could plot my next moves in relative peace. Yet the shadow of doubt lingered—could Carolina truly be bested in the trials? Given the sheer magnitude of her powers, would the enhancements provided by my invention be enough to tip the scales?

It seemed wise to prepare a contingency.

“I suppose I also ought to hand one of the capsules off to *her*,” I considered, a veil of silvery-blond hair cascading past my mind’s eye. Since this was to be the backup plan, I carried my thought experiment forward with the assumption that Monica’s efforts with the gray pill had failed. Given that *she* was even less powerful than Monica, particularly in her current condition, it would be insufficient to rely on the same level of enhancement that Monica had used. In that case...

“Black it is, then...”

In this hypothetical situation, the risk would no longer be a factor. With Monica, it was crucial to balance her empowerment with her survival past the preliminaries, whereas this imagined fail-safe scenario allowed no half measures—it was all or nothing. Ideally, the black pills would serve merely as insurance, unnecessary if all else went according to plan. *Besides*, I assured myself, *side effects vary widely among individuals*. A fatal outcome was possible but by no means certain. Overthinking such unfortunate possibilities would serve no purpose.

Comforted by this rationale, I summoned my retainer, who had discreetly

accompanied me to the estate. He appeared slightly apprehensive as he took possession of the black pill, the gravity of its potential not lost on him. Nevertheless, he departed silently, a loyal agent ready and willing to perform his clandestine task and deliver my “gift” to its intended recipient.

As he disappeared back into the shadows, I turned my attention to the looming preliminary trials again. I had deployed every tool at my disposal. With all contingencies considered and the appropriate actions set in motion, the tight knot of anxiety that coiled around my heart finally began to unravel.

Chapter Four

(Carolina)

As the trial approached, I found myself deeply engaged in training at the Emerald Palace under the watchful guidance of Teodore. This time, I squared off not against a cactus but three fluffy towels laid out in a row. The terry cloth had formerly been pristine white before each had been stained completely with vivid blue ink. My task was to cleanse the ink from only one towel while leaving the others untouched, and it was proving unexpectedly difficult.

“Come on,” I muttered to myself, my frustration mounting ever higher. I leaned back on the sofa, glaring at the stubborn towels. “Can’t just one of you come clean without the others?”

I had repeated this exercise twenty times now, and every attempt had ended in the same manner: a trio of impeccably white towels. At this rate, there was no hope that my unchecked powers would remain unrevealed at the preliminaries, which would instantly expose me as a bearer of Divinity. A tendril of hopelessness curled its way around my heart, but luckily, Teodore was there to intervene. He approached the towels and sternly intoned, “You don’t have the time to whine, Your Highness. The preliminaries are imminent. We must refocus and continue.” With a flick of his fingers, magic emanated from his fingertips, restraining the towels blue. “Again,” he commanded.

I expelled the quietest sigh I could and prepared to try once more. As I began to focus my energies, I found a question nagging at me. “Speaking of the preliminaries, have you received word from Prince Gilbert? I know you said he planned to arrive the day of the trials at the very latest, but that seems to be an awfully unforgiving schedule. What will happen if the organizer of the trial himself doesn’t manage to attend?”

Teodore shook his head slightly, his expression sober. “Indeed, the first prince has yet to confirm his return,” he admitted.

“I see. Then perhaps we truly are asking too much of him, managing both the investigation and the trials.” My face clouded with concern about the immense burden we had placed onto Prince Gilbert. Before I could allow myself to worry too much, though, there was a sudden knock on the door.

We weren’t expecting visitors. I exchanged a quick look with Owen, who shook his head, signaling no imminent danger. Relieved, I called out for whomever it was to enter. The door slowly swung open to reveal an unexpected guest...

“Pardon my intrusion. Pyreborn knight Collett here with an important message for the vice commander!”

Collett, upon entering, immediately dropped to one knee, his gaze earnest as he looked up at us. The affable smile that usually lit up his youthful face was alarmingly absent, and in its place shone a grave and terrible seriousness. *So Collett can make faces like that too*, I observed through my concern. Theodore pointedly nudged his glasses up his nose.

“An urgent matter?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Collett responded.

“An update from Prince Gilbert, then? I’ll hear it at once.”

I wondered if Theodore was choosing to have the message delivered in my presence because he sensed my anxiety. If so, I was deeply grateful for his consideration; being excluded and left to imagine the worst would have only deepened my worry. *I just hope it isn’t bad news...*

“Yes, sir,” Collett continued. “The message is as follows: His Imperial Highness Prince Gilbert requests immediate transport back to Malcosias.”

My heart leaped. *That’s the opposite of bad news!*

Collett’s report didn’t end there. “Prince Gilbert has secured all the necessary evidence and witnesses for formal charges to be leveled against Archbishop Mills. The prince is prepared to proceed immediately.”

Teodore briefly winced; I could already tell he was dreading the strain of the upcoming teleportation spell. But then, as expected of one as unflaggingly

dutiful, his expression soon settled into one of quiet resignation. A twinge of sympathy stirred within me. If it were merely physical evidence that needed to be transported, perhaps he could've worked out a way to handle it with nothing but his storage magic, but if there were witnesses, plural, that would make for a significantly greater challenge. Unfortunately, there was no one better suited to carry out this task than Theodore.

At least Prince Gilbert is coming back, I reassured myself. There were still so many tasks left to do, but finally, we could cross one thing off the list: the status of the trials was no longer jeopardized.

Teodore threw back his shoulders with deliberate resolve. "Understood. I will head there immediately. Please relay the exact message you've given me to Prince Edward as well."

"At once, sir!"

Collett rose to his feet, snapped into a knight's salute, and swiftly exited the room. Teodore spun back to me. "Then if you'll excuse me, Your Highness, I have a prince to wrangle."

"Go, please," I said, offering him a supportive smile. "Don't mind me. I'll practice by myself."

His expression softened slightly at my words. "Your understanding is most appreciated." He dipped his head in a gentle nod and made his way quickly to the door. Then, with a brisk bow, he was gone.

As the sound of his footsteps receded down the hall, I let out a quiet sigh. *Oh, Theodore, I can excuse the lack of a bow or two in the face of pressing circumstances, you know.*

(Prince Gilbert)

Three days after the noble assembly had approved the formation of the Faith Council, I was ready and waiting for Teodore to bring me back to Malcosias. In the archbishop's absence, I had succeeded in infiltrating the Celestian church and uncovering the truth behind Saint Claudia's death. Now, surrounded by piles of written evidence and a formidable array of witnesses, all that was left to

do was return to the central cathedral, where we could present our findings to the high pontiff and formally press charges.

To my surprise, the investigation had proceeded more smoothly than I had anticipated, especially in the recruitment of these witnesses. I'd thought the Celestian clergy would be resistant, would remain guarded and loyal to their malevolent leader, but in actuality they had turned on him almost immediately after just a few words from me. Their readiness to betray him had almost been eerie. I'd procured minimal evidence at that point; they could have easily feigned ignorance and denied my accusations, but...they hadn't. Instead, each and every one of them had confessed their crimes loudly and without reservation, even crying at times, as if in penance for the sins they had committed against their Saint.

It appeared that while Archbishop Mills had tried his utmost to harden these men into unfeeling automatons, he could not snuff out the spark of holy devotion that yet lingered in their souls. Some of the clergy had admitted that their complicity in the plot had only occurred because the archbishop had taken their families hostage. Though they had lacked the courage to confess willingly, they were nonetheless relieved to have the truth exposed.

"A rotting sea bream is still sea bream, indeed," I muttered to myself as I reflected upon their plight. I had picked up this delightful foreign idiom at some point, and I understood it to mean that something of value maintained its worth even in its worst condition. It seemed to perfectly encapsulate the essence of these conflicted men of faith.

I stole a glance at the clergymen I had assembled; all were silent, their gazes fixed on the ground in front of them, as if they intended to live out the rest of their days in quiet penitence. At this critical juncture, none showed any inclination to flee, nor did they display signs of fear. Despite their roles as accomplices to truly heinous deeds, the sight of their subdued and defeated demeanors stirred an unexpected emotion within me. There I was, seated loftily, surrounded by these silent, shattered figures—it almost seemed as though I were the perpetrator of some great wrong.

Just as I'd begun to wrestle with this thought, a sudden, blinding flash of light engulfed the room. Instinctively, I shut my eyes, my body tensing as magical

energy battered at me. The burst of light was fleeting, and as I sensed its dissipation, I cautiously opened my eyes to find the very man I had been anticipating standing before me. Indeed, his arrival was expected, but did he *really* have to stick the landing of his teleportation spell directly in front of me?

Of course he did, I thought sardonically. It was most likely unspoken revenge for having him teleport over a dozen witnesses and myself back to Malcosias. *Yes, by all means, punish the Mana Hypersensitivity sufferer with his biggest weakness for achieving our goals in too efficient a manner!* Thankfully, the remedies provided by Mistress shielded me effectively. Deciding not to dwell on his juvenile display of petulance, I resolved to let the matter drop.

Rising from my seat, I approached him. “Teo, what took you so long? Are you quite well?”

“And likewise a cordial salutation to you, Your Highness,” he replied with some evident irritation. “I am perfectly well at *this* moment in time. And may I reiterate: *this* moment.”

Ah, so even the great Theodore would find the teleportation of so many individuals a challenging feat.

His gaze swept across the room. “To confirm, the witnesses are all those gathered here?”

“That is correct,” I affirmed.

“Understood.” He approached the writing desk buried under heaps of documents and glanced back at me. “And the evidence is everything on this desk?”

I admired Theodore’s relentless precision with a wry smile. I walked over to the desk, teased out a single letter from the towering stack of reports, and waved it before him. “You can process everything here at your discretion—except for this letter.” As I removed the letter, the pile began to sway precariously. I quickly steadied it with a swift hand, preventing a cascade of papers.

Teodore took one look at the name on the envelope and sighed. “When in the world did you take up a routine private correspondence with King Phillips?”

“Routine? Nothing of the sort,” I retorted with mock indignation. “I simply

chose to update him on the outcome of our investigation. Given his considerable cooperation, he's entitled to that much, wouldn't you agree?" With a fluid motion, I passed the letter to a knight standing nearby, who nodded his understanding and quickly exited the room.

Though I'd been under no obligation to report anything to King Phillips, much less pen an entire account to him, a part of me pitied him. Now that I knew he had been personally involved in the matter, I only felt it to be right that he was informed of the truth.

As I envisioned the expression of pain that might cross King Phillips's features as he digested the letter, my own gaze slipped to the floor. I was surprised to find myself with such a personal stake in this whole story, and my demeanor seemed even to give Teo pause, though he quickly assumed an air of unconcern as he shrugged off my words. "If you say so, Your Highness. As long as you ensure my continued uninvolvedness in your private dramatics." He then turned his attention back to the desk and lightly tapped the air above it. With a practiced ease, he began transferring the evidence into his extradimensional storage pocket, sealing the rift once all was securely nestled inside. Next, he pulled a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket. It was covered in an array of numbers and arcane symbols—the calculations for the magic circle.

"Now then," he announced, setting the circle in place. "We will be traveling via teleportation. Please arrange yourselves around this circle and, for your safety, do hold tightly to the hands of the people immediately to your left and right."

A visible ripple of unease spread through the clergymen, their faces reflecting their reticence and unease surrounding the very concept of teleportation. Nonetheless, they managed to gather round exactly as Theodore instructed. Although this was my second encounter with teleportation magic, I couldn't say that my own nerves were altogether settled. The significant amount of mana required for the process inspired a twinge of fear that such an outpouring of power might lead to a resurgence of my illness.

It's all right, I assured myself. The worst you experienced last time was some light nausea. And if things take a turn, Mistress can simply heal you once again.

“We will be departing shortly,” Teodore said, his voice firm. “Do not let go of the people next to you—for any reason.”

His cryptic warning did little to alleviate the growing tension. Suddenly, the ambience of the room shifted. A soft breeze stirred, causing the curtains to flutter gently as the presence of his magical power filled the space. As Teodore channeled his full arcane strength into the magic circle, I silently prayed that my condition would remain stable under the intense magical pressure.

“We are teleporting...now!” On cue, a brilliant white light enveloped us. I clenched my eyes shut, enduring thirty seconds of eerie, silent dread. Finally, when the sensation of wind brushed against my skin once more, I knew the teleportation was complete. I cautiously opened my eyes, only to find myself looking directly at the budding bloom of a cymbidium orchid. *Unadorned heart...* Recognizing the distinct flora, I realized we had arrived in the deserted rear gardens of the central cathedral, exactly as planned.

And everyone had rematerialized successfully. *Splendid*, I thought, taking a mental head count. The teleportation left me feeling slightly worse for the wear, a reminder of my persistent condition, but there was no time to dwell on discomfort. The end of the investigation was within reach, and I needed to summon the strength to meet with the high pontiff and conclude our investigation.

Breaking away from the circle, I turned to take in the grandeur of the cathedral that loomed behind us. A clergyman approached, his head bowed respectfully. “The high pontiff is expecting your arrival,” he announced in a solemn tone. “Prince Gilbert, Lord Teodore, please follow me. The rest of you, remain here until I return.”

As we walked towards the cathedral, I cast a glance back at the huddle of men we were leaving behind, shivering in the cold. It was the point in the year at which the winter’s chill was just beginning to develop its bite, so the high pontiff’s intention to leave them exposed to the elements for even a brief period of time hinted at the nature of the treatment they might anticipate going forward.

Well, perhaps that’s to be expected. They are, after all, accomplices to

murder.

Upon entering the cathedral, we were greeted by the comforting warmth within its thick stone walls, which swiftly dispelled the chill of the outside air. By the time we reached the high pontiff's office, the cold was a bygone memory.

"His Holiness awaits within," our guide informed us, pausing by the door. "Knock, and he shall answer."

"Very well," Teo responded gravely. "We offer our sincere thanks for your escort."

With a brief nod, the clergyman departed, his footsteps echoing down the corridor. Turning back to the door, I wondered if Teo didn't look a shade a paler than usual. He slapped his cheeks lightly, as if to invigorate himself.

He did just teleport over a dozen individuals in one go, I conceded, granting him a silent acknowledgment of his weariness. Perhaps, in turn, he'll overlook the strain I've placed on him.

Was it heartless of me to worry more about potential future lectures from Theodore than his well-being in this moment? *Perhaps...* But my contemplation was cut short as Theodore delivered three sharp knocks on the solid wood of the door before us.

"Your Holiness," Theodore announced clearly and with authority. "Theodore Garcia and Gilbert Ruby Martinez request an audience. May we enter?"

"Please do," came the solemn response from the other side of the door; the somber tone caused our backs to straighten instinctively.

This is it, I thought, bracing myself. We were about to present the high pontiff with a harsh reality. I was certain that upon learning what one of his own had done to an innocent woman, he would feel a deep sense of personal responsibility. The high pontiff had always been like a kind grandfather to me, having provided guidance and care throughout my life. I didn't want to be the one to cause him such distress, but for the health of the entire church, this was a tumor that had to be excised.

I hope he won't take this too hard, I silently prayed as Teo opened the door. Inside the spacious, immaculate room, the high pontiff sat awaiting us, flanked

by his paladin guard. Teo and I excused ourselves as we crossed the threshold and closed the door behind us.

“It’s been too long, Your Holiness. How have you been?” I greeted him warmly.

“Blessed to see you, Your Highness,” he replied with a joyful chuckle, “I remain hale and hearty, as you can see. The Lord hasn’t called this old servant home just yet, if you were hoping to be rid of me.”

It was good to see him in high spirits despite everything, and I found myself smiling in response. I silently offered a prayer for his continued health as Theodore stepped forward and announced without a hint of compassion, “Greetings, Your Holiness. I, Theodore Garcia, am honored to present myself in your most gracious company. His Highness and I”—he shot me a pointed look that was anything but subtle—“thank you for accommodating our visit on such short notice.”

Well, there goes the mood. Clearly, Teo wanted to remind me of the seriousness of our purpose here. His uncompromising nature never wavered; indeed, he was perhaps the only person who could address the imperial family so frankly without giving offense.

With a resigned shrug and a wry smile, I settled onto the couch opposite the high pontiff. Theodore followed suit, his demeanor tense. The silence was momentarily broken by the paladin who came forward and served us tea, but the moment of respite was brief; Theodore wasted no time in getting to the heart of our visit.

“Please forgive my abruptness, but I prefer to be direct. Your Holiness, we are here today to bring serious charges against Archbishop Jonathan Mills in connection with the murder of Saint Claudia.”

The high pontiff’s eyes widened. His mouth opened as if to speak, but no words came. Clearly, the gravity of the situation had surpassed even his worst expectations.

For the faithful, murder was a cardinal sin. While the church turned a blind eye more often than not, especially when it came to capital punishment or war, the alleged involvement of an archbishop in a crime so heinous was far too

prominent to overlook. *Thou shalt not kill.* For a man of the cloth, this commandment rang with doubled force, and yet, here we were, laying bare a betrayal that struck at the very core of ecclesiastical integrity.

As the high pontiff remained speechless, Teo reached into his extradimensional storage and methodically laid out the evidence across the table, organizing it by category of document. His task complete, he gave me a meaningful look, silently passing the baton to me, an unspoken command for me to lead the explanation. Though I felt a twinge of resentment at Teodore for placing the weight of the moment on my shoulders, I was forced to acknowledge that I was indeed best suited for this task. Yet I couldn't help but wish that just this once, he might have shown a softer and more empathetic attitude, one that took into account my great affection for the high pontiff. Reluctantly accepting my role, I fortified myself against the inevitable sorrow that would follow as I began to detail our findings.

"Your Holiness, the official report claims that Saint Claudia died in an accidental fall from a second-floor terrace," I began. "To my mind, this explanation appeared overly simplistic given the circumstances. According to witness testimony, the terrace railings at the Saint's residence are chest-high when scaled against an average adult male, and additionally, they are wrought from iron. Moreover, a group of paladins was stationed in a room adjacent to the Saint's at all times, maintaining constant vigilance. Yet somehow, despite these protective measures, no one witnessed her fall."

I paused, observing His Holiness closely. His expression, clouded with thought, confirmed his engagement with the seriousness of these allegations. "That does sound...quite improbable," he murmured.

My resolve wavered upon seeing his concern, but the urgency of our mission urged me forward. "However, none of the irregularities I have so far mentioned definitively point to 'murder.' That is why I sought out clergy members who were present at the time of the incident. To my surprise, each of them confessed the truth behind Saint Claudia's death, as if they felt compelled to atone for their sins."

His Holiness met my gaze with a solemn intensity. "And what is this truth?"

The moment had come, but my mouth ran dry. I tried to speak, but words failed me. Teo's glare, sharp and reprimanding, reminded me that backing down was not an option.

Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I reached for the tea that had been served earlier. The warm liquid was soothing, its subtle floral aroma providing a brief moment of comfort. I bolstered myself with a silent affirmation: *I am Gilbert Ruby Martinez, the first prince of Malcosias. I cannot falter at this minor challenge, not when the vast duties of an emperor await me.*

Reminding myself that I must be of steady heart and calm mind if I wished to someday sit upon the throne, I continued. "At the time, the Celestian church was undergoing a significant transition. Following Archbishop Oliver's death, Mills assumed his position. An ambitious man, Mills launched a series of drastic reforms aimed at consolidating more power and wealth into his hands. The most shocking of these was the complete cessation of all church-sponsored charitable activities."

"What?!" His Holiness exclaimed. "But we are the church! Charity is at the core of what we do!" He shook his head, overcome with dismay.

I empathized deeply with His Holiness's shock. It was beyond belief that any diocese of the church, which had built such a vast following by aiding the needy, would dismantle the very institution that had earned them such devotion. Alas, my account was not yet complete.

"As another part of his sweeping reforms, Archbishop Mills radically altered the mission of the church-run orphanages. He expelled all nonmagical children, and those who remained were indoctrinated from a young age. Upon reaching adulthood, they were inducted as paladins into the church. Raised in isolation, these children grew up without the perspective to question their circumstances, wholeheartedly dedicating their lives to the archbishop's cause."

I caught His Holiness's eye once more; his response to the grim reality of the Celestian orphanages was heart-wrenching. He buried his face in his hands, his head shaking incessantly. For someone who cherished the well-being of our future generations as much as he did, this revelation must have been particularly harrowing.

“The opposition to Mills’s reforms was fierce, coming from both within the clergy and from Saint Claudia herself. However, Mills turned a deaf ear to their pleas. He maintained his grip on power through promises of wealth and influence, and those who resisted his rule were exiled to remote lands. His methods were certainly underhanded, but they were undeniably effective. Ultimately, Mills secured absolute control over the Celestian diocese.”

A veritable reign of terror, I thought to myself. Particularly troublesome clergymen had even been sold to slave traders, and those remaining were silenced by fear, too terrified to speak out against such tyranny. Despite understanding their deep trepidation, I couldn’t help but feel a strong sense of secondhand disgrace at the cowardice they had displayed. If only we had uncovered this sooner—if only I had acted earlier—perhaps fewer would have suffered, and the high pontiff might have been spared this great sorrow.

“Yet, through the decay and corruption that overtook the church, one voice of dissent remained resolute—Saint Claudia’s. Even as the church abandoned its charitable deeds, she used her own allotted funds to sustain them. And as the church’s operations grew increasingly opaque, she ceaselessly advocated for transparency. However, she was just one woman, one ultimately crushed by the weight of her own limitations. Recognizing her powerlessness, she made the fateful decision to ask the Celestian monarchy for help.”

I personally did not find her position to be enviable at all. Caught between her love for a church that was disintegrating before her eyes and the prospect of seeking aid from its long-established adversary, she had faced immense risks. It could have undermined her standing and brought endless complications, but she had proceeded regardless, driven by a desire to prevent further harm.

Inspired by Saint Claudia’s unwavering compassion and determination, I pressed on. “Amidst all this, the monarchy was experiencing its own transitions. Saint Claudia reached out to the newly crowned King Phillips, planning to expose the church’s plight and seek his intervention. But tragically, just days before a meeting that could have altered many lives, she hesitated. ‘What if I could resolve this crisis myself, without involving the royal family?’ she seems to have wondered.”

Pausing to catch my breath, I let my eyes drift down to the floor, the weight

of my words settling in the silent room.

“Three days before the crucial meeting between church and state, Saint Claudia confronted Archbishop Mills with a final ultimatum. ‘If you cannot be swayed, then I will reveal everything to the monarchy,’ she declared. From that moment, there was no turning back. Mills perceived her as a grave threat and devised a plan to eliminate her. To him, the church had become merely a tool for his ambitions; the murder of one woman seemed a trifling matter. He was confident that as long as the clergy parroted a unified story, the truth would remain buried. And thus, with Saint Claudia’s untimely demise, the tragedy of the Celestian church was complete.”

And with that, my extensive explanation drew to a close. I had termed it a tragedy, yet that word scarcely captured the sheer depravity of the truth. Given the direction things had taken, the loss of all checks and balances, this devastating end seemed almost inevitable.

If only Saint Claudia hadn’t second-guessed her instincts, if she had approached King Phillips directly without alerting Mills, perhaps the outcome could have been different. I truly believed her death was the last thing Mills had wanted. In his eyes, she had been the guarantor of the church’s sterling reputation—a perfect figurehead, a linchpin in his scheme to amass wealth and power. The only reason he had thought he could eliminate the church’s charitable duties without repercussion was because of the reputational shield offered by her good name. Alive, she was a useful tool; in death, she was nothing.

As my detailed account of Mills’s rapacity settled over the room, a heavy silence enveloped us. After a long moment, His Holiness lifted his head, his expression transformed into one of hardened stoicism. Yet from him radiated a palpable mix of rage, sadness, and a suffocating solemnity; his usual warm demeanor had utterly dissolved.

“I have heard your accusations against Archbishop Mills,” His Holiness stated, his voice tinged with gravity. “And I am grateful that you have brought this matter to my attention.” With those words, he bowed his head deeply, an action that seemed more a gesture of repentance than of gratitude.

A pang of regret struck me, and I wished that I could take back the sorrow my words had inflicted upon him. But then, he raised his head abruptly, his eyes meeting those of the paladin beside him. “Dispatch inquisitors to the Celestian diocese immediately. Take paladins from here, use whatever resources you need, but trust no one associated directly with that chapter of the church. The capture of Archbishop Mills is your paramount task. And prepare the clergy for a divine inquisition; let neither manpower nor cost deter you. Once my regular duties are concluded, I will join you.” He delivered this speech in an ominous, commanding tone I had never heard from him before, and I found myself chilled to the bone by his uncharacteristic and stony rage. In that moment, I almost felt a twinge of pity for Archbishop Mills.

Almost.

(Carolina)

“Truly? The archbishop hasn’t yet been found?” I gasped.

Ed and I listened raptly as Prince Gilbert and Teodore informed us of all the tumult that had occurred since the return of the first prince a few days prior.

“He’s on the run?” Ed murmured beside me.

Our eyes met, reflecting our shared disbelief. We had anticipated a swift resolution following the indictment of Archbishop Mills, not further complications. As we pondered how one man could elude the formidable reach of the church, Teodore offered a theory, his voice cutting through our speculation.

“Either our archbishop has mastered an impressive vanishing act, or”—he paused, adjusting his glasses with a knowing look—“he has found sanctuary with an ally.”

His suggestion hung in the air, laden with implications. Teodore’s expression remained inscrutable, leaving me to wonder whether he was merely speculating or if he had knowledge to which were not yet privy.

But who would do such a thing? Who would willingly harbor a fugitive? I certainly hope it isn’t a Malcosian noble. With the high pontiff himself investing

heavily in the search, any involvement from within the empire would be nothing short of a scandal!

And yet, who else but the Malcosian nobility could so adeptly obscure a man's trail? My brief tenure within the empire had taught me of their penchant for deception, layering true motives behind multiple guises. It wouldn't be far-fetched for them to possess the means to do such a thing.

I just hope he'll be found before the trials, I thought, expelling a weary sigh.

Beside me, Ed furrowed his brow, lost in thought. "This could get messy if it can't be resolved quickly. Perhaps the Pyreborn should offer our help in the search?" Crossing his arms, he added, "We should be able to throw together a small squad without much issue."

Prince Gilbert, however, was less enthusiastic. "Leave it, Edward. While I believe you're well-intentioned, the high pontiff's people haven't even been searching for a week yet. To step in now would be to openly question their competence," he pointed out, his smile tinged with irony. "It would be wiser for us to stay out of it."

Prince Gilbert's counsel carried more weight than Ed's, given his personal involvement in the matter and his relationship with the high pontiff. It underscored the notion that this was fundamentally an issue for the church to resolve internally—though I couldn't help but question the wisdom of leaving the matter to the clergy, as it was only Prince Gilbert's involvement that had allowed the situation to be brought to light in the first place.

But I supposed it was prudent to keep the affair within the church's domain. Imperial involvement in the search effort would almost certainly drag the matter into the public eye, something the church was likely keen to avoid. How else could they maintain their image and suppress any scandal surrounding Mills's corruption? If that was indeed their priority, then there was truly nothing we could do. Ed also seemed cognizant of this fact as he slumped back into his seat.

Sensing our dissatisfaction, Prince Gilbert offered us a reassuring smile. "Though, yes, if the investigation were to stall...say a month or longer, then we could—"

His words abruptly ceased as he clutched at his heart, his face contorted in pain. His breathing grew labored and shallow; something was clearly amiss. Everyone in the room froze, a mass paralysis seemingly overtaking us as we watched his struggle with increasing consternation.

Teodore was the first to spring into action. “Your Highness, please excuse my intrusion,” he said urgently, supporting Prince Gilbert’s shoulders as he gently guided the prince down onto the sofa. His quick assessment painted a grim picture. “He’s as pale as a ghost,” Teodore observed, his hands moving from Gilbert’s forehead to his neck. “Labored breathing, sweating profusely, even a fever. These are all symptoms of a common cold, but in this case...” He paused, adjusting his glasses as he turned to us. “This is clearly an adverse reaction related to his Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome.”

Though Teodore’s diagnosis seemed inordinately rapid, I was forced to admit that his medical expertise far surpassed my own, leaving me little room for doubt. “Princess Carolina,” he addressed me with urgency, “please administer him an infusion of divine power.”

“Right away!” I responded, relieved to hear the firmness in my own voice despite the suddenness of the crisis. Rising from my seat, I moved swiftly to Prince Gilbert’s side and bent down, reaching for his hand. “Can you hear me, Your Highness?” I asked, hoping my words would provide some comfort. “I’ll be taking hold of your hand for the procedure.” I was unsure if he was able to comprehend or if he was even conscious at all, but it still seemed prudent to communicate.

With a deep breath, I centered myself amid the chaos, turning my consciousness inwards. I could feel it vividly—the power within, surging like roaring whitewater rapids. *Where does all of this come from?* I wondered, the distracted thought briefly pulling me out of the tense moment.

As I channeled the external energy towards my hands, I repeatedly readjusted my grip on Prince Gilbert, seeking the correct alignment of our energy pathways. Finally, I felt the connection stabilize at the very moment I’d amassed the necessary energy.

“Beginning the infusion now,” I declared, guiding my power down that

familiar route. I could feel it seep gradually into Prince Gilbert's system, being absorbed bit by bit. I watched anxiously as color slowly returned to the prince's face.

As the final vestiges of the allotted energy drained from me, Prince Gilbert emitted a faint groan, his eyelids fluttering open. He fixed his gaze directly on me, which suggested to me that he had been conscious throughout the procedure.

"Your Highness, how do you feel?" I asked, my face etched with the depth of my concern.

"Much better now, thank you," he replied weakly.

"I'm only doing what I can." My lips relaxed into a smile. "I'm just relieved that was the worst of it."

Both Theodore and Ed breathed sighs of relief, but my own sigh caught in my throat. Guilt gripped my heart. The resurgence of Prince Gilbert's symptoms, I feared, was my fault. Had he not been overexerting himself in his efforts to indict the archbishop, nor undergone two teleportations in rapid succession, his condition might not have deteriorated so rapidly.

My smile faded just as a smile blossomed on Prince Gilbert's face. "Tomorrow is the big day, isn't it?" His voice was weak but cheerful. "The day of the preliminary trials. I'm looking forward to seeing your formidable power in action, Mistress." My hand still remained in his grasp; he squeezed it tightly. "You'll emerge victorious—for me, won't you?"

In that moment, I understood his intent—he was offering me a chance to balance the scales, to remove any lingering obligation between us. As his expectations settled, a sobering sense of responsibility struck. "Absolutely, Your Highness. Your efforts won't be in vain!" My response came with a decisive nod, my expression morphing into one of fierce determination.

Failure isn't an option! I silently reminded myself. Another hand clasped around my wrist, startling me. Turning sharply, I encountered Ed's unamused gaze. He spoke not a word, but the message was nevertheless loud and clear; he redirected my hand away from Prince Gilbert's and into his own, interlocking his fingers with mine. "You have my support as well," he declared. His eyes

dropped and a trace of sulkiness clouded his features. “My brother isn’t the only one who cares for you, you know?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at his almost childish pout. “Thank you, Ed. That means a great deal.”

Standing there, encircled by the warmth of loved ones, with my husband Ed’s hand in mine, I felt an immense sense of gratitude wash over me. I gave Ed’s fingers a reassuring squeeze, and his mood lifted instantly. His face lit up, radiant and joyful, much like a delighted puppy; if he had a tail, it would surely be wagging exuberantly.

Oh, Ed. There’s a childlike simplicity to your interactions with me that never fails to touch my heart. His open, honest expressions were not only amusing—they were deeply endearing, reminding me how charming truly genuine emotions could be.



With the unflagging support of all my friends and loved ones, I approached the day of the preliminary trials in high spirits. Early that morning, Ed, Theodore, and I had arrived at the venue and made our way along the corridor towards the greenroom that had been assigned to me. I’d known to expect Marisa and Owen to have already set up the space with every comfort I might need, having arrived even earlier that morning in order to do so.

Despite my days of preparation, the imminence of the challenge stirred a flutter of nerves within me. *Will I be able to adequately control my power? What if I can’t and accidentally unleash something truly miraculous?* If that happened, there would almost certainly be a price to pay—to Theodore, that was. Casting a covert glance at the blond-haired lord walking confidently behind me, I inwardly let out a sigh.

I’d better perform well enough to avoid any of his passive-aggressive remarks, I mused, picking up my pace...when I noticed a familiar figure approaching from the other end of the corridor. With her emerald-green hair, light-green eyes, and youthful face, it was unmistakably Lady Monica Arendt. I had seen her name on the list of participants, and I had anticipated our paths might cross, though I hadn’t expected it to happen so soon.

I had to admit I didn't quite like her. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say I didn't like her because she so clearly didn't care for me, but in either case, I suspected that we would never get along. As she drew closer, flanked by her attendants, Lady Monica's eyes widened in recognition before her expression quickly smoothed into a polite smile. She halted before me and Ed, executing a flawless curtsy. "Your Imperial Highnesses. I, Monica Arendt, am delighted to present myself at your gracious service. What a delightful surprise to encounter you both here."

Her courtesy was impeccable, her greeting faultless. To an onlooker, she appeared to be affording us all of the respect befitting royalty. Yet her true intentions were betrayed by her stance—boldly positioned as she was in the center of the corridor. Proper etiquette, especially when addressing royalty in a public setting, required one to step aside, clearing the way before offering greetings. By obstinately blocking our path, she subtly flouted the norms, a "misstep" that I was certain was deliberate. Surely the daughter of Duke Arendt was too well-versed in courtly manners to plead ignorance, even at a venue that, while not the palace itself, was still under imperial auspices.

Despite the discomfort of this encounter, and her disregard not just for me but also for Ed, I bit back any admonition of her manners. To chastise her publicly would only paint me as petty and overly concerned with protocol, and it might even lend weight to her anti-foreigner sentiments. So with a forced smile, I responded with diplomatic warmth, "Lady Monica, a pleasure indeed. I hadn't anticipated our paths crossing quite so early."

She giggled coyly. "Neither did I, Your Highness. Neither did I."

Did she seem a little disappointed I didn't mention her breach of etiquette, or was that merely my imagination?

"By the way, Your Highness," she began, her voice taking on a deliberate, thoughtful quality that suggested she was about to say something provocative, "I thought I had heard you were nonmagical. If this unfortunate rumor is true, I am curious to know: how do you expect to compete today?"

And there it was. Though her brow furrowed in feigned concern, the light green of her eyes flickered with unmistakable disdain. The way she looked at

me—it was chillingly reminiscent of my sister Flora’s contemptuous gaze. A cold shiver ran down my spine as an image of my distant sibling flashed through my mind. *Ugh, she was the last person I wanted to be reminded of today.*

I was struggling to dispel these unwelcome thoughts when I noticed Ed’s expression had hardened, his gaze piercing through Monica’s facade. “Lina has no obligation to explain herself to you,” he retorted sharply. “You’ll witness her capabilities for yourself at the trials. Now, step aside. How much longer will you obstruct the path of royalty?”

Faced with Ed’s imposing demeanor—every inch the Pyreborn’s decorated commander—Monica visibly recoiled. “Um, well...” she stammered; her confident air evaporated at once under his stern scrutiny. Turning paler by the second, she shot me a pleading look, her eyes brimming with tears.

I couldn’t fully fault Monica for her reaction; she had just endured the full brunt of Ed’s icy stare. Even I felt a tremor in my knees from merely catching a glancing blow of it. Theodore, on the other hand, seemed unaffected. He observed the unfolding scene with a detached air, neither inclined to assist Lady Monica nor to temper Ed’s wrath. Clearly, he saw no personal gain in intervening. *As calculating as always...*

It seemed I was the only one poised to defuse the tension. I glanced at Monica, visibly shaken, then back at Ed, his brow knitted in lingering anger, the two locked in a silent standoff. Internally, I sighed. While I held no particular fondness for Monica, prolonging this confrontation was a pointless delay; we had places to be. I reached out and gently tapped Ed’s arm, breaking his stern focus. His demeanor softened instantly, a warm smile replacing the formidable glare as he turned to face me. “What is it, Lina?” he inquired, his icy tone melting away, the sharp frost that had frozen Monica flowing into a softer, affectionate timbre. His golden eyes focused entirely on me, radiating his love.

Feeling relieved at his swift return to gentleness, I managed a smile. “I just remembered I’ve left something back in the carriage. We have time to retrieve it before the ceremony starts. Would you mind accompanying me?”

“Of course not,” he replied without hesitation, already stepping away from the standoff, hand extended towards me. “Let’s go.”

Grasping his hand, I felt the reassuring warmth of his touch, like a beam of sunlight piercing through clouds, causing my eyes to narrow in delight. As I pondered how I might convincingly pretend to retrieve a forgotten item from the carriage, Teodore suddenly hastened ahead of us, moving with purpose down the corridor. Knowing him as I did, he was likely about to ensure my fib became fact, planting whatever I needed to find. This was Teodore as I knew him: dependable and perceptive—perhaps, at times, a bit too perceptive.

Nevertheless, I was grateful for Teodore's intervention, which would spare me the effort of improvising further. As Ed followed after him, I fell into step beside him and cast a final glance back at Lady Monica. She seemed utterly relieved, her posture slackening as if released from Ed's imposing aura. "Good day, Lady Monica. Let's both strive to do our best," I called out towards her. Her face instantly contorted with annoyance, prompting a wry smile to touch my lips. *Really, there's no need to glare such daggers at me. I see that your reputation as the most competitive lady in all the land is well deserved.*

That was the end of our interaction as we briefly left the venue behind. Reaching the carriage, Ed and I scoured the seats and unearthed a solitary ring—Teodore's clever plant, undoubtedly. Relieved that I hadn't been caught in a lie, I showed Ed the ring, and together, we made our way back. This time, our return to the venue was uneventful, and we concluded my final practice session in the greenroom before I advanced without my companions to the grand setting of today's event—Nobel Hall. This majestic amphitheater, reserved for the imperial family's state functions and designed to house a crowd, was built as an elliptical coliseum, with tiers of seating surrounding a central space.

Peering from the corridor that led into the arena, I surveyed the vastness of the hall. Every seat was occupied, a seemingly endless sea of eager faces, despite the short notice of the event. My gaze wandered to the box seats, where a familiar figure with blazing hair stood behind a pane of glass—my fiery-headed prince. Our eyes locked momentarily; his initial surprise at my attention softened into his usual impassiveness as he mouthed "Best of luck." His encouragement was simple and uninspired, but still enough to bolster my spirits. I returned his reassurances with a modest wave and steeled myself with a silent affirmation: *Ed believes in you. Don't falter now.*

Just then, a resonant, regal voice filled the stadium, commanding attention. “Most distinguished ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention please?”

The host quelled the chatter, giving way to a uniform rustling as the assembly of nobles adjusted in their seats with renewed decorum. He rose from his seat, his voice booming through the hall once more. “We now commence the preliminary Saintly Trials. Representing His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Eric, is His Imperial Highness, Prince Gilbert, who will now address us.”

At this introduction, Prince Gilbert rose gracefully, his smile sweeping across the spectators. A ripple of murmured astonishment spread through the crowd, for the appearance of the first prince was an unexpected honor. While royal standins at state functions were common, Prince Gilbert had only recently resumed regular appearances at public engagements. Though he’d attended the odd soiree or two, this was the first time the Malcosian aristocracy had seen him host an event.

“Good day to you all,” began Prince Gilbert, his voice clear and resonant. “On behalf of His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Eric Ruby Martinez, I extend a warm welcome to everyone here today. Your presence, despite the spontaneity of this gathering, is greatly appreciated. To our lovely contestants, I wish you the utmost success—expectations are high, and we anticipate exceptional performances.”

The audience hung on to every word, and Prince Gilbert remained unshaken by their intense scrutiny. His demeanor was calm, his smile unwavering, as he concluded his remarks and resumed his seat. The hall, captivated by his fearless and poised delivery, erupted into thunderous applause. I couldn’t help but admire him for the way he managed to win hearts and minds just like that—a gift inherited from the emperor, no doubt.

When the applause subsided, the host resumed the program with renewed vigor. “We shall now introduce our distinguished contestants. They will appear sequentially, and I ask that you extend the courtesy of silence once again, holding your applause until the appropriate moment.” He retrieved a folded parchment from his pocket, unfolding it with a practiced flick of his wrist.

It was clearly a prompt script, but the necessity of such an mnemonic aid was

silently acknowledged by all; the hastiness of the event was at the forefront of everyone's mind. Since contestant applications had been accepted up to the previous afternoon, memorizing each name and detail would have been an impossible task. I was sure it had been a struggle to memorize even the introductions and appropriate segues in that short amount of time.

"Please welcome our first contestant: Lady Monica Arendt!"

At his declaration, out walked into the arena the familiar figure of the green-haired girl we'd encountered in the hallway just a short time ago. She moved towards the center with an air of composed elegance, without a trace of her earlier discombobulation, acknowledging the robust applause with gracious nods and warm smiles. Her amicable demeanor made the earlier confrontation in the corridor seem like a fever dream.

"Lady Monica, the eldest daughter of Duke Arendt, is a masterful practitioner of holy magic," the announcer continued. "Rumored to be the most formidable holy mage in the entire empire, her healing magic is of particular note. It is said that her prowess may well someday secure her a coveted position at the imperial court. Ladies and gentlemen, here is a contestant truly deserving of your attention."

Lady Monica halted at the center of the arena, subtly positioning herself directly within Prince Gilbert's line of sight. She smiled coquettishly at him all the while as the host introduced the second contestant.

That's interesting, I didn't know Lady Monica was celebrated as the empire's leading practitioner of holy magic.

No, no, that's not what I most want to comment on—her mildly scandalous behavior towards Prince Gilbert was much more interesting. While it seemed that she was, like many, a Prince Gilbert admirer, unlike the other girls who melted under his gaze, she seemed to regard him more like a huntress would her quarry—intense and calculating. I shrugged slightly, amused by her brazen comportment.

As the second and third contestants made their entrances and took their positions, the anticipation built until it was my turn to step into the spotlight.

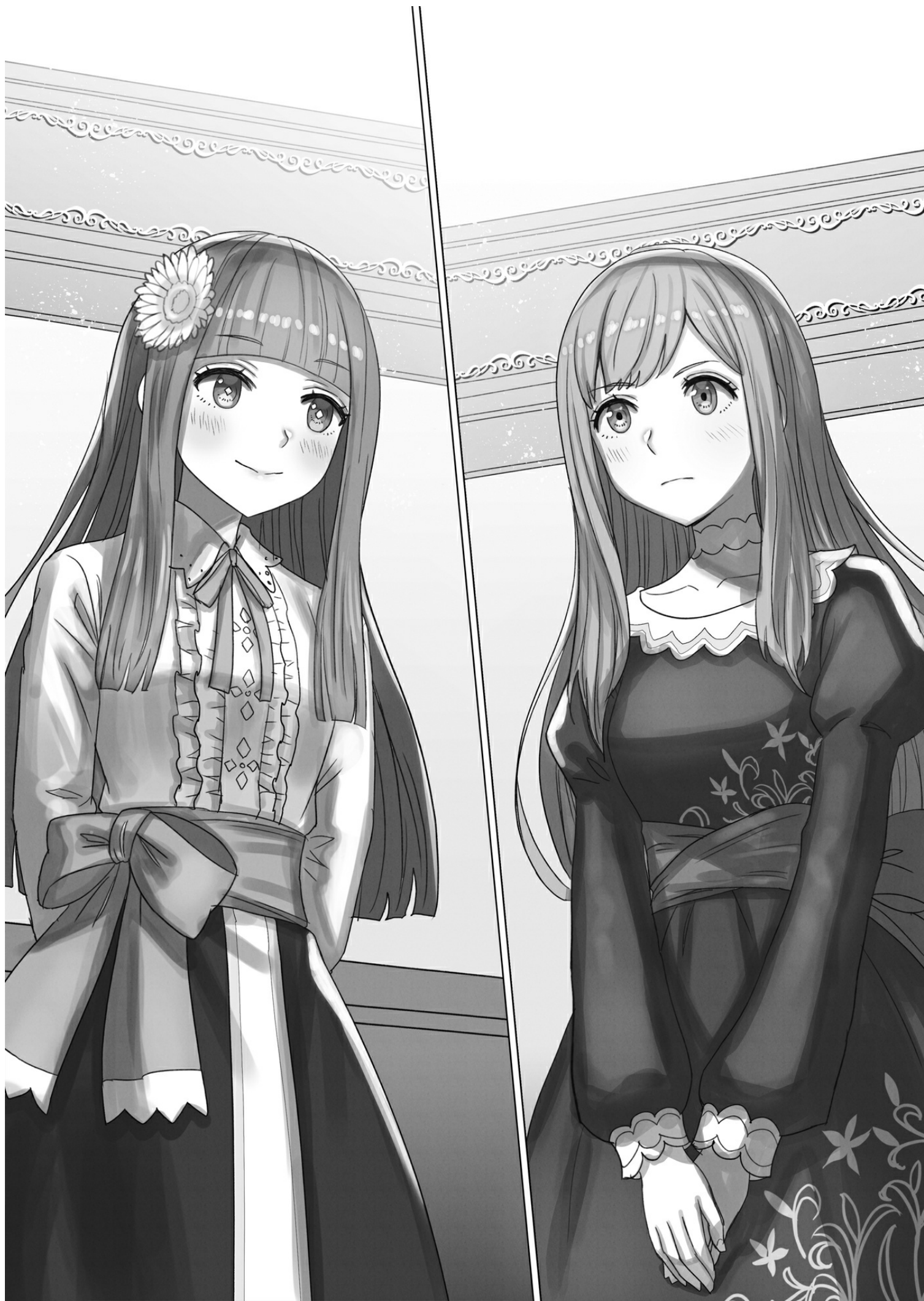
"And last, but certainly not least, we have Her Imperial Highness, Princess

Carolina Ruby Martinez!”

A murmur swept through the crowd as I emerged. I sensed the confusion and curiosity in their glances, the whispered conjectures buzzing all around. Despite their inquisitive susurrations, I advanced with unwavering confidence, each step poised and resolved. The eyes that met mine sought vulnerabilities, any hint of weakness that might challenge my right to compete, but I shrugged off every skeptical look, my head held high.

“Wife to Edward Ruby Martinez, Princess Carolina hails from the distinguished ducal house of Sanchez,” the announcer continued. “Rumored to possess a mysterious power, she stands before us today as the competition’s wild card. What secrets might she reveal? We are eager to witness what capabilities she brings to this grand event.”

As I positioned myself alongside the other contestants, I released a breath I hadn’t been entirely aware I’d been holding. Drawing a deep breath, I raised my gaze and locked eyes with Prince Gilbert across the arena. His response was a soft, supportive smile—a quiet endorsement. That was probably the most he could offer me without declaring any overt bias as the event’s overseer, but it was already enough to earn me a sharp sidelong glance from Lady Monica all the way from the far end of the lineup. Though she restrained her ire just short of overt hostility due to the many watchful eyes, her expression wavered on the edge of civility. *You’ll burn a hole right through me*, I thought with a wry twist of amusement.



Just then, the host intervened with a timely cough, drawing the attention of all of the contestants. He cast a brief, questioning look towards Lady Monica, prompting her to quickly adjust her expression and face forward once again, sparing me from her frosty gaze.

“Now that all our competitors are present, we shall commence the first trial,” he announced, his voice echoing through the hall. “Please bear with us for just a few short moments.”

Four individuals, each swathed in gauze and bandages, solemnly entered the arena. They positioned themselves before us, one in front of each contender, as the host continued his explanation.

“The first challenge will test your prowess in healing. The men before you each suffer from a fractured limb due to various mishaps. Your task is to mend their injuries within a thirty-minute time frame.”

The distinction between “injuries” and “fractured limbs” in the announcement piqued my curiosity. Considering that all the men before us seemed to suffer from injuries in addition to their limbs, it seemed that healing an arm represented a baseline requirement, and the true challenge lay in addressing the full spectrum of injuries each patient bore. Success would hinge on the extent of comprehensive care provided within the time limit.

I surveyed the man before me. His arm was visibly broken, but it was the array of small scratch marks covering his skin that drew my attention. *Could he own a particularly feisty feline?* I wondered idly as the host displayed a large clock, one clearly visible to both us and to the crowd.

“Should you find the task overwhelming, I encourage you to withdraw gracefully,” he advised. “Improper healing done under duress can lead to severe complications. While each patient has been made aware of the risks involved, let’s aim for no mishaps, shall we?” His gaze swept over us, lingering on each contestant until she nodded in understanding. Then he turned back to the audience. “That concludes the instructions for the first trial. Contestants, you may begin!”

At his signal, the arena transformed into a hive of focused activity. Each candidate took a different approach; one conducted detailed assessments of all

injuries while another launched directly into casting healing spells. The level of skill on display was remarkable, with every contestant proving their worthiness of their place in this competition. Lady Monica was especially striking in her methodology. In one outstretched palm, she cupped the energy she needed to heal her patient's arm, while the other focused on his various cuts and scrapes. Simultaneous spellcasting was an impressive feat. Even Flora had struggled with it, but here was Lady Monica, managing it with apparent ease, truly embodying her reputation as the empire's most formidable holy mage.

Her performance lit a fire under me. I recalled Theodore's caution to restrain my powers, yet in the face of such formidable competition, the urge to fully engage was irresistible. I turned my attention inward, clasping my hands in prayer as I let my gaze drift downward.

My patient looked on in bewilderment. "Is she...praying to God?" he murmured, his confusion mirrored by a stir among the spectators, puzzled as they were by my unconventional approach.

Praying to God. A simple yet apt way of putting it. My powers were, after all, a communion with the divine. "O Heavenly Guardian," I whispered, "I beseech thee. Heal this man's wounds, alleviate his suffering."

As my heartfelt supplication reached its crescendo, a serene white light enveloped the man before me. It was a radiant glow, ethereal and gentle as moonlight, casting a spellbinding aura across the arena. A moment later, the light receded as quickly as it had appeared, leaving behind a stunned man surrounded by an equally stunned stadium.

I smiled warmly. "How do you feel? Your arm should be much better now."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, blinking away his surprise as if he'd forgotten why he'd been invited here in the first place. He looked first at his arm, scrutinizing it in disbelief. Tentatively, he moved it, bracing himself for a pain that no longer existed. The apprehensive grimace that had tightened his features dissolved into astonishment. "It... It doesn't hurt at all! I don't believe it!" With a burst of elation, he tore off the gauze and sling that had constrained his arm. He swung it freely, demonstrating his complete recovery both to the awestruck spectators and to himself.

“I don’t believe it!” he exclaimed again, his face alight with joy. “Even the scratches are gone! Oh, joyous day, I can work again! I’m so glad I decided to participate in these trials!” Then, he turned back to me—and bowed his head low. “Oh, Princess, how can I ever repay you? Because of you, I can provide for my wife and daughter once more! You are my savior—my family’s savior! Should you ever need anything in the future, just ask, and although I am only a humble citizen, I will do all that I can to assist you!”

As he spoke, tears began streaming down his face, and his voice became more and more choked with emotion. His heartfelt thanks, filled with sincerity and relief, touched me deeply, and I couldn’t help but feel a surge of fulfillment. Helping someone in such a tangible way was truly a genuine pleasure. While the competition was a test for me, for him, it had been a chance to regain his livelihood.

Aware of the attention his emotional display might be drawing, yet moved by the sincerity of his words, I stepped forward and gently placed my hand on his shoulder, urging him to raise his head once more. “There’s no need for such formality. I only did what I could. A simple ‘thank you’ is more than enough. Now that you are healed, go and take care of your family. They are what’s most important, after all.”

“Your Highness!” His voice broke as he dropped to his knees in an even greater spectacle of gratitude. He clasped his hands together in front of him as he repeated his thanks over and over again.

I... I made it worse...

A twinge of discomfort tugged at me, seeing him so profoundly moved by an act that I felt hadn’t required much in the way of toil from me. All I had done was offer a prayer—his health had been restored more by divine grace than by any effort of my own. The lavish thanks seemed disproportionate, twisting my sense of accomplishment into a feeling that was not quite as positive.

As I gently attempted to temper the man’s overwhelming display of emotion, my gaze wandered to the box seats. There, I locked eyes with one Theodore Garcia. Unlike Ed, who stood next to him beaming with pride, Teo’s expression was etched into lines of irritation.

I've... I've overdone it, haven't I?

I snapped my focus away from his arctic scrutiny, seeking refuge elsewhere, and I found myself observing the other contestants, all of whom were still engaged in the task at hand. Even Lady Monica, who had torn ahead of the rest of the pack, still wasn't finished. Seemingly in accord, they all looked my way at the same time, their confused and anxious gazes flitting between me and my patient. Lady Monica's mien, though, had far transcended confusion and anger and had veered into frustration and bitterness.

Indeed, as Theodore's stern reaction had suggested, I had now inadvertently set a pace far beyond what was expected. The ease with which everyone had sprung into action had pushed me into thinking I could act without restraint. But now, the likelihood of an uncomfortable debriefing seemed inevitable. As the reality of my overly hasty completion settled in, a ghostly image of Theodore, snide and smirking, intruded into my mind—a vision of what was to come. My cheeks blanched, but the moment for self-correction was long past; what was done was done.

It was at that moment that Lady Monica completed her healing task. Her patient, moved to tears, tested his newly mended arm and celebrated the chance to pursue his dream of becoming a knight once more. His savior's reaction, on the other hand, couldn't have been more different. Lady Monica's expression twisted with frustration, her lips barely moving as she murmured, "I am not losing again." Quickly masking her annoyance, she turned to the audience with a radiant smile, graciously accepting their applause.

Beside me, another contestant finished her healing, gasping for breath, her magical exertion evident. The intensity of her efforts made me wonder—was the healing of a broken arm truly such a demanding task?

"And stop!" The voice of the host rang out, proclaiming an end to the first trial. The last contestant, the one standing next to Monica, ceased her spellcasting and slumped forward, a look of dejection crossing her face. It seemed that while her magical prowess had been enough to earn her a spot in the arena, it was not enough to propel her any further.

"The first trial is officially concluded," the host announced. "Please bear with

us a moment longer as we assess the condition of our patients.” At his signal, several knights stepped onto the stage, escorting the healed men off the floor for a thorough evaluation, leaving a trail of speculative whispers rising from the audience and a stream of anxious thoughts within my own mind.

After a tense wait, a lone knight reappeared on the floor. He approached the host, whispered something in his ear, then retreated back from whence he had come.

With the arena holding its collective breath, the host took a moment before speaking, ensuring he had everyone’s attention. “Now then, allow me to announce the results of the first trial. Lady Monica Arendt—you have healed the fractured arm perfectly. There’s nothing to be said about your work. You’ve passed! Well done.”

As the crowd absorbed this information with nods and quiet acknowledgments, Lady Monica stuck her chest out proudly. *Did you expect anything less?* her posture seemed to convey.

The host worked his way down the line. “Lady Violet Rogers. You managed to regenerate the piece of bone that had been damaged, but you were unfortunately unable to connect it to where it needed to be, and as a result, the arm is still fractured. An unfortunate state of affairs, but this means you do not pass. If you would please exit the arena on your left.”

As his words hung in the air, the bustling noise of the stadium dwindled to an uncomfortable silence. Lady Violet held back her reaction as she clenched her fists tightly at her sides. “I...understand.” Her whispered reply, though soft, echoed with startling clarity through the amphitheater. With every eye fixed upon her, she made her solitary walk off the arena floor, her steps slow, her posture defeated. Despite my preparedness for the inevitable disappointment of my competitors, witnessing Lady Violet’s palpable despair still tugged at my heartstrings.

“Lady Lilian Roberts. You have successfully mended the fractured arm; however, points were deducted due to the imperfect positioning of the bone. There is a slight protrusion on the patient’s skin, but as it is a superficial defect, you pass. Good luck to you in the second trial.”

Lady Lilian, the girl next to me, exhaled a tense breath, her relief visible as she realized she had narrowly made the cut. The audience's response was a low, understanding murmur, clearly picking up on the word "superficial" as the key term that justified her qualification.

Focus shifted towards me. I had watched my patient earlier; he'd been moving his arm as freely as could be. That image bolstered my confidence, yet as the official verdict approached, a flutter of nerves tickled my stomach. The arena hushed to a near reverent silence. All eyes were on me as the host paused, adding to the tension before announcing the outcome of my trial.

"And lastly, Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez... You pass with flying colors. Not only did you mend the fractured arm, but also the scratches on his arms and the contusions on his legs. That is to say—everything wrong with your patient was healed, with the exception of previous scars."

The revelation of a full recovery sent the audience into an uproar. As a thousand eyes bored into me, I couldn't help but seek out Prince Gilbert's reaction; his shoulders shook with the efforts of suppressing a guffaw, seemingly both amused by the audience's fervor and recalling his own experiences with my abilities. For better or for worse, I had indeed stirred the crowd, a consequence of my unchecked display of power with which I had now to contend.

The host intervened with a pointed clearing of his throat, bringing the spectators back to order. "That concludes the results of the first trial. The second trial shall commence shortly. Please bear with us for just a few short moments."

As we awaited the next challenge, I and the other contestants gazed around absentmindedly. It wasn't long before knights appeared, pairs of them struggling slightly as they maneuvered three large water tanks onto the arena floor, one for each of the remaining contestants. The tanks, each large enough to house a full-grown man, were filled with dark brown, murky water that churned ominously. As they neared, a pungent odor wafted through the air, hitting me with such force that I instinctively raised my hand to my nose. Though I managed to avoid doing something as uncouth as pinching shut my nostrils, I could do nothing about my facial expression, which twisted

involuntarily in response to the stench.

“The second trial is a water purification test,” the host explained. “Each contestant will have one attempt to purify as much water as they can. The winner of today’s overall competition will be determined based on a combined metric of the amount of water purified and the results from the first trial. Please note, the water in these tanks is mixed with a special type of mud that is resistant to purification. Purifying a quarter of the tank’s contents will be considered a good showing.”

Water purification—a task more straightforward and certainly more transparent than the first. Literally so; the glass tanks visibly showcased the progress of the purification to all onlookers—which provided all the more reason for me to better control my powers this time around.

Reflecting on the previous trial, it was clear that Lady Monica’s formidable abilities positioned her as the standard to meet. As long as I could modulate my power to surpass hers just slightly, I should be able to secure a victory *and* avoid a scolding from Teodore.

A *second* scolding from Teodore, I reminded myself. The memory of my earlier overzealousness loomed large. It was pure wishful thinking to believe that I could escape a few choice words inspired by that blunder. I found my gaze drifting up, up, all the way to the box seats, where I locked eyes with the blond lord in question. *Do not repeat your prior mistake*, his icy glare unmistakably said. A cold sweat broke out across my back; I silently nodded my acknowledgment.

Is it just me or, at this point, is making Teodore angry a scarier thought than losing the trials?

“Your time limit remains unchanged from the last trial: thirty minutes,” the host announced. His voice softened, imbued with a motivating warmth. “Now please, give it your all. No matter what happens, you may all walk away from here without any regrets.”

His intense gaze swept over us, the three contestants left standing in this competition. It felt as if the weight of every look—from Ed’s and Teodore’s to those of every spectator in the crowded stands—pressed upon us, all

wondering the same thing: just who would emerge victorious?

“This concludes the instructions for the second trial. Contestants, you may begin!”

At his signal, we each hurried to our respective tanks. The pungent odor wafting from the murky water hit us like a physical barrier, its foulness almost tangible. Despite the offensive smell, neither Lady Monica nor Lilian showed any sign they might retreat. Both competitors, faces twisted in distaste, pressed their hands firmly against the glass of their tanks, beginning their spells with a focused determination.

I quietly observed my competitors for a while. The host had been quite vague about the special properties of the mud used, but it did indeed seem as if its hard-to-cleanse reputation was well deserved. Both Lady Monica and Lilian were making slow progress, managing only to clear thin layers at the top of their tanks, and their efforts left them visibly strained as they wrestled with the stubborn impurities.

In that case, purifying the entire tank in a single action would probably be far too reckless.

Having garnered enough information this time so I wouldn't make the same mistake again, I clasped my hands in prayer and focused on the tank ahead of me. “O Heavenly Guardian, I beseech thee. Purify this foulness!”

But only the bits on the surface, please!

My prayer—even its unspoken caveat—was swiftly answered. The surface of the murky water in my tank began to shimmer, turning clearer and clearer, then stopped just below the waterline.

Perfect! My training had paid off. Now I just needed to keep to my strategy and continue to purify it gradually.

Breathing a sigh of relief that things were clearly going according to plan this time, I allowed myself a brief moment to survey the rest of the competition once more. Lady Lilian was out of breath, having just succeeded in creating a clear sliver of clean water at the top of her tank. Beside her, Lady Monica was faring significantly better, having purified about an eighth of her tank. This was

not to imply that the task seemed to be effortless for her; sweat glistened on her forehead, and her breaths came in short, labored bursts. But since she was my standard to beat, I proceeded to cleanse about an eighth of my tank as well. As the water cleared, the audience's reaction was instantaneous and electric; their excitement surged as they watched our neck-and-neck competition unfold. From my position on the floor, however, I could see that Lady Monica herself was the furthest thing from enthused.

(Monica Arendt)

I didn't want to admit it. The very notion was like acid on my tongue. But that greasy archbishop might have stumbled upon the truth about this infuriating woman facing me in the preliminary trials—how else could she match my skills if not touched by the divine itself?

I seethed as I tried to keep my composure on the arena floor, my jaw clenched so tightly that I fancied I could hear it creak under the strain. *How did someone like her stumble across such power?*

Suddenly, I remembered the loathsome pill in my pocket. It galled me to think that old archbishop would be proved right for a second time, but it was clear that I had no choice. If disgrace was inevitable, would cheating really deepen my shame?

Determination hardened within me. I *would* triumph. My hand darted into my pocket, fingers searching until they closed around the small, hard capsule. As I scanned the crowd to see whose eyes were on me at the moment, my gaze locked with that of the princess. The fragile dam restraining my wrath shattered.

"Y-You dare to mock me, you...you peasant simpleton from a trifling realm! If you believe you can best me, you are sorely mistaken!" My voice thundered out, and although my words were drowned by the roaring crowd, they were clearly audible to the one who was meant to hear them.

"Peasant simpleton from a trifling realm?" she retorted. "I fail to see how either my status or my homeland are relevant to this competition, but please know that despite your insults, I have no intention of losing. I will not let Ed or

my companions down.”

Princess Carolina. Her composure was infuriatingly serene, a stark contrast to the storm that raged within me. She declared her intent with dismissive finality and then turned away, utterly indifferent to any retort I might have crafted. *The audacity!*

I suppressed the urge to unleash another torrent of invectives, to put this insolent child in her place. *Patience*, I chided myself. *Do not engage with imbeciles.*

With a steadying breath, I deftly rolled the pill between my fingers and into my palm. I cast one last surreptitious glance around me—I could sense no eyes lingering upon me. Seizing the moment, I brought my hand discreetly to my lips and swallowed the pill in a single fluid motion that I hoped had eluded detection.

And indeed, it seemed my sleight of hand had gone unnoticed. The audience’s attention was riveted on the tanks of water, not the contestants themselves. I let out a silent, relieved breath and settled back down, the vision of my imminent ascendancy crystallizing in my mind. *I will be the one to emerge victorious*, I assured myself, allowing my lips to twist into a sly, confident smirk.

Abruptly, my pulse surged, and a fierce warmth spread through my body, intensifying by the second. I blinked furiously, stifling a scream that I could feel clawing its way up my throat. My mind swam in a hazy, surreal fog, yet I was surprised to realize that there was no pain—just an overwhelming surge of power. The archbishop had been truthful; the elixir did seem to bear minimal side effects. I couldn’t help but feel a grudging respect as my magical senses heightened, becoming acutely sharp. I could feel them, along with the rising heat in my core: the arcane energies roiling and churning within. I feared that if I were to let my concentration lapse for even an instant, a wild, uncontrollable discharge of power might erupt from me.

Honestly, the magnitude and immediacy of the effects were beyond anything I had anticipated. I had never been happier to be proved wrong. With this explosive burst of newfound strength, I faced the tank once more. Conventional wisdom suggested the prudence of purifying the water in small batches, but the

remaining time didn't allow for that sort of restraint. Resolutely, I opted to purify as much as I could in a single fell swoop.

I focused inwards, marshaling the arcane energies into a singular, luminous burst. As the magic exploded forth, light dazzled through the glass, bathing the tank in a blinding white glow. When the scintillation finally dimmed, it revealed half a tank of sparkling, purified water—far surpassing the modest quarter-tank goal.

Drained of magical energy, I felt utterly exhausted but sustained by a profound sense of achievement. I managed a weary, triumphant smile before my strength gave way, and I collapsed to my knees. Despite the raggedness of my breath, I held my chest high with pride. My victory was assured. My eyes sought out Princess Carolina for what I imagined would be a ceremonial acknowledgment of my triumph, only to catch her offering me a sympathetic smile.

“I apologize, Lady Monica—but I shall be winning this one.”

There was something unsettling about her tone, as if she possessed complete confidence that my defeat was inevitable—as if she had been merely warming up this whole time. Stunned, I watched on as she placed her hands on her own tank—the water contained therein which had been barely purified—and transformed almost three-quarters of the liquid to complete clarity in an instant.

My best efforts had been wiped out, just like that. As the audience's focus shifted from me to the princess, I could feel the weight of their awe and surprise. Despite her dramatic display of power, Princess Carolina appeared entirely nonchalant.

“How?” I muttered weakly. “The sheer effort it took to purify half the tank nearly undid me, so how could she...?” The words dissolved into disbelief. “Impossible impossible impossible impossible,” I incessantly muttered under my breath in a feeble attempt to deny the stark reality unfolding before me. I had lost to Princess Carolina again, not just once, but twice in swift succession.

Amid the cacophony of the crowd, the host stood, lifting his timepiece with solemn formality. “And stop,” he commanded. “Cease your spellcasting,

contestants.”

At his command, Lady Lilian, ever the resilient contender, abruptly pulled her hands back from her tank. Despite her determined efforts, she had managed to purify only a quarter of her tank. Exhausted to the core, she collapsed to the ground, her energy completely spent as knights stepped onto the stage to remove the tanks.

“While the apparent results leave little in the way of ambiguity, we will still have the volumes measured for integrity’s sake,” the host announced. “Please bear with us just a little while longer.”

The knights strode away from the stage, each pair handling a tank with utmost care to prevent any spillage.

“In the interim, I’ve been informed Prince Gilbert would like to say a few words,” the host transitioned smoothly, nodding towards the prince, who stood to address the crowd.

All chatter ceased and all eyes swiveled to the blue-haired, golden-eyed beauty. He floated gracefully from his seat, flashing the venue with a charismatic smile. “I think I speak for everyone present when I say, well fought, ladies. If the engagement of the crowd is any indication, then this has been a most thrilling competition indeed. It’s hard to believe it’s already come to an end. Thank you all for that stunning performance.” With a graceful wave to the audience, he concluded his remarks and resumed his seat.

It was then that a knight approached the host, discreetly handing him a small note. The host nodded in acknowledgment, scanned the message quickly, and prepared to address the crowd once more. “Thank you for your inspiring words, Your Highness. We are now prepared to announce the winner of the second trial. But before we do so, I would like to remind everyone that the evaluations have been conducted under the direct supervision of His Lordship, the head of the civil service. No irregularities were found—and thus the results you witnessed for yourselves are accurate.”

At the invocation of the title of the head of the civil service, the murmurs of discontent that had begun to bubble among some spectators were promptly quelled. Clearly, none were willing to challenge the credibility of such a revered

figure, nor risk their reputations in a public dispute of the results.

“In the second trial, Lady Lilian placed third, Lady Monica came in second, and Princess Carolina secured first place. The detailed results and all calculations performed will be made publicly available in a few days’ time. Now, to announce the overall victor.”

Victor. The word jolted me, and I looked up, scanning the crowd for any sign of support or sympathy. But all eyes were riveted on Carolina as if my fate had already been sealed, as if I had even now faded into the backdrop of this grand spectacle.

The feeling of isolation and inferiority increased, cresting into a surge of clarity that broke through my despondency. My thoughts sharpened just in time for me to feel a keen despair at the host’s next words. “As the wild card of these trials, she secured her place by obtaining full points in the first trial and an extraordinary result in the second. Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, your Saintly candidate is—Her Imperial Highness, Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez!”

Of course. It wasn’t me. It was that vexing, infuriating woman who now stood center stage. Most of the nobility clapped enthusiastically for her—the ashen-haired princess, she who basked in the adulation as though born to it, as though it was her due.

Why...? How...? How could I lose to this lout, this...Celestial?!

This couldn’t be right. I was pure of blood—I was preordained to stand above the vulgar. My heritage was a mantle of superiority that should have shielded me from such humiliation. To lose to someone like her—a Celestial—there had to have been an error, some oversight, or else the world was more askew than I could bear.

The jealousy and rage brewed within me, reaching a point that seemed to reduce me to nothing but a venomous glare at Carolina. She, on the other hand, didn’t spare me even the briefest glance, treating me as if I were some matter of inconsequence, one that didn’t deserve an iota of her attention. My blood boiled, fueling the flames of my fury even further. My nails dug into my palms, a flaring pain that paled in comparison to the seething anger coursing through my veins.

The host continued, oblivious to my inner storm, as he lavished praise upon *her*. “Congratulations on your well-deserved victory, Princess Carolina. We trust you’ll represent our empire proudly on the world stage. You have my best wishes for the trials to come.”

She giggled coquettishly. “Thank you, sir. I’ll strive my best to live up to those expectations.”

How dare she. How dare she stand there, radiant with happiness, while despair consumed me? How dare her ruby eyes glimmer with such joy as I wallowed in failure? My heart pounded with a possessive fury: it should have been me receiving those blessings, not her! The accolades, the congratulations, the lofty expectations—those were supposed to be mine, mine, *mine*!

I couldn’t accept this. Even if the archbishop had been correct that she was possessed of Divinity, Carolina had robbed me of my rightful glory. It was inconceivable, unbearable. How dare she diminish me, when by every measure I was superior?

Then, amid the turmoil, a thought crystallized, cutting through the rage with chilling clarity. “Of course,” I murmured to myself. “I shouldn’t have to accept this—not when I didn’t lose. Carolina must’ve tampered with the results. If that scheming outsider hadn’t cheated, the victory would have undoubtedly been mine.”

This rationalization shielded my bruised ego, casting me as the wronged party and Carolina as the villain of this tale. This perspective restored a semblance of calm to my fraying nerves. With a newfound, eerie composure, I rose from my position. I walked over to Lady Lilian—unsuspecting of my intentions, she had the misfortune of standing in my path. Without a second thought, I pushed her aside, barely registering the sound of her body hitting the ground with a thud.

Her shriek pierced the air as she landed heavily on her back, her eyes wide with shock and fear as she looked up at me. But my focus was elsewhere; she was merely an obstacle. My gaze, my purpose, was fixed on the one who had usurped my place.

Compelled by righteous indignation, I strode towards Princess Carolina and shoved her to the ground with purpose. Caught off guard, she too fell onto her

back, the impact sharp and sudden, her head snapping back against the ground.

Ignoring the gasps and shouts from the shocked onlookers, I stepped over her prone form and knelt over her body, straddling her, driven by an overwhelming need to reclaim my stolen honor.

“Lady Monica?! What are you doing?!” she cried.

“Shut up!” I yelled. “You didn’t win. You’re not a winner. You’re nothing!”

Before I knew it, my hands had shot towards her neck. I’d lost all reason, driven completely by instinct to choke the life from this baseborn royal.

“I don’t know how you did it, but you cheated!” I screamed. “You think you can fool me? You think a lowly boor like you can deceive the empire’s greatest holy mage? Say it! ‘I’m a dirty, conniving wretch,’ say it!”

“G-Get...off...me...”

Carolina struggled weakly beneath me, her voice reduced to a raspy whisper. Her face contorted in desperation as she gasped for air. Her spindly limbs flailed, trying in vain to push me away. But having been raised among knights, my stance was as firm as iron.

I might not have been the strongest knight, but I received the training all the same! You are as good as dead!

“Tell everyone you cheated!” I shrieked. “Tell them the truth, if you don’t want to die!”

Boom.

A thunderous explosion shook the hall. My head instinctively whipped towards the source—the box seats high above the arena floor—and through a pane of shattered glass, I saw two imposing figures, one blond, the other red-haired. Prince Edward and Lord Theodore stood at the edge of their charred balcony. The prince was visibly and uncharacteristically furious, while Lord Theodore appeared merely annoyed, as if he were about to be subjected to a duty that he expected to find particularly unpleasant.

Their eyes, I could not help but notice, were locked on me.

As I knelt on top of Carolina’s body, struck dumb by the contrast of Prince

Edward's blazing rage and Lord Theodore's icy disapproval, a pair of fiery wings unfurled from the prince's shoulders. The infernal plumes flamed up in a palpable manifestation of his anger. Their blinding heat seemed reminiscent of the phoenixes in the picture books of old—a terrifying beauty to behold.

The prince launched himself from the balcony, soared down to the arena floor, and landed directly in front of me, seemingly oblivious to the surrounding chaos in the amphitheater.

"What do you think you're doing?" His voice boomed, a deep, resonant rumble that seemed to vibrate through the very floor to reach me. "Get your hands off my wife." The biting cold of his commanding tone was a terrifying enough juxtaposition to the warmth roiling off his wings that it caused me to instinctively loosen my grip.

Below me, Carolina, her airway finally clear, gasped for air. She turned her head weakly to look at Prince Edward; tears welled in her eyes. "Ed..."

"Lina!" At her soft, almost imperceptible cry for help, Prince Edward's face twisted with desperation, a show of emotion I hadn't thought him capable of.

"Get off of her!" was the last thing I heard before he charged. He backhanded me across the cheek, sending me sprawling.

Everything went white. I felt my body soar through the air. After what felt like an eternity, I hit the ground hard. As I struggled to prop myself up, I was overwhelmed by pain. All I could think at that moment was that the rumors were true—Prince Edward was indeed a merciless man who showed no pity, not even to women and children.

I groaned, clutching at my rapidly swelling face. Prince Edward knelt, cradling Carolina in his arms, the flames still streaming out from his shoulder blades like a fantastic cloak of light. "Lina, are you all right? Just hold on a little longer, Theodore will heal you!"

"Ed..." Carolina's voice was a weak murmur.

"Does it hurt? Where does it hurt? Oh, my darling, I arrived too late." His face clouded over once again with rage. "Don't worry about that woman, I'll handle her."

“Ed...!” The princess raised her voice, silencing him with an expression that seemed to say, *look at me, listen to me*. She managed a faint smile and tenderly stroked his cheek. “I’m all right, darling. I just feel a little faint, that’s all. So please, don’t look so worried.”

Her words came in weak, choppy syllables, her consciousness barely clinging on. Despite this, I could tell that she was doing everything she could to soothe Prince Edward. Thanks to her efforts, he regained his composure, and the fiery wings receded into his body. He covered her hand with his, cupping it gently against the side of his face as if to affirm her presence. “Lina, I was so afraid I was going to lose you.” His voice was soft and emotive—nothing like one might expect from someone known as “the Bloodthirsty Prince” (or from a man who had viciously struck an unarmed woman mere moments ago).

The hall was still in an uproar, but the royal pair locked eyes, seeing only each other in that chaotic moment.

Carolina giggled softly. “I’m still here, Ed. I’m sure a little rest will make me feel as good as new.”

“You promise?” Ed asked, his eyes shimmering with uncertainty.

“I promise.” She nodded with confidence, and only then did Prince Edward’s chest rise with a deep, relieved breath. After witnessing this, Carolina’s strength seemed to wane, her head lolling back as her eyelids fluttered closed.

“Good night, Lina. Sweet dreams,” he whispered as Carolina surrendered to unconsciousness, nestled safely in his arms. Prince Edward stood solemnly, holding his wife close against his body.

As if on cue, the rest of the world snapped back to reality, and activity surged around the prince. Imperial knights burst through the corridor that led from the arena floor and hoisted me to my feet, securing my wrists behind me. Shaking off my stupor, I resisted, struggling futilely to free my hands. “Let go of me!” I yelled. “Do you even know who I am? I am the eldest daughter of Duke Arendt! Don’t think you’ll be getting away with this!”

“Shameful, Lady Monica. Just shameful.”

That voice! That smooth, velvety voice! Immediately, I turned to see Prince

Gilbert addressing me from his vantage in the stands. His lips curled into a faint, knowing smile, though his eyes held a sharp, scornful gleam.



“It’s pathetic, isn’t it?” he continued ruthlessly. “You lost fair and square, yet you accuse the competition of misconduct. Really, it’s embarrassing. Have you forgotten these trials are held under the auspices of the imperial family? Do you think we would permit any dishonor to taint the proceedings under our oversight?”

His voice remained soothing and calm, yet his words were scathing in their clarity. Anxiety surged within me. I tried desperately to dismiss the gravity of the situation unfolding before me, but one glance into Prince Gilbert’s imperial, golden eyes forced me to confront the stark reality.

“Lady Monica,” he said, his voice carrying across the amphitheater in a final, damning verdict, “you have brought disgrace upon yourself.”

The last bit of hope I’d clung to—the gentle smile on his face—vanished. His golden zircon eyes were merciless, striking a deep fear into my heart. And with the disappearance of that smile, Prince Gilbert’s metamorphosis was complete—he now looked at me with unequivocal and absolute disdain.

He loathes me? I’m despised by the very man who I knew was destined to be my future husband?

Shock overwhelmed me; tears streamed down my face, stinging as they rolled over my rapidly swelling bruises. Having lost my chance to become the Saint, to marry the man of my dreams, I felt myself go completely limp and allowed the knights to lead me away.

And as I was shepherded down the corridor that led from the arena, my mind was awash with a single thought: who knew that the sting of losing would pale so much in comparison to the pain of being despised by Prince Gilbert?

Chapter Five

(Carolina)

The sensation of something warm brushed against my face. My eyelashes fluttered as consciousness seeped back, and I opened my eyes. A crimson mane of hair glowed through my bleary, sleep-clouded vision. My heart swelled with reassurance at the familiar sight, and I blinked rapidly to clear the remnants of sleep. As the blur dissolved, the features of my fiery-headed prince came into sharp focus, his hand resting gently on my forehead.

“Ed,” my voice rasped.

He looked up, his eyes snapping towards me. “Lina!” he exclaimed, seizing my hand. “You’re awake?”

“Yes,” I managed.

Relief washed over his face, softening his expression. He was still in the same clothes he’d been wearing during the trials, as if he hadn’t left my side for a second. *You could’ve at least changed*, I inwardly chided him with wry amusement as I struggled to sit up. I put a hand to my hair and found nothing but a snarled tangle. As I worked my fingers absently into the strands, I noticed Marisa slipping out of the room—likely to fetch Theodore.

“Lina, are you sure you should be sitting up yet?” Ed asked cautiously. “You can still rest.”

He looked as hurt as a puppy whose owner was about to leave him behind, and the almost comical extent of his dismay drew a smile from me. “I’m all right,” I assured him. “More importantly, is this *my* room?”

In hindsight, I realized that the question had been an unnecessary one; taking in the familiar furnishings and layout confirmed the truth of the matter. Ed simply nodded. He must have carried me here while I’d been unconscious. I didn’t remember much of what had happened in the moments before I’d lost

consciousness, but the image of Lady Monica on top of me, strangling me, was vivid enough. I couldn't help but wonder what had become of her.

As I pieced together the fragmented memories, I gingerly touched my neck and found it wrapped in a bandage. "Gauze, really?" I muttered. "Seems a bit excessive."

I made an attempt at trivializing the whole ordeal, trying to position the incident as a relatively minor occurrence, but Ed's response was swift and severe. "You could've died, Lina, and you're questioning if this is too much?" His tone was almost scolding. "If that woman had managed to muster up a little more strength, you could've...!"

"I...yes, Ed, I know. I'm sorry, my phrasing was insensitive." I sighed, reflecting on my new reality. "Perhaps I've just grown accustomed to attempts on my life."

After surviving an attack in the colonnade and a poisoning at the fete, it seemed I had developed a somewhat blasé attitude towards the possibility of assassination—a change in myself that left me feeling ambivalent. Faced with yet another life-threatening event, I knew that the old me would have been paralyzed with fear, but now I found myself responding with an unsettling nonchalance.

I tried to assuage Ed's concerns with a gentle smile and heartfelt words. "Besides, it's only because of you that I can remain so calm. You always save me from whatever messes I find myself in, so I have no reason to be afraid."

Ed's eyes widened just a touch before he broke into a blissful smile, warm and comforting like the sun. It was as enchanting to witness as it always was, and as I sat there, basking in a sense of joy and fulfillment, a familiar blond figure waltzed through my bedroom door.

"I knocked several times to no response. I must admit that I felt a twinge of concern about what might have occurred, only to discover you two flirting as usual," Theodore announced with a teasing lilt as he approached my bedside. Despite his exaggerated sighs and air of exasperation, he seemed genuinely relieved to see me well. *Not so honest with himself, is he?* I mused.

Marisa followed behind, wheeling a tea cart. As the saying goes, two's

company, but three's (and certainly four's) a crowd, and with that, the intimate atmosphere vanished.

Ed didn't seem too pleased with the interruption. "Teo," he barked. "You ruined it; get out of here."

"Oh, yes, I ruined it, all right—I ruined a lecherous man's chances of taking advantage of a sickly woman." Teodore pressed a hand to his mouth in mock horror. "What do you have to say for yourself, Your Highness?"

"Wha—?!" Ed swallowed Teo's words, bait and all. "I was doing no such thing!"

As Ed sputtered and raved, Teodore approached, cool and collected as he settled into a seat near my bed. He ignored Ed's continued outburst, waiting patiently for Marisa to serve the tea.

"Princess Carolina, how do you feel?" Teodore said, cutting through Ed's grumbles. "I did what I could with my magic, but how are you *really* feeling?"

I took a sip of the herb tea, savoring its relaxing aroma. "I think I'm completely healed, thank you. My throat doesn't hurt, and my breathing feels fine."

"That is good to hear." Teodore nodded in relief and smiled.

After a moment of enjoying the tea, curiosity nudged me. "By the way, what happened to, um, Lady Monica?" I wasn't sure if it was entirely appropriate to ask about the fate of a person who had tried to harm me, but I couldn't help myself.

Teodore's smile faltered into an uneasy expression. "Lady Monica was taken away by the knights and is currently being held in the dungeon beneath the imperial castle. She will likely remain there until her sentence is decided."

A chill ran down my spine. Her guilt was so evident that the only question remaining was her punishment. But I supposed that was more often the case than not when the crime in question was inflicting bodily harm on a royal. Or was it attempted murder? Either way, it seemed the imperial family would be unilaterally deciding her fate. But if that were the case, then why the delay? Given that the incident had been witnessed by hundreds of members of the aristocracy, one might expect a swift decision...unless there was an element of

the case of which I was unaware.

Ed confirmed my suspicions with a deep frown. “Ricardo Arendt, the girl’s father, is currently doing all he can to plead for his daughter’s life. He is an influential figure, so we must tread carefully.” As he spoke, his usually composed face twisted with anger, a clear sign that he at least wished for strict and immediate justice.

Next to him, Teodore expelled a quiet sigh. “Even without the duke’s intervention, it would have been difficult to impose upon his eldest daughter the penalty she truly deserves—that is, death. She may very well escape with a more lenient sentence.” Though Teodore maintained his composure, his clenched fists betrayed his inner turmoil. It was evident that he too was dissatisfied with the manner in which events were unfolding.

Thank you both for your concern, Ed, Teodore.

Seeing them both so indignant on my behalf, I wanted to reassure them somehow, to prove my resilience. “As long as the sentence doesn’t cast aspersions on the majesty of the imperial family, I’m amenable to any outcome,” I said. “I certainly do not wish to see that girl put to death. Moreover, isn’t this the greatest opportunity we could ever have to explore the Arendt family’s ties to the extremists? Or is it your intent to let this golden chance slip away?” With a playful puff of my chest, I struck a pose to underscore my indomitable spirit. It felt somewhat awkward to perform such theatrics from a seated position, propped up by pillows, but in the end, it was all worth it to see both of them quickly regain their usual energy—Ed’s face returned to its accustomed demeanor of masculine stoicism, while Teodore’s lips curled into an amused half smirk.

“Indeed, Your Highness,” Teodore said. “As you say, we’re all tired of the guessing game; this is the perfect chance to unearth their ties. If the duke truly loves his daughter, then we’ll just have to ask: how deeply?”

“Every cloud has a silver lining, eh?” Ed chimed in.

I smiled, pleased with their readiness to flip a challenging situation on its head.

Ed and Teodore. I can only hope they remain themselves forever.

The road had been far from easy, but my candidacy as the Malcosian representative in the Saintly Trials was now secure. All that remained was to triumph in the final round and ascend as the Saint. We were one significant step closer to our objective. Clenching my fists against my blankets, I felt a surge of determination—the future looked brighter than ever.

(Archbishop Mills)

“What?” I sputtered in disbelief. “Lady Monica has not only suffered total defeat at the hands of Princess Carolina, but she’s also been charged with attempted murder?”

As I read the outcome of the preliminary trials that had taken place three days ago, I was dumbfounded. I’d always had doubts about Lady Monica’s ability to exercise good judgment, but strangling the princess in front of *everyone*? I was at a loss for words. I could grasp the frustration and humiliation of defeat, but those emotions should have been channeled into devising a more discreet and strategic revenge. Instead, what she’d done was sheer madness—there was no other way to put it. Though I had to remind myself that it would have been equally troubling if she had managed to suppress her anger and concoct a more cunning plan to eliminate Princess Carolina. After all, if any family had the means to orchestrate an assassination within the imperial bloodline, it was the Arendts.

Yes, in fact, this outburst might just be the lucky break I’d been hoping for.

I expelled a quiet breath. “In any case, I can no longer stay with the Arendts,” I addressed my man kneeling before me. “Make preparations for a quick departure.”

I hadn’t yet considered where I could go from here. I’d expected to remain in this haven for a bit longer, but a certain duke’s daughter had derailed those plans. Now it was only a matter of time before the imperial family would come knocking. This incident provided the perfect pretext for them to conduct extensive searches of the duke’s properties and detailed audits of all of his dealings. Being found here would leave me with no plausible explanation; at worst, I could be shackled and dragged back to the central cathedral—an

outcome I needed to avoid at all costs.

A chilling premonition washed over me, prompting me to leap from my seat and assist my subordinate in packing. I was stuffing clothing into a large sack when the door to my room burst open and a squad of men in pure-white armor rushed in. “Jonathan Mills,” the paladin in the doorway—clearly the leader—declared. “By order of His Holiness the High Pontiff, you are under arrest. You will be coming with us to the central cathedral.” He brandished a piece of parchment—a directive signed by the high pontiff himself commanding my capture.

Before I could even think about fleeing, I found myself completely surrounded. *Paladins? Here? Did that wench sell me out? No, impossible; she should still be unconscious or at the very least too sickened by the side effects of the pill to deliver testimony. But if not her, then who? The duke himself?*

I couldn’t think of anyone else who could have betrayed my location. I stood rooted to the ground in shock, but this was no time to lament my misplaced trust, not with my back against the wall.

But why would he... Unless it was to save his daughter?

It made sense that he might attempt to secure a more lenient sentence for her by trading information, but would he really go so far as to expose his family’s disgrace just to save one single daughter? To me, it seemed like folly. I doubted the soundness of his mind. But none of that altered my current predicament.

I could only silently curse the overly doting nature of Duke Arendt as my man and I were both shackled and led away by the paladins. We were unceremoniously shoved into a carriage waiting outside. After a jolting ride, we arrived at the central cathedral—a place I had visited just a few weeks earlier, yet the atmosphere was markedly different this time. There was a tense solemnity I had never felt before, smothering the familiar comfort of the setting. As I was led down one of the pristine corridors, met on all sides with cold, scrutinizing gazes, I felt suffocated, ostracized from my own kind.

Why are these clergymen regarding me with such disdain? I understand I’m under suspicion, but their contempt seems excessive, doesn’t it? I thought men

of the cloth were supposed to treat even criminals with empathy. Unless...their animosity stems from the fact that one of their own is implicated in this crime?

My composure began to crack under each unyielding glare we passed. Midway through our procession, my man was led down a separate corridor, leaving me isolated and increasingly frightened. Panic began to set in as I looked around for any inkling as to what might happen next. In my haze of fear, I realized we had stopped in front of the central nave.

Not the keep? I wondered as the paladins swung open the double doors. “The accused, Jonathan Mills, has arrived,” one of them announced, his voice reverberating through the grand and echoing chamber. He took to one knee before me, his suddenly reduced height revealing a chamber that usually bustled with worshippers, now ominously empty. But not completely so—a few august presences awaited me. Cautiously, fearfully, I studied their faces and recognized them as members of the Celestian clergy.

What?! My heart pounded in alarm. Why are they here?! They lined the central aisle, their eyes downcast, bodies as still as sculptures. They were positioned in such a way that they alternated from left to right along my path, leading all the way to the altar. They looked utterly defeated, broken, discomfited—and suddenly, I was struck with a more imminent sense of danger. What is going to happen to me? Interrogation? Torture? Worse?

Struggling to grasp the nature of these rapidly unfolding events, my thoughts became a chaotic blur. Despite trying to reassure myself that I wouldn’t be subjected to torture right here and now in the central nave, fear overwhelmed me, causing my knees to tremble uncontrollably.

“Bring in the accused,” commanded a voice I knew all too well. Fighting against my fear, I looked up to see a familiar face—the high pontiff himself. He stood at the far end of the chamber near the altar, his expression grave.

As the situation became more and more bewildering, a whimper of confusion escaped me as the paladins behind me pushed me forward, urging me to stand before the high pontiff. With a firm shove to my back, I stumbled and fell to my knees in front of His Holiness.

He clasped his hands in prayer, and his next words shook me to my core:

“Thus commences the divine inquisition. May God have mercy upon thy soul, thou errant lamb of His flock.”

A divine inquisition...? For me...? This... This can't be...

My eyes widened as I finally grasped the full gravity of the situation, but it was far too late to alter my fate. A divine inquisition was a unique form of judicial proceeding held by the church, one in which the high pontiff served as judge, jury, and executioner. Anyone found guilty in such a trial, regardless of the crime's severity, would be excommunicated from the church. To be branded a heretic, forsaken by His teachings, was to be forever scorned by society.

“Let us proceed by establishing the pertinent facts,” the high pontiff continued, his tone resolute. “Jonathan Mills, you stand accused of direct involvement in the death of Saint Claudia. How do you plead?” Instead of the holy scriptures, the lectern before him held reams of investigative documents. He flipped open a folder, his gaze intensifying. “And I urge you to answer truthfully,” he added, his eyes simmering with a silent fury.

I swallowed hard, my throat tight with anxiety. Saint Claudia was the last name I'd expected to hear today. What exactly did he know? He hadn't used the word “murder,” suggesting perhaps he didn't have all the details...

But there is also a high probability that this is a trap.

Caught in a perilous asymmetry of knowledge, I wrestled with what to disclose. Should I be honest? No, that seemed far too risky. The best strategy would likely be to deny everything. Despite the nagging suspicion that members of my own clergy might have betrayed me, I opted to lie. “N-Not guilty, Your Holiness. I had no involvement in the matter at all, I...” My voice faltered as I lifted my gaze to meet that of His Holiness. “Though...that isn't to say I might not have been somewhat involved in the cover-up of her murder. Not intentionally, of course! I simply took my subordinates at their word and reported it as it had been framed to me—as an unfortunate accident.”

Acknowledge that murder might have occurred, but distance myself from the direct act—that would be my strategy. Besides, it *wasn't* me who had actually killed her—a truth I would weave into this lie. I wagered that the consequences

of a cover-up would be less severe than those for murder.

However, disappointment shadowed the high pontiff's features as his shoulders slumped. "Jonathan Mills, did I not urge you to be honest?"

My heart leaped. "Y-Your Holiness, whatever could you mean?" My voice wavered; I could no longer keep it steady. *He can't possibly know it all...can he?*

But no, no, I told myself. Remain calm. Panicking now would only serve as an admission of guilt. This is just a bluff—a bluff to get you to confess!

"I see you intend to feign ignorance until the very end," the high pontiff continued grimly. "Then you leave me no choice. Witnesses, step forward."

At his command, the Celestian clergymen broke rank and turned to me. Their gazes...were cold and distant, like those of specters risen to haunt me.

"Witnesses, please give your testimonies, starting with you on the right," the high pontiff instructed.

The clergywoman he'd addressed, her face marked by deep shadows of fatigue and stress, replied in a monotone, "Yes, Your Holiness." She cleared her throat, her voice calm and composed. "My name is Vanessa Diggory, and I serve in the Celestian church. Twenty years ago, I pushed Saint Claudia to her death at the direct instruction of Archbishop Mills."

As she confessed to her crime, the clergywoman's face contorted as if she were about to cry, but only for an instant. Her face instantly reverted back to normal—she *forced* it back to normal, as if she believed herself unworthy of the catharsis of tears.

"There is no written proof of the archbishop's command, but I do have a record of a payment made out in my name," she continued.

The receipt? My anxiety stirred. If I remembered correctly, that record would indeed have a date and time stamped on it. I'd need a compelling explanation for why a significant sum had been transferred to this woman on the very day of Saint Claudia's death.

But still, this was nothing utterly damning. She'd said it herself: there was no written proof of my command. Such a payment might have been for anything.

As long as I maintained my ignorance, no one could conclusively establish my direct involvement beyond possibly being an unwitting accomplice.

But then the second witness began to give his testimony. “My name is Norman Enoch. I served as adviser to Archbishop Mills. In the conspiracy of Saint Claudia’s murder, I acted as liaison between the parties involved and devised the details of her death.” His voice was flat. He avoided any embellishments, presenting only the stark, unvarnished truth. His body language—fists clenched, shoulders trembling—betrayed the strain of the burden of his admissions.

“As evidence, I am in possession of Archbishop Mills’s letter of commission and his secret ledger.” Norman paused, his gaze still lowered. “Though it must be noted that the letter details the powers he devolved to me were earmarked as building upkeep and nothing more than that.”

My ledger... That proved problematic in its own way; it provided clear evidence of my misuse of church funds, a serious offense in its own right...but this still necessitated no change in my plan. An additional embezzlement charge was nothing if I could escape the murder one.

As I steeled myself for the final testimony, the paladin stepped forward, his presence alone commanding attention. “Paladin Nils Alanson; I was stationed at the Celestian church. I witnessed the murder of Saint Claudia twenty years ago with my own two eyes. She was pushed off the second-floor terrace by Ms. Vanessa, and I watched her as she fell.”

A live witness? The revelation shook me to my core. But now that I thought about it, there indeed had been one... I remembered threatening him with his life if he ever spoke about what he’d seen that night, and how he’d sworn to obey without so much as a second thought. He’d even signed an affidavit, the fool...

Wait, an affidavit?

My complexion turned pale, a cold sweat breaking out across my back. I dived into my memories, trying to recall what exactly the man had signed, but the passage of time clouded my recollection. Had I truly put my intentions down into writing? Did that affidavit actually exist?

“Before I could report the incident, I was approached by Archbishop Mills and forced to sign an affidavit swearing to never again speak of Saint Claudia’s death. As he’d threatened my life, I felt that I had no choice but to sign it. I still have the document—drafted by Mills himself.”

The realization that I’d been trapped at the endgame struck with crippling force. Anger at my past errors—the thoughtlessness, rashness, and arrogance of my tactics—bubbled up within me, but there was no action left to take that could alter the course I had set in motion years ago. At the time, I’d believed that a written record of what he’d witnessed would be enough to silence him. It would make him an accomplice, someone as vested as I in keeping the situation forever hidden...or so I had naively thought. The irony that the affidavit meant to safeguard my secret was now the clearest evidence against me was not lost on me. *Why didn’t I let someone else write that damned document?*

Driven into a corner, desperation clawed at my composure. “Th-That affidavit is a forgery! Someone must’ve learned to copy my handwriting!” I blurted out, making a final, feeble attempt to sway the high pontiff. “I beg you, Your Holiness, you mustn’t believe these lies!”

His response was as cold as the marble beneath my knees. “We have had the handwriting analyzed. It is without a doubt yours, and we have admitted it as direct evidence in the case against you.”

Even now, His Holiness tried to offer me a way out, a chance for me to confess gracefully, but I still couldn’t bring myself to take it. “In... In that case, I must have written the thing while drunk! Yes! Embarrassingly enough, I am a terribly foolish drunk!” My voice was quivering; the words tumbled out in a frantic, disjointed mess. A nervous tic pulled at the edges of my mouth, but I quashed it, desperately trying to maintain a self-deprecating smile.

His Holiness’s response to my frantic claims was nothing short of disgust. “Then I must say, you write with surprising legibility for a drunken man. Should I take the meticulously detailed account of Saint Claudia’s death as the ramblings of a mad dipsomaniac as well?”

“That is... Well, you see...!” I babbled.

Excuses, come up with more excuses! My eyes darted back and forth as I

stubbornly tried to find a nonexistent path out of the situation, but it seemed my time was finally up—the high pontiff had reached the limit of his patience.

“Jonathan Mills, enough is enough!” His voice, usually so gentle and calm, now thundered through the quiet room. “The evidence of your crimes is incontrovertible! Why persist in this pointless defiance? You are a grown man; do consider acting like one!”

His face flushed with anger, his voice cracking under the strain, and I, caught under the weight of his condemnation, fell into silence. Like a kind grandfather who for the first time raises his voice—the rebuke made me shrink back, and I chose not to retort, subdued by the sudden, chilly calm that descended upon me. Was this the end for me? Had I reached the limits of what I could reasonably contest?

Finally, I accepted that any further denial would be futile and would likely only serve to worsen His Holiness’s opinion of me. Perhaps, then, the only remaining path was to confess to my crimes and express genuine remorse and regret—even if it might be too late to make any difference.

But...this was me. A man who measured the world solely in terms of personal gain or detriment, irredeemable and steadfast to the last. Confession galled me, but it seemed that at the last I had no choice.

“I...admit to it,” I said quietly as I let my gaze fall to the floor. “I have told unto you several untruths, and for that, I beg your forgiveness.”

Finally flying the white flag, I raised my eyes to his, seeking some hint of his thoughts. His gaze, though slightly softened into a semblance of agreeability, retained a chilling detachment. There was no warmth there, no flicker of sympathy; it was as if he peered directly through my pretense, seeing it for the hollow act it was.

Keeping to his undaunted, indifferent manner, the high pontiff bestowed upon me these final words: “Archbishop Mills, I hereby declare you guilty. You are sentenced to life imprisonment. May you dedicate every remaining moment of your worldly existence to profound repentance for your sins.”

Capital punishment was anathema within the church, rendering his sentence the gravest permissible. While it might have appeared lenient compared to the

death penalties of some nations, the church embraced a doctrine known as “purification of the heart” for those it imprisoned. It was akin to a form of compulsory asceticism, where one was subject to frigid baths and compelled into continuous, twenty-four-hour prayer sessions. These methods were designed to break the soul and tame the heart, but since these practices were sometimes adopted voluntarily by the devoutly pious, they were regarded as humane—rather than the tortures they truly resembled.

As I contemplated the bleak days that lay ahead beginning tomorrow, I found myself resigned to the notion that any meaningful existence I’d ever had was already drawing to a close. From the next day onward, I would be a dead man walking, a stark embodiment of the well-worn adage—you reap what you sow.

(King Phillips)

News of Archbishop Mills’s fate had reached me three nights ago. Wielding the authority vested in me as sovereign, I breached the hallowed confines of the Celestian church to visit its crypt, the sacred resting place of the most esteemed members of the clergy and the Saints. Ordinarily, the church’s most sanctified enclaves were forbidden to me, yet on this occasion I had been granted an exception by His Holiness himself. A mere half hour had been allotted for my visit, yet such time would suffice for my purposes.

With a reverence born of deep respect, I entered the windowless chamber with a lone candle as my sole guide against the darkness. Navigating by its flickering light, I delved deeper into the crypt until I found it—the tomb of Saint Claudia, her name etched with delicate care on the plaque, surrounded by flawless white lilies. Considering that only clergy members had access to this sacred space, it was clear that someone within the church continued to honor her memory with floral tributes.

Kneeling in the dirt, heedless of the filth staining my garments, I placed a bouquet of chrysanthemums beside the lilies, their red, white, and yellow hues a striking contrast against the lilies’ unblemished purity. I couldn’t help but smile wryly; the arrangement seemed overly vivid, almost garish next to the serene whites, yet no regrets could alter that now. Indeed, Claudia had never

cared for extravagance; she had always preferred to channel potential luxuries towards aiding those in need. “What a waste!” “How indulgent!”—it was almost like I could hear her voice, chiding me for my frivolousness. Truly, there had never been a soul more benevolent.

“And it was that very benevolence that made me fall in love with you,” I whispered, my voice trembling more than I’d anticipated, revealing depths of emotion I dared not fully explore. Even now, twenty years later, my thoughts frequently wandered to her, my affections not diminishing with time—no, instead they grew stronger and stronger. Even I found this peculiar, of course, this profound attachment to a single woman, one who had long passed away. And yet, speaking these sentiments aloud now, after all these years, merely underscored how much of a brokenhearted fool I truly was. Indeed, what else does the heart want but what it needs?

“Say, Claudia, do you remember the day we first met?” I murmured, my lips curving into a gentle smile as I spoke to the silence of the tomb. That memory lingered as vividly as if no time had passed at all.

It had been over thirty years ago. I’d still been crown prince at the time, and I’d found myself in the throne room, merely an adjunct presence to my father’s audience with the then Saint-to-be.

Standing at attention behind the king’s throne, I shrugged my shoulders, dismissing my irreverent thoughts. *A commoner as the Saint-to-be?* I harbored little in the way of classist ideals, but I still found myself questioning whether a farm girl could possess the charisma needed to win over the hearts and minds of the people—even if her magical abilities were as renowned as they said. Yet in some ways the role of the Saint was merely ceremonial, so perhaps the expectations weren’t all that high.

It was then that the doors of the throne room swung open, and a guard announced, “Saint-to-be Claudia has arrived!” At his call, a young woman entered with a confident stride. She walked with her head held high, her eyes fixed resolutely ahead, betraying no sign of trepidation as she moved with singular purpose down the ceremonial aisle. Her hair shimmered a deep navy blue, and her eyes mirrored the cyan expanse of a clear sky. Tall and poised, her

mature countenance bore none of the naive softness of youth.

She's nothing like the ostentatiously adorned ladies of the nobility was my first thought. Her gown was of a singular, unembellished shade; her face devoid of makeup; and her person unadorned with the glitter of gems or jewelry. Despite this, she was breathtakingly beautiful—not only in her physical appearance but also in a mesmerizing projection of something like an aura of beauty, a tangible elegance that I could palpably feel. Never before had I experienced such an instant, profound admiration for one girl. Initially, I had deemed my father's request for my presence in this ceremony as an unnecessary and irksome chore, but witnessing her, I understood that my attendance was indeed serendipitous.

She halted in front of the dais and dipped into an elegant curtsy. "Your Royal Majesty, Your Royal Highness," she began, "it is with profound reverence that I find myself standing in your illustrious presence. On this day, I come to present to you the results of my Saintly Trial and to humbly implore your blessing to ascend to the rank of Saint. I am most grateful for your time."

Her greeting was—on the surface—a flawless one. A little stilted and less practiced than if a member of the aristocracy had performed it, but it was exceptionally delivered for a commoner. Truly impressive for a hastily learned endeavor, if that indeed was the case.

"Raise your head, child," commanded my father. "You may stand at ease."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she replied, her hands releasing the folds of her dress. I didn't know whether it was nerves or her inherent solemnity, but when she straightened from her curtsy, her posture was as rigid as an arrow and unyielding as oak.

"The tidings of your triumph at the trials have already reached me," my father proclaimed. "Heartfelt congratulations are in order. We are indeed fortunate to have a sage such as yourself steering the course of our kingdom."

"Your Majesty's words do me a great honor. And may I remind you of your promised blessing?"

To my astonishment, she had outright urged a *king*. Was her temperament naturally impatient, or did she fear my father might withhold his favor? Despite her accolades at the trials, she could not ascend to Sainthood without the dual

endorsement of both church and crown.

My father assuaged her hasty expectancy with a kind smile. “Of course. The royal House of Phillips bestows upon you its blessing. You are now the Saint of Celestia. The official certificate shall be yours within a few days.”

Her face lit up immediately. “I am deeply thankful, Your Majesty.”

My eyes widened. There was something about her sudden excitement, the faint but enchanting curve of her lips, that stirred a feeling within me. A comforting warmth infused my very being, my heart quickened, and a delightful tingling ran down my spine.

What is this sensation that besieges me? My heart—it pounds with an unaccustomed fervor. Could this truly be? Have I, despite all of my skepticism, fallen in love?

The moment I identified the nature of my inner turmoil was the very moment I was besieged by a profound wave of chagrin at myself. I had always belittled the notion of love, dismissed it as trivial, a folly unworthy of pursuit. Yet here I was, abruptly ensnared in its delicate grasp. The sheer force of these emotions compelled me to place a hand over my mouth, as though to suppress the red-hot roil bubbling within me.

Claudia... The mere thought of her name ignited a raw, almost primal desire to know her more deeply. This longing surged up within me so swiftly, so overwhelmingly, that I found myself completely ensnared, a willing captive to these newfound emotions.

A few weeks later, I approached my father with a proposal: that I marry Saint Claudia to forge a political alliance. I chose this course of action because, for reasons I could not articulate, the very idea of simply declaring my love for her and pursuing her in the traditional manner seemed unbearably awkward.

Marriages between the Saint and the royal family were not uncommon in Celestia’s storied history. My father did not object; in fact, he seemed quite in favor of it, eager for the benefits such a union would bring. After discussing it with him, I sent the proposal and then waited anxiously for her response. I was certain Claudia would accept; she had every reason to agree, and I expected a

positive reply within a few days.

But when the response did arrive, it was merely a letter, brief and crushing, with just the words “I’m sorry” scrawled across it.

“Why...?” I whispered, my hands shaking as they held the parchment. “How could she have...”

My heart shattered. It dawned on me that my confidence—perhaps more accurately, my *arrogance*—as crown prince had blinded me to possibilities other than a swift acquiescence. But why would she decline such an alliance? Was she already committed to someone else? No...that couldn’t be. The mere thought of her in someone else’s arms was...unbearable.

The shock twisted my love—turning it into hatred, the venom rapidly consuming my heart as I stared at those two horrible words. It was Raymond, my long-standing friend and adviser, who pulled me from the depths of this dark emotion. He stepped forward from his position against the wall to offer comfort. “Your Highness, I urge you to remain composed. I am confident that Saint Claudia’s refusal is not a rejection of you personally, nor do I think it indicates a desire to marry anyone else. News has just reached us that she plans to devote herself to the church. As you know, the church regards the Saint as a divine figure, and earthly attachments are forbidden to those who take the cloth. Thus, I do not think it likely she will be bound to anyone at all.”

And that includes you, Your Highness. Raymond didn’t say this last part out loud. Instead, he cleared his throat, a subtle nudge towards the unspoken truth.

I see. So she rejected me because she intends on joining the church.

Honestly, the realization that the church would claim her was a bitter pill to swallow, yet it brought a peculiar solace—knowing that her refusal did not originate in feelings for another man she’d chosen over me. This small comfort helped to dissolve the more corrosive strands of my despair, leaving behind a composed, hollow ache. I pressed a hand to my chest, trying to etch into my memory the melancholy feeling of my heart breaking.

In an attempt to rebound from the sting of a lost love, I threw myself into my work. I buried myself in duties and responsibilities, hoping to erase Claudia from my mind as quickly and thoroughly as I could, yet her memory only intensified

with time. The persistent strength of my love for her puzzled even me, and before I knew it, a decade had passed.

A month after my coronation, I found myself as an older and wiser man, but that ember of my youthful affection still smoldered in my heart. I was preoccupied with the complex task of solidifying my rule, when on a day like any other, the news of her death reached me.

She's...gone? Just like that? But she was so beloved by the people! How could she have just...

The official statement from the church claimed she had died after falling from a terrace, but the explanation seemed dubious and insufficient. Given the extensive protections around her, such an accident seemed implausible.

"Raymond!" I roared. "Send someone to the church immediately. We must investigate Claudia's—"

"We cannot!" he countered, his voice firm and tense. "The nobility would revolt, the people would be up in arms! If we investigate and cannot find proof of culpability, there will be riots in the streets!" He ended his tirade with a shake of his head, fixing a defiant glare on me.

I was acutely aware of the risks. I understood them perhaps even more than Raymond did. I knew it was imprudent to stir up controversy when my rule had yet to stabilize, but still!

"Do you really think me a man so stoic as to hear of the passing of the love of my life and simply let it go? Something's wrong here, you must see it! Raymond, I beg you!"

In a moment of raw emotion, I abandoned all decorum expected of a monarch and grasped Raymond's arms, my eyes brimming with tears. He clenched his jaw and averted his gaze; his fists shook, betraying his barely concealed agitation. Torn between allegiance to an old friend and the prospects of the long and prosperous reign of his king, he chose the latter. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but I cannot allow you to pursue this path—not this time. You are the king of an entire nation. It is high time you acted like one."

Anger overwhelmed me. Why couldn't he understand my pain? Why couldn't

I accept the wisdom and rationale in his caution? Overcome by emotion, I seized him by the collar. “Then I abdicate! The throne means nothing to me without her!”

I’d never forget the shock in my old friend’s eyes at that moment. In a swift, solemn motion, he raised his hand and brought it sharply across my face.

The slap resounded sharply through the room, startling me into silence. It took me moments to register that my cheek was stinging from the impact.

“I have heard quite enough from you today!” Raymond thundered. “You are the king of Celestia. I will not stand idly by as you cast reason to the wayside and let chaos consume the kingdom your family has nurtured for generations! I do not wish to trivialize your feelings, but you realize that this would mean facing the possibility of war? All because you can’t move past a teenage crush?!”

This was the first time in my life I’d heard my friend’s voice laden with such ire, and it jolted me towards a semblance of calm. The emotions that had rocked me like a tidal wave began to recede. I cast my eyes downward, momentarily shutting out the world, while Raymond’s heavy breathing filled the silence.

“Your Majesty. Saint Claudia loved this country,” he continued, his voice softening. “Many of your subjects regard her as their savior. If war were to break out, it would undoubtedly have broken her heart. Is this your intention? You wish to dishonor her legacy by destroying all that she worked so hard to build?”

What could I say to that? To tarnish the legacy of the woman I loved? Impossible. The realization struck me with clarity—I could never rob the people she’d cherished of their joy. I would never forgive myself. So, I swallowed my rage and my grief, and I vowed to let the matter rest forever.

Clutching my throbbing cheek, I looked up at Raymond. Tears glistened in his eyes—tears of sympathy, tears of frustration, shed by a friend who cared deeply.

Ah, of course. How did I not see that his heart is as heavy as mine?

Self-loathing consumed me. How could I have been so blind to my friend's feelings?

"Sorry, Raymond," I muttered quietly. "I lost my composure. That was unseemly of me. Thank you for returning me to my senses."

"No. I am deeply sorry for striking you. You may punish me in any way you deem fit."

The ever-serious Raymond dipped his head low in apology, eliciting a wry smile from me. I shook my head in exasperation, reflecting on his conscientious character. "That won't be necessary. What you did was only necessary to help me regain my composure. But, um, would you mind stepping out for a moment? I would like some time to myself."

He looked at me for a second. "Understood."

With a sharp bow of his head, he excused himself at once to the adjoining room. Now alone in that quiet room, one hand nursing my stinging cheek, I cried silently and freely.

Regrets filled my head, pain tightened around my heart—if only I'd torn up that letter of rejection and swept her off her feet that day; if only I'd conveyed to her the true depth of my affection; if only I had locked her in my arms at that first meeting and never let go. Why had I let myself be satisfied with merely knowing she hadn't chosen another over me? Such folly, so many wasted chances.

Tormented by the echoes of what could have been, my younger self's blunders haunted me, and I wept. I mourned the loss of a selfless soul, taken before her time.

I returned from my recollection, my gaze narrowing on the tomb in front of me. "But Claudia, Prince Gilbert has uncovered the conspiracy shrouding your death. He has honored your memory, and Mills has been subjected to a divine inquisition, suffering for the full measure of his sins. Isn't that something? You can rest now."

Alas, Claudia was no more. I spoke into the eerie shadows of the crypt, fully

aware that my words fell upon no living ear—yet still felt it right to impart this news. My hand reached out to caress the cold tomb. There was one more thing I had to say to her.

“Forgive me, Claudia, that I wasn’t the one to avenge your death.” The chill of the stone bit into my flesh, a cruel reminder of her absence. On the twentieth anniversary of her passing, it grieved me as deeply as it had on the day of her departure.

I must confess that I’d had ample opportunity to seek the truth of her untimely death. The instability that marred my reign had been temporary—a transitional phase that had ultimately allowed me to consolidate my power. That turbulent period had ended less than two years following her death. By then, even the most petulant of the nobles had sheathed their barbs, while foreign powers had bowed to the legitimacy of my throne. I could have commissioned an investigation at any point in time beyond those seasons of chaos, but doing so would have been tantamount to admitting a harrowing truth—that Claudia was indeed gone, an actuality my heart had been loath to acknowledge. Thus I’d chosen the coward’s refuge: I’d fled from the truth. By ignoring the reality of her death, I could hold tenuously to an illusion, a fantasy in which she was always just around the next corner, forever elusive, forever and always so slightly out of reach.

“And Prince Gilbert...” I continued. “He told me. You wanted my help in combating the corruption of the church? Yet I in my blindness did nothing as he righted the wrongs I’d ignored for so long. How wretched I feel.” A deep sigh escaped my lips, an audible expression of the disgust I bore for my own impotence, for failing to realize the dreams of the woman I had so deeply cherished.

I traced the engraved letters of her name with a reverent finger. The absence of “Phillips” beside “Claudia” drew a deep frown across my brow. It was merely a name, I tried to console myself, yet without its presence, without my projected fantasy of a world in which we had been together, the gulf between us seemed vast and unbridgeable, as though we had been mere strangers.

Even if I had approached things differently, would you have ever stood by my side?

“I love you, Claudia, from the depths of my heart, always and eternally. May you rest in peace.”

With that final confession, I rose from the cold stone floor, brushing the dirt off my trousers. My gaze held fast to her tomb, as though trying to imprint its every detail upon my memory. Clutching my candle, its light quivering in the draft of the crypt, I took a final, lingering look.

Farewell, Claudia, my first and everlasting love.

Chapter Six

(Carolina)

The week following my success at the preliminary trials was one that was marked by an intense flurry of activity. Ed spent his time directing the Pyreborn hither and thither; Teodore expended his efforts subjecting Duke Arendt to a thorough interview (it might be more accurate to term it an “interrogation”); and Prince Gilbert, as the organizer of the trials, had his hands full dealing with all of the repercussions of that most eventful day. Despite the fact that I was still recovering, I myself had my own tasks to attend to—I busied myself with unwrapping and responding to the greeting cards and well-wishes from acquaintances far and wide.

As I finished composing another thank-you note, I looked up from my cluttered writing desk and scanned the room. Every available surface was strewn with over a hundred letters and parcels of all sizes—a peculiar sort of blessing, indeed. Given that up to now, few nobles in the empire had had reason to write to me, let alone wish me well, the trials seemed to have significantly boosted my social standing.

Perhaps a little *too* significantly...

After a quick sip of tea, I moved on to choose the next letter—maybe the one from Duke Blake? But as I reached over the pile of unread missives for the letter opener, a familiar wax seal caught my eye. The hyacinth emblem made my hands tremble with excitement. Setting aside Duke Blake’s letter, I picked up the one from my father instead.

Elated that he had written, I eagerly broke the seal and devoured the familiar handwriting. The letter began with heartfelt congratulations on my success, confirmed Celestia’s participation in the Faith Council, and relayed the news of the abolition of the Celestian system of Sainthood.

“The abolition of the Celestian system of sainthood?” I murmured to myself.

I could hardly believe my eyes, but I reread the sentence, and it was indeed the message contained in the words upon the page: “With the establishment of the Faith Council, and the crimes of Archbishop Mills brought at last to the light, the decision was made to abolish the Celestian system of Sainthood.”

I...supposed it was true that it might have been a little confusing if Celestia were to have its own Saint while supporting the Faith Council. Not to mention that the kingdom would undoubtedly want to avoid another tragedy like the one involving Saint Claudia. Yes, the more I pondered, the more I was able to convince myself that this was the right decision, even if it seemed a shame to dismantle such a storied Celestian institution.

Deep in thought, I folded the letter and returned it to its envelope. “Marisa, could you place this in the usual spot?”

“Very well, Your Highness.” She took the letter from my hand and tucked it into a specific drawer in my dresser. It was there that I kept every letter and gift from my father, safeguarding them like jewels in a treasure chest, my most precious possessions.

With a deep breath, I grasped my quill, pondering my response, but a knock at the door interrupted my thoughts. “It’s Theodore, Your Highness, along with Prince Edward. May we enter?”

His voice was muffled but clearly recognizable as Theodore’s all the same. Though one could never be too careful—just to be sure, I glanced at Owen for his approval. He nodded, and with my personal guard’s endorsement, I called out for my visitors to enter. The familiar duo walked in and settled themselves on the sofas, their expressions a mix of amusement and curiosity as they surveyed the cluttered room.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Theodore said with a small dip of his head. “Please allow me to apologize for our unannounced arrival.”

Ed raised an eyebrow at him. “What for? We barge in like this every time.”

Teodore’s cheek twitched; he swiftly lifted his heel and brought it down on Ed’s foot with a dull thud. I winced at the sound, but Ed, ever the stoic military commander, showed no sign of discomfort. Had my own foot been the target of Theodore’s annoyance, I surely would have screamed.

“It’s all right,” I replied as nonchalantly as I could. “I was just about to take a rest from my correspondence, so you’re both very welcome to join me. After all, we are friends, aren’t we? There’s no need for such formality.”

In response to my assurances, Teodore let out a small breath. Ed looked relieved as well.

“So, what inspired your visit?” I asked, reaching for my teacup. “Is something the matter?” Both men were very busy individuals, and I knew they would appreciate my direct approach.

Curiously, it was Ed who seemed poised to speak. “The fates of Monica Arendt and the duke have been decided. Though you would have been privy to the official announcement soon enough, we felt it might be better if you heard it from us directly.”

I had expected this subject matter to yield good news, so I was surprised to see Ed look so somber. I had imagined he would be relieved to conclude a matter that had lingered too long, but his expression suggested otherwise. Had the duke managed to win a concession or two? Surely, no matter the circumstances, Teodore would have triumphed in that battle of wits, no?

Ed slowly raised his head to meet my gaze. “First, Duke Arendt... His degree of peerage has been degraded and a portion of his domain seized.”

“By all rights, he should have been stripped of his title entirely, given the severity of the crime,” Teodore jumped in to explain, “but considering his past achievements and contributions, he was merely degraded. And...it must be admitted that we have found no direct connections between him and the extremists.”

“None? At all?” I gasped, shocked at the news. Of course, I knew that if there *had* been conclusive evidence, the degradation of his rank would have been the least of his worries.

“Not *directly*,” Teodore clarified. “But we do believe him tacitly complicit in their existence and activities.”

My eyes widened. “Tacitly? You mean he had information about the extremists and their plans, but he never informed the imperial family?” My

brow furrowed in frustration. Overlooking the existence of an organization actively antagonizing the imperial family was dangerously close to treason—at the very least, a severe abandonment of civic duty. What could have been his motivation? The duke possessed a powerful voice. If he had thrown his support behind the emperor, perhaps the extremists wouldn't have spent so much breath slandering Ed as the "Bloodthirsty Prince," and I might not have faced attempts on my life.

Unless the (former) duke had a vested interest in the downfall of the Pyreborn?

This was mere speculation, but I couldn't think of any other reason. For the family known as "the sword of the empire" to act in such a careless manner, the potential to eliminate the Pyreborn would have been the only risk worth the cost. *All this violence and upheaval, all over a personal grudge...*

Teodore interrupted my thoughts, clarifying his position. "The duke, of course, never confessed to anything of the sort. But during our interrogation—excuse me, *interview*—he revealed a great deal about the extremists. Now, I cannot say with *absolute* certainty, but the level of information he was privy to was not...shall we say, surface level."

I smiled sympathetically. Teodore's words gave his position on the matter a little more nuance, making it clear that since he had no concrete evidence of the duke's intentions, what else could he really do? Absent a mind-reading device, there was no way to determine when the duke had become privy to his information and for what purpose he had done so. The duke could claim that he had only recently acquired this knowledge and he had been planning to report it as soon as he was able, and we would have to accept that as plausible.

Teodore cleared his throat. "What details he did share allowed the Pyreborn to conduct simultaneous raids at the estates of two marquesses, four counts, and one viscount. All of the known ringleaders of this little group have been arrested and indicted on treason charges. The element of surprise was on our side, so we managed to get our hands on ample evidence before any proof could be destroyed. Do believe me when I say that these unfortunate aristocrats will not be worming their way out of this one." His words tapered off into a broad smile, expressing a fierce joy in this outcome. In such a context,

that dubious smile of his took on a wholly different definition of terrifying, and I would be lying if I said I didn't flinch. As I'd found myself fervently wishing many a time and oft, I silently prayed to remain in Theodore's good graces forever.

"I... I see," I stammered, trying to hide my discomfort. "Is that why the Pyreborn have been so busy?"

"Indeed," Theodore responded. "Though I suspect that now that we have a few rats in custody, the rest will begin turning on each other soon enough. When that happens, we will become even busier. But that is a blessing, not a curse."

This was the first time I recalled ever seeing him downright giddy as he detailed the impending downfall of the extremists. Truly, he seemed satisfied that this whole affair was coming at last to a favorable conclusion. My mind briefly drifted to those poor individuals about to face Theodore's tenacity when my eyes met Ed's. In a stark contrast to Theodore's buoyant mood, Ed seemed gravely sober, even nervous. It looked like he had something more to say, so I straightened up in order to listen more keenly.

"Lastly," Ed began in a solemn tone, "you must know that Monica Arendt has been...sentenced to life imprisonment." He cast his gaze downward, making his feelings about this slightly harder to discern, but I thought I could detect a hint of dissatisfaction in his mien. *I suppose he was more upset than any of us when it came to her*, I thought wryly.

"Due to the duke's intervention, she was spared the death sentence," Ed continued. "He was prepared to renounce his position, to throw away his entire life for his daughter's sake, so we had no choice but to respect that."

"But," Theodore jumped in with a lighter tone, "we successfully argued for and won the ability to strip away Lady Monica's noble status. While incarcerated, she will be treated like any other commoner. Given what I know of her predilections, I imagine that she will find this to be a fate worse than death."

Teodore had managed to rob Monica of the part of her identity that she cherished most, snatching a minor victory from the jaws of defeat. Indeed, for someone as proud as she clearly was, she might very well spend the rest of her days wishing for death rather than face living a life beneath what she believed she deserved.

“In a way, this might’ve been the best possible outcome,” I muttered, almost unconsciously.

Ed’s face snapped up. The concern in his gaze practically shouted the unspoken question: *Are you sure?*

If I was honest with myself, I didn’t much care what happened to Lady Monica. Her ultimate fate was irrelevant to me. But Ed’s feelings mattered, and right now, he looked so glum and defeated. I couldn’t have that.

“In my opinion, Lady Monica is a woman of unmatched pride,” I explained. “To her, living out her days in prison as a nobody seems a far greater punishment than facing the gallows as the daughter of a duke. I don’t think she’ll be able to bear the thought of dying a lonely death after years spent in a bare cell rather than with dignity, surrounded by loved ones and family. So yes, I think this was for the best.” I smiled in my best imitation of Teodore, hoping to convey my satisfaction with the outcome.

Ed looked conflicted for a moment longer but eventually nodded in acceptance. The weight on his chest, the impotence he felt at not having successfully defended my honor, seemed to lift, and he sank back in his seat with evident relief.

I would hate for both of them to think their efforts had been for naught. “Ed, Teodore,” I began, my eyes crinkling at the edges with kindness, “I really can’t begin to thank you both enough for the time you’ve devoted to my cause. It gives me great strength and joy to know I have such a dependable husband and friend.”

A hint of sheepish pride colored their cheeks, gradually evolving into expressions of quiet fulfillment.

“Thank you for calling me a friend, Your Highness,” Teodore replied with grace. “And let it be known that I will continue to devote myself to your well-being without question.”

“Teo put it much better than I could have done,” Ed added. “We’re here to help, always.”

“I appreciate that, truly,” I replied, a smile curving my lips. As I gazed at them,

feeling the profound depth of our unshakable bond, that smile blossomed into a radiant expression of gratitude and affection.

Once more, I was struck by the profound sense of comfort and belonging that the presence of these two men brought to me.

(Flora)

The Celestian system of Sainthood had just been abolished. I sat alone in my room, my head cradled in my hands, consumed by a single stomach-churning possibility:

Has Carolina's Divinity come to light?

I shook my head fiercely, my silver-blond locks swaying with the movement. "As Archbishop Mills fell, the Faith Council of Saints rose," I muttered to myself. "And in the position of the Malcosian representative? Carolina. At the very least, the empire must know of her power. No matter how I look at it, the Faith Council must have been established for her benefit."

A frustrated groan escaped my lips. Despite my best efforts to rationalize this turn of events, to concoct some other justification for these circumstances, I found myself inexorably drawn to the same inescapable conclusion. No one had confirmed my suspicions outright, but all the evidence pointed in one direction.

Foremost among these clues was my father's reaction! When he'd heard the news of Carolina becoming the empire's candidate, he hadn't so much as flinched. In fact, he'd nodded approvingly, as if he'd known this would be the outcome all along. He knew just as well as I did that Carolina was nonmagical, didn't he? So why hadn't he even paused to express surprise at the news? There was only one possibility.

Because he knows about her power.

"So he knows, does he?" I whispered under my breath. Speaking the words aloud left me with a surprising sense of acceptance, one which tugged bitterly at my heart. My nails dug into my palms, my teeth ground against each other. *He knows. How long has he known?* But no, that wasn't what was important, nor was it relevant to know who it had been who had told him. What mattered

was that he now knew that the source of my power had been Carolina all along. All this time, I'd paraded myself about as if I were some unassailable paragon, when in truth, it had been my sister all along. The fact that I'd been ignorant of this knowledge until recently was no excuse. This truth was my greatest embarrassment!

My father would never look at me again in the same way; he'd scathingly scold me for my foolishness—and that was the best-case scenario. Currently, only he and perhaps the people around him knew of my shameful secret, but if that truth were to spread? If the nobility and the rest of the world were to know? I'd be made a laughingstock, the greatest jest they'd ever seen! The image I'd cultivated for decades would crumble in an instant.

Images of people pointing at me, laughing behind my back, flooded my mind's eye, and I could feel my soul crumbling under the sheer weight of the vision. The shame would be unbearable. I squeezed my eyes shut.

It was an unattainable dream to think that I'd be able to keep the truth concealed forever; that thin hope would shatter the moment that Carolina ascended to Sainthood. Sooner or later, the world would realize the truth of her powers, and in doing so, understand that the cause of all of Celestia's crises was her absence and not my own ill health. If only she could fail the Saintly Trials somehow...but how could she, blessed as she was with the power to move nations?

Another frustrated grunt escaped me. "What do I do, what do I do?!" My face contorted into a grimace as the previously unassailable parapet of the reputation I had so carefully built began to collapse beneath my feet; the feeling was an assault to my senses.

A knock on the door interrupted my dark despair.

Oh, for— Who is it? This is hardly the time!

"Flora, are you in there? It's your father. We need to talk."

Father? His voice jolted me back to reality. Why was he here? What did he need to discuss? I took a deep breath to steady myself, willing my anxious eyes to stop darting around. Plastering on my usual smile, I sat up straight. "Yes, come in," I called out.

“Excuse me.” The door clicked open, and my father stepped inside. His silver-white ponytail swayed as he entered, faint dark circles shadowing his eyes. He shut the door behind him, and the click of his boots seemed to echo as he moved to sit on a nearby sofa.

Rising briskly, I approached the tea cart. “One moment, I’ll brew us some—”

“That won’t be necessary,” he interrupted. “I have to return to the castle within the hour.”

I paused, then slowly resumed my seat, maintaining my impeccable posture.

“In the interest of time, I’ll be brief. Flora, we would like you to represent Celestia at the Faith Council’s trials.”

A confused whimper escaped me, my eyes widening in shock. I stared into my father’s emerald eyes, searching for any hint of madness. *Me, represent Celestia?* The notion seemed absurd, almost cruel given my current state. Could he truly be unaware of what he was asking?

Unless he actually knows nothing of Carolina’s power?

No, no, that couldn’t be. His calm acceptance of Carolina’s candidacy was undeniable proof that he’d recognized her power and its role as the true source of Celestia’s prosperity.

Then what? Was this some fatherly jest I couldn’t understand? One glance at his solemn expression dispelled any such notion. No, he was deadly serious.

If he was resolute, then there had to be a reason. My mind raced, sifting through possibilities, analyzing the situation from every conceivable angle. I discarded theory after theory until only one remained.

Does Father know about Carolina’s ability to repel mana-beasts and to ensure the fecundity of crops, but not her power to amplify magic?

It was a frail thread to hang on to, but it was the only one that might allow me to make sense of his request for me to step forward as Celestia’s representative, despite being aware of Carolina’s formidable capabilities. Reflecting further, I realized that I hadn’t demonstrated my own magic publicly since Carolina’s departure. And that the official statement issued by the church

regarding my trials had indicated I'd failed by a narrow margin.

I see. So the perception of my powers hasn't yet waned in the public eye.

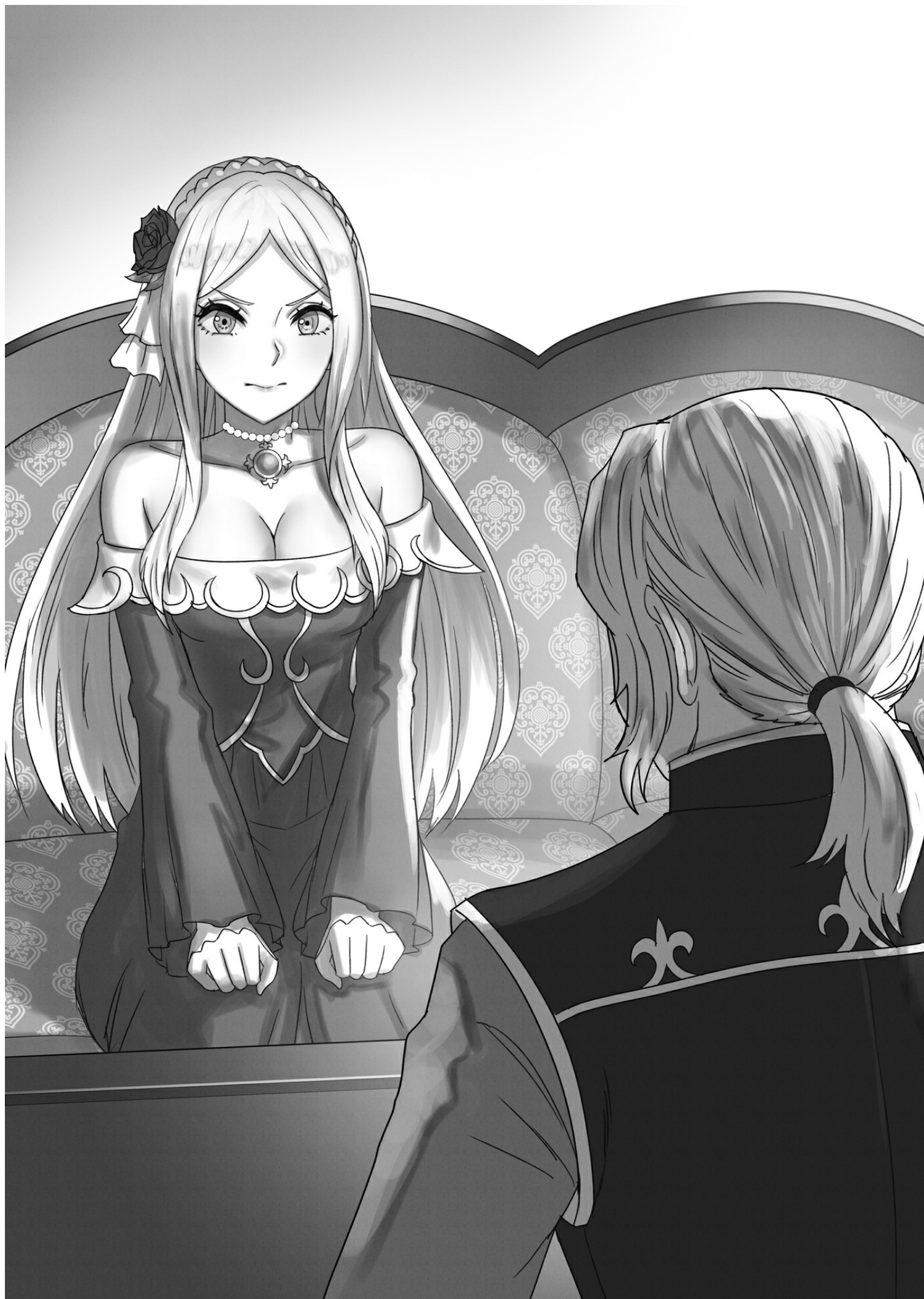
While I might have unearthed a plausible explanation, it ushered in a far more daunting dilemma: should I accept this candidacy? Logically, I ought to decline; the reasons to do so were numerous and compelling. Yet if I refused and another took my place, what troubling rumors might circulate about the reasons for my withdrawal?

But those considerations paled in comparison to the deeper truth: I had been chosen by Celestia itself. My father hadn't explicitly stated it, but the nomination carried the weight of a royal edict, a manifestation of the kingdom's will. Declining wouldn't be an option without a full, transparent explanation. And that explanation—the explanation that my power had been borrowed Divinity all along—would be tantamount to a confession of my utter dependence on my sister. And that was a revelation I could never willingly make.

In that case, the decision had been made for me from the outset.

"Of course, Father. I gladly accept," I declared, my voice resolute.

With my affirmation, I felt myself cross an invisible threshold between pride and recklessness, claiming the Celestial candidacy as my own. My pride was now to chart an irreversible course. No longer could I afford the luxury of regret over not having crushed my ego and confessed the diminution of my power; my focus must shift entirely to what lay ahead.



I resolved to attain a power befitting a Saintly candidate by any means necessary—even if it meant venturing into the forbidden. No taboo was too formidable...not even the little black pill that had been bequeathed to me by Mills in hushed secrecy prior to his downfall.

The proverbial wheels had fallen off the carriage of my pride, yet I was committed to following this path to its inevitable end—to my very demise.

Side Story: Worry—Edward’s Memories

As Lady Monica was led away, I stood on the arena floor, cradling Lina’s unconscious form. Rage, grief, and regret overwhelmed me as I gazed at the angry, red marks that marred the neck of my beloved.

I’m sorry, my dear Lina, that I couldn’t prevent this. The terror, the pain, the suffering you endured could’ve all been avoided if I’d acted sooner.

Protecting her. That had been my one overarching duty, and I had failed it. How utterly worthless had I become? As I berated myself, Teo glided down from the stands under the power of his wind magic and landed next to me. “Let’s take her to the medical office,” he said, gesturing towards the nearest vomitorium. “We’ll treat her there.”

I almost protested—insisting we administer aid to her right there, right then—but I caught myself just in time. Medical treatment might necessitate undressing her, I realized. It was an emergency, but Lina’s dignity still needed to be preserved. With this in mind, I followed Teo, quickening my pace as much as I dared as we hurried down the corridor, moving carefully to accommodate Lina’s condition.

“Where’s the medical office? I don’t see it,” I said, my impatience growing.

“It’s just around the next corner,” Teo assured me. “Hold on a little longer, Your Highness.”

Unlike me, my vice commander remained perfectly composed. “Make way, make way,” he called as we navigated through the milling crowd to a nondescript door. A sign marked “Medical Office” hung above it, and the faint scent of disinfectant seeped into the hall. Teo knocked briefly, and without

waiting for a response, he turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, the room was empty—no doctor in sight. Only a medicine cabinet and several beds occupied the space. Teo quickly approached the nearest bed, pulling back the sheets. He then looked over at me, still lingering in the doorway. “What are you waiting for? Bring her here quickly, and I’ll begin my examination.”

Jolted into action, I hurried over to the bed and laid her down as gently as I could. She was deeply asleep. The stress, not just from today’s event but from the ordeal with the archbishop, must’ve taken its toll on her. The realization struck painfully late: I should have been more supportive.

Lost in a spiral of self-criticism, I barely noticed Teo grabbing my arm. “You’re in the way,” he hissed. “If you can’t make yourself useful, then make yourself scarce.” He moved in front of me, leaning over Lina. Gently, he touched her face, tilting her head to assess the extent of her injuries, then checked her pulse. “Her pulse is a little elevated, but she’s otherwise fine. She’ll make a full recovery.”

“Are you sure?” I blurted out before remembering it was folly to question Teo’s medical expertise.

He sighed, recognizing my anxiety but clearly exasperated. “Yes, I’m sure. Now will you please compose yourself?”

His irritation was thinly veiled, but as I breathed a sigh of relief, he adjusted his glasses and returned to examining her neck. It wasn’t immediately apparent what he was doing, but upon seeing the marks on her neck slowly fade, I realized that he was casting a healing spell. When he finished, the bruises were less noticeable—only apparent if you knew to look, but undeniably still present.

“Can’t you do something about that?” I asked, my gaze fixed on her neck. “Won’t the marks disappear completely with another spellcast?”

“The rest will heal on its own,” he replied. “There shouldn’t be any scarring, barring of course any additional significant stress to the affected area.”

“B-But—”

“Your Highness,” he interrupted with another sigh, “I’m quite certain you

know as well as I do that it's best to rely on the body's natural healing processes whenever possible."

I understood that; of course I did. Healing magic, though versatile, carried risks. Its control was intricate, requiring precise adaptation to each specific injury, and a misapplication could worsen a patient's condition. I knew all this, yet the faint red marks on her skin were a vivid reminder of my failure, causing a sharp ache in my chest.

Observing my restlessness, Teo shrugged in exasperation. "If it bothers you that much, I can bandage her neck."

Despite his tone, I realized he was trying to offer a solution. I nodded. "Please."

With a quick word of acknowledgment, Teo fetched some gauze from the medicine cabinet. He wrapped it around Carolina's throat with the greatest care, trimmed the excess, and then glanced at the clock on the wall. "While Her Highness rests, we should move her to the Emerald Palace. Nobel Hall is much too populous for comfort." His voice tightened slightly—perhaps he was concerned about extremists finding us here. "I can teleport us."

I nodded in agreement. "Lina's safety is the priority."

"Then keep an eye on her for a moment while I work out the calculations," he said, and with a respectful bow, he retreated to the back of the room. Although he was out of sight, the faint scratching of his quill on paper echoed in the quiet room.

Feeling a sudden pang of loneliness, I moved closer to Carolina's bed and took her hand—so delicate in mine—as I watched her serene face. "Please, just wake up, Lina. I'll take any scolding, bear any punishment. I just need to hear your voice again," I whispered, my voice heavy with longing.

Get better soon, my love, I prayed, my gaze lingering on her, filled with a mix of hope and wistful worry.

Side Story: Happy Days—Flora's Memories

A long, long time ago—long before Carolina had even been introduced as a

minor character in my story, I was living in an unmitigated paradise. Surrounded by family—a kind and beautiful mother, a stern yet loving father—my days were an endless parade of contentments. Blessed with so much, I'd been fortunate enough to live in a world where “unhappiness” had been nothing but a vague concept.

“Flora, darling, come here,” my mother, Karen Sanchez, called out, her hand beckoning me towards the cooling shade of a grand old tree. The gentle breeze played with her lustrous, raven-black hair as she invited me into her little haven, solace from the fierce summer sun.

Obediently, I trotted over to her side, and she adjusted the straw hat tied around my neck, positioning it perfectly over my head. “Remember what Mama always tells you about your hat? We have to keep it in the right place to protect your beautiful skin. We wouldn't want anything to happen to it, now would we?” With my hat securely shading my face once again, she gave me a radiant smile. “There we go. My, my, how pretty you look today, Flora.”

“Thank you, Mama,” I replied, my fingers instinctively reaching out to adjust my hat, pleased that it was identical to the one that she wore.

Today was the day of an eagerly anticipated picnic, and I was excited beyond words. In my glee, I hadn't even noticed when my hat had slipped from my head. I resolved to pay more attention, clutching the brim with both hands—I was determined not to let it slip away again! I was certain that if I just held my hat in place, it would stay positioned exactly like Mama's—the perfect countermeasure to ensure that it wouldn't slip again, or so the young me thought. It was at that moment that Mama retrieved her pocket watch from her dress. “We have more time than I anticipated. Why don't we do something delightful before we eat our lunch? Any ideas, darling?”

My mama knew how quickly I became restless; her suggestion was just another token of her endless affection. I couldn't contain my excitement. “There's lots of flowers over there! I want to make a flower crown!”

“Why, that sounds lovely,” she replied, a nostalgic gleam in her eyes. “A flower crown. It's been years since I last made one.” She set her eyes on the nearby hillside, blanketed with multicolored blooms, and gracefully rose to her

feet.

As she set off to craft a crown fit for her cherished daughter, my father, lounging beside the picnic basket, pointedly cleared his throat. “I think I’ll stay here and keep an eye on our belongings,” he announced, neatly excusing himself from a task he clearly felt unsuited for. He pointedly and firmly kept his posterior planted upon the ground as a resounding echo of that sentiment.

Mama responded with a playful shrug of her shoulders. “We have servants for that, you know.”

“I... I’m aware,” Father replied, only a little stiffly.

“This is a rare day out for all of us, love,” Mama pointed out with a dazzling smile. “It wouldn’t be the same without you.”

Father grunted, his face pulling into a conflicted expression as he mulled over his wife’s cajoling words.

“Or perhaps is it that you don’t want to make any happy memories with your family?” she continued with the barest hint of a pout.

Father’s eyes widened in alarm. “Of course I do! Lots of them! Memories with you and our little girl are my greatest treasures,” he blurted out insistently, shaking his head vehemently in denial of her accusation.

Mama’s smile broadened, satisfied by the success of her tactics; Father had responded just as she had anticipated. “Then that means you’ll join us, won’t you?” She extended a hand to him invitingly.

Caught in a gentle trap of Mama’s making, Father paused momentarily, eyeing her outstretched hand. He then took it with a resigned yet affectionate smile, acknowledging the subtle power she wielded over him—power that he seldom resisted (unless it threatened to distract him from his work, of course). “Let’s set off, then,” Mama said cheerfully, leading the way towards the hillside, her enthusiasm contagious.

We hurried to keep up with her despite the heat of the bright summer sun. As we reached the sea of wildflowers, Mama said, “It’s even more beautiful up close, isn’t it?”

“There’s an untamed charm to them,” Father admitted. “Quite different from the manicured bouquets we often see at home.”

They both crouched down to get a closer look at the flowers. “I think these will make a fine crown,” Mama said with satisfaction.

“Indeed,” Father concurred, then added in a curious tone, “But how exactly does one make a flower crown?”

Mama looked at him in wide-eyed astonishment. “Really, there are things you don’t know, dear?” She fluttered her eyelashes. “How unexpected.”

“I’m curious to know exactly when during my life you think I might have gained such a skill,” Father retorted with an exasperated shrug.

Mama giggled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to tease. It’s not often I get to experience the excitement of knowing something that you do not, so I was genuinely surprised.” She plucked two flowers, one pink, one green, and she began to deftly weave their stems together. “Let me show you how simple it is to make one—it’ll be my way of making up for mocking you so scandalously.”

From that point, Mama became a gentle tutor in crafting flower crowns, guiding my father through each step with patience and clarity. Despite being new to this art, quick learner that he was, my father managed to create a crown on his first attempt—though it was admittedly a bit rudimentary in its aesthetic. In a way, however, that was uniquely reflective of him. Most importantly, he was there, fully engaged and sharing in the moment with us, and that was what truly mattered the most.

As I presented the flower crowns I had made to my parents, even at that tender age, I sensed the significance of the moment. The crowns were far from perfect, but my parents received them with genuine joy. The smiles we shared that day are etched in my memory, vivid and bright. I remembered smiling back at them, my heart overflowing with love, knowing that we had created a shining memory that would endure within the secret depths of my heart.

Afterword

Thank you for choosing to pick up the third volume of *The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I Was the Real Saint All Along!* out of all the books that are assuredly at your disposal. It is I, Almond, the author who has been struggling due to lack of sleep.

Perhaps those of you who are reading might already know this, but starting with this volume, publication of this series has moved to Earth Star Luna.

To be honest, the change has been subtle at best (lol).

The illustrator's still the same, the editor's still the same, so really, nothing has changed. Oh, but I suppose the schedule has. The schedule changed, and that has thrown me for a loop. I'll admit that when I first heard about the transition, I was a little wary, but I'm glad to report that my expectations were dashed (in the best possible way).

That's enough meta talk! Let's move on to a glimpse of the process behind the scenes. If you've followed the web novel, you've probably realized I had to fiddle with the timeline quite a bit. Mills especially felt like he didn't quite meet expectations of the villain he was supposed to be, so some changes had to be made on that front, including the addition of an entirely new scene.

You got this, Jona-chan! (Jonathan Mills) You're the real antagonist here, not the unpleasant Lady Monica!

Speaking of Monica, she was originally supposed to be a mage who wielded plant-related magic instead of holy—thereby explaining her green-on-green design motif! But unfortunately I figured that would kind of mean she wouldn't be able to participate in the trials, so I had to (reluctantly grumbling every step of the way) banish that to the realm of scrapped ideas.

You'd think I'd have learned to properly set up characters after the Gilbert fiasco, but alas.

I hope you enjoyed this peek behind the curtain! Now, for some

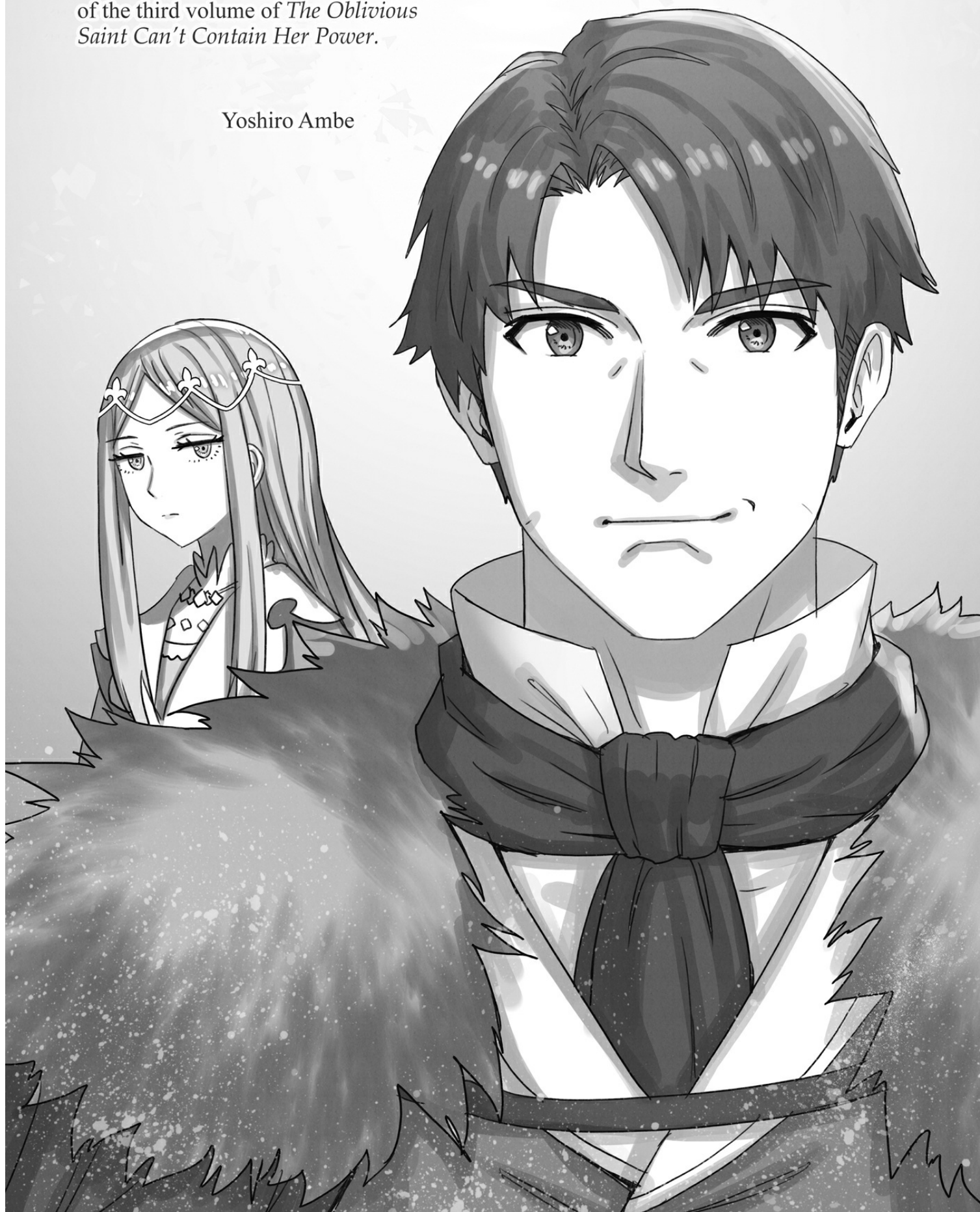
acknowledgments. To my supportive dad, my outwardly cool but inwardly doting brother, and all my writing friends—thank you all so much, as always.

To Yoshiro Ambe, the incredibly talented illustrator for the series; to my editor, whose clear and concise feedback has always been indispensable; and to everyone else involved in the production of this book—thank you.

Lastly, to you, the reader, who picked up this volume and ventured once again into my world, I will say this again because it bears repeating: thank you so very much.

Thank you so much for your purchase
of the third volume of *The Oblivious
Saint Can't Contain Her Power*.

Yoshiro Ambe



Bonus Short Story

Love at First Sight—Monica's Memories

I remember my father taking me to a dazzling debutante ball over a decade ago. At just five years old, I was naught but a tiny child, a wide-eyed little Monica watching the dance floor swirl with a sea of unfamiliar faces. At the time, the undercurrents of such an event eluded me, but the atmosphere was unforgettable—electric, pulsating with the sheer brilliance and opulence of it all.

What luxury, I thought, my dazzled gaze darting restlessly across the scene. The elegantly dressed guests, the exquisite food, the lavish decorations—so this was a ball hosted by the imperial family!

As I absorbed the sights with childlike wonder, my father looked down at me, his eyes crinkling with fondness. “Monica,” he said, “I must step away for a moment. Feel free to explore until the first dance, but do not cause any mischief.”

“Yes, Papa!” I chirped, nodding vigorously. “I’m a good girl. You needn’t worry about me!”

All the social rounds and greetings and whatever else was expected of my father—it was all such a chore. Happy to be spared the adult drudgery, I slid down from my chair and set off on my own miniature adventure, eager to discover whatever secrets I might find hidden within the grand ballroom.

I walked wherever my little feet took me, hither and thither, meandering through a whirlpool of grown-ups who showered me with adoring compliments. Amid the churning current of taller bodies draped in silks and satins, a striking mane of pastel-blue hair caught my eye. Mesmerized, I halted, my gaze locked onto the beautiful cascade of hair and the intriguing boy who sported it. “How pretty...” I whispered to myself, my cheeks warming and my heart fluttering as if a butterfly were trapped inside of me. It was a bewildering sensation for a girl

as young as myself; all I knew then was that I couldn't look away. Time itself seemed to pause around me.

Before I'd fully grasped what I was doing, my legs moved on their own. "Excuse me!" I stammered, weaving through the crowd to stand directly next to the blue-haired boy.

His surprise quickly gave way to a warm smile when he saw me. "Hello there, young lady. Are you lost? Where are your parents?" He didn't brush me off like the child that I was, crouching down slightly instead to meet me at eye level. Suddenly we were a lot closer, and my heart began to race.

Uh-oh, I thought nervously. I managed to grab his attention, but what do I say now? In a flutter of panic, I blinked rapidly, and his smile only widened in response.

"I believe we've yet to be introduced," he said kindly. "My name is Gilbert Ruby Martinez, and I am the first prince of Malcosias. What's your name?"

His words, offered so graciously, paved the way for my response. Yet upon learning his identity—a prince of the imperial family—my eyes widened with surprise. A prince? I had sensed his popularity, but I hadn't imagined his royal status! That explained his distinguished air, especially for a boy who couldn't have been more than a handful of years older than me.

Overwhelmed and momentarily lost for words, I struggled to process this revelation. But after a brief pause, I mustered the composure to respond with a small, somewhat clumsy curtsy. "H-Hello, star of the empire. My name is Monica Arendt, the eldest daughter of Duke Arendt."

My movements might have been unpolished and my words slightly stilted, but I was determined to present myself well. My young mind whirled, striving not to appear uncultured (and therefore unworthy) in front of such esteemed company.

Prince Gilbert's expression sharpened. "Ah, Duke Arendt's daughter, are you? Very well met. The duke is always speaking of his precocious young child." His smile held a wry edge as he shrugged lightly, perhaps recalling past conversations with my father. A small sigh of exasperation escaped him, hinting at the depth of their discussions.

“In any case, congratulations on your debut,” he continued, his tone shifting to one of encouragement. “Now you are a lady, through and through. There will be many challenges ahead, but I know you’ll handle them with grace.”

With that, he straightened up and called for a few nearby maids, dispatching them to search for my father. As I watched them all scatter, Prince Gilbert turned away from me, I sensed our encounter drawing to a close. But I wasn’t ready to let it end. Stepping forward, I called out again, “Excuse me!” My voice broke through the growing distance. “How... How can I stand by your side?” It was bold, perhaps too bold, to stop a prince in such a manner, but my young heart couldn’t hold back.

He turned, and with an indulgent smile, he responded, “That is a question only you can answer for yourself, young lady. What does it take to be consort to a prince? I’ll give you a hint: It isn’t someone who waits for others to provide their answers.”

Think for yourself. His words might’ve been difficult for a child to understand, but they resonated deeply with me. I had to think independently, determine my needs, and strive diligently to fulfill them. I couldn’t be someone who relied solely on the guidance of others. Such a person could never stand by his side.

With my goal set, hazy and resolute all at once, I clenched my fists tight. Overflowing with the determination to become a lady worthy of His Highness, I called back a “Yes, Your Highness!” with all of my might.



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The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I Was the Real Saint All Along! Volume 3

by Almond

Translated by Dawson Chen Edited by Rachel Kohler

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