



# 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**

1



The book cover features a detailed illustration of three characters in a medieval-style setting. In the background, a woman with long white hair and a pink dress stands near a window. In the foreground, a young woman with long light blue hair and red eyes, wearing a blue dress with a white ruffled collar, looks towards the viewer. To her right stands a man with red hair, wearing ornate silver and blue armor with a large white fur collar. The title 'The Oblivious Saint' is written in a large, stylized font, with 'Can't Contain Her' in a smaller font and 'POWER' in a large, green, outlined font. A quote bubble is positioned between the title and the characters. The author and illustrator names are in the bottom left, and a large number '1' is in the bottom right.

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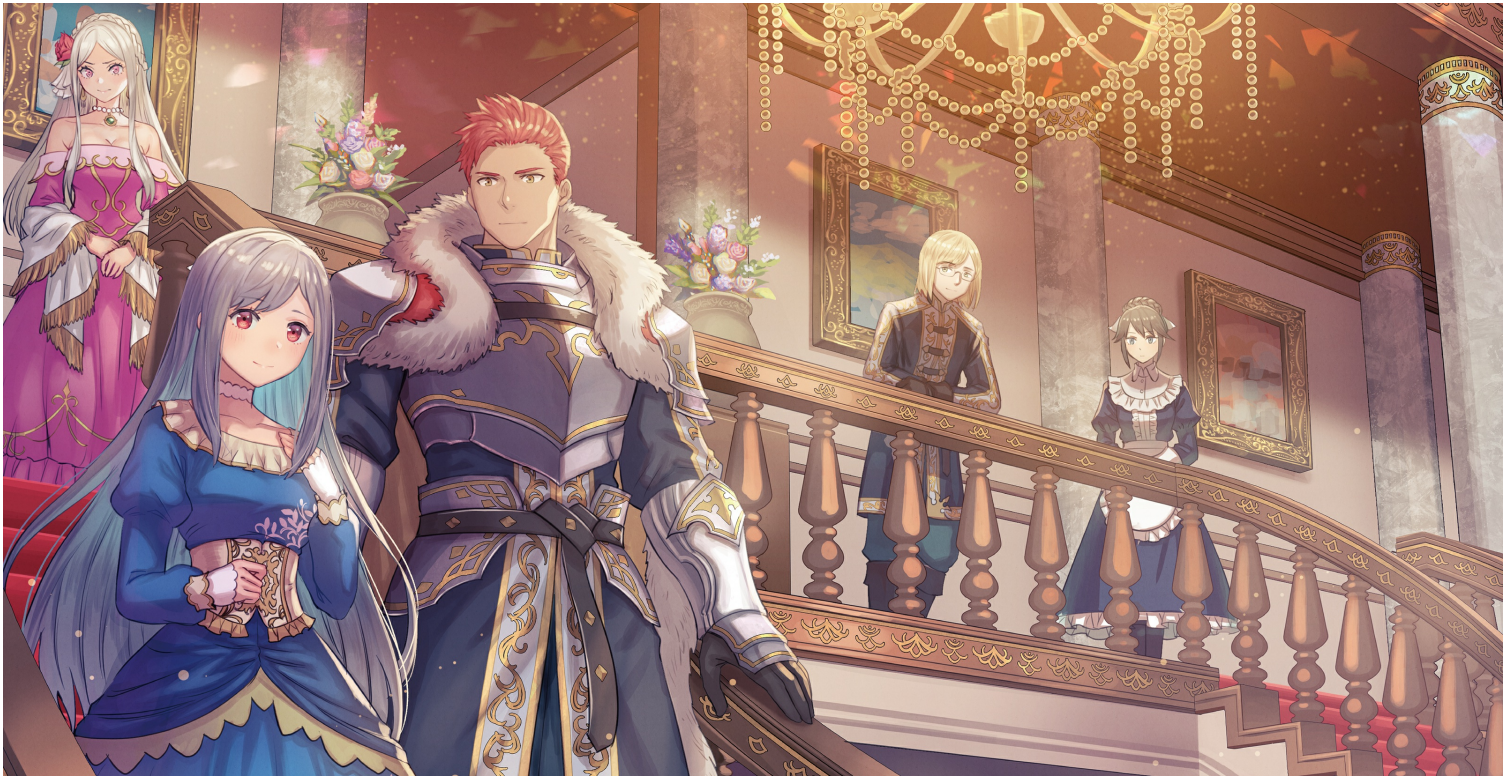
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# Prologue

The Kingdom of Celestia had exactly one ducal house: the House of Sanchez. The legacy of this exceptional lineage of men and women, all steadfast allies to the royal family through the ages, was intertwined with the very soul of the realm.

In times of war, members of House Sanchez served as unyielding knights, capable of defying an army ten thousand strong. In times of peace, they were advisers, prime ministers, and premiers, the very pillars of governance. Through each and every era, the brilliance of House Sanchez shone brightly, a beacon of hope for the people of Celestia.

Yet even the most illustrious lineages were not exempt from God's fickleness. Thus it was that to this esteemed house was born a girl who was perplexingly ordinary. Carolina Sanchez was her name, and by every measure, she was simply...average. Her beauty was neither striking nor lackluster; her intelligence neither brilliant nor dim. Bereft of any noteworthy talent of which to speak, she could sacrifice a week of sleep to her studies, and yet her academic abilities would never stand out. She could dance until her heels were raw and bloody, and yet her footwork would never improve. Against the background of a family of giants, she stood out as a diminutive disappointment—no better than a disgrace.

I was all too familiar with that girl...because that girl was me. As the second daughter of a duke, I had but one solitary wish: to possess even a shred of the greatness that would make someone, anyone, proud.

This is my story—the tale of “the Sanchez family disgrace” and how she found her extraordinary path.



# Chapter One

Under the shimmering glow of chandeliers, the soft strains of an orchestra melded with the ambient hum of lively conversations and genteel laughter. Noblewomen, each one draped in a gown so exquisite it could only be described as a work of art, glided about in the grand hall.

This was a place where hidden agendas came to gather, a theater where the intricate mind games contrived by peers of the realm unfolded in their full complexity. Yet among this labyrinth of dazzling personas and veiled intentions, one figure eclipsed them all.

Her graceful steps carried her effortlessly through the gathering, her silver-blond hair swaying in harmonious rhythm with every click of her heels. Feeling the attention of every person in the room fixed upon her, she allowed her padparadscha-sapphire eyes to narrow ever so slightly and unveiled a dazzling smile.

It was a smile suffused with an enchantment so potent that it captivated any soul fortunate enough to behold it. It was the smile of one Lady Flora Sanchez—my elder sister.

Flora wasn't anything like me; she was the Sanchez legacy personified. She possessed all of the virtues and talents emblematic of our name, and she was truly exceptional both inside and out. A valedictorian from the Royal Academy, her intellect was rivaled only by the diversity of her talents. From musical instruments to equestrian arts, she was always a quick study, mastering disciplines with an ease that was nothing short of prodigious.

By contrast, I...

"Oh, Lady Flora truly is the embodiment of perfection, isn't she? Her sister, on the other hand..." The snickering voice of a nearby noblewoman reached my ears.

"Imagine how heartbroken Lady Carolina would be to hear that!" her



companion scolded.

“But it’s the truth, is it not?”

“I suppose, but...”

“Besides, everyone’s saying it! Lady Carolina is *the Sanchez family disgrace!*”

“The Sanchez family disgrace.” That was how I was branded. Though few dared to utter the phrase in my presence, the walls whispered their agreement in my absence. As unflattering and disrespectful as the title was, I could find no grounds to dispute it—I felt every inch the disgrace they named me.

I shrunk back, redoubling my efforts to blend into the walls. As I dropped my gaze to the floor, wishing to erase both the gossipers and the ever-radiant image of my sister from view, Flora’s voice cut through the chatter. “Girls, could you please refrain from teasing my dear baby sister? She isn’t quite as thick-skinned as she would have you believe.”

Ever the savior, the shining star of high society, my sister interceded and smoothly positioned herself between me and the murmuring nobles. Their composure visibly wavered under her gaze.

“W-We weren’t...” the first speaker began hesitantly.

“T-Teasing her? Perish the thought...” the second stammered.

Flora chuckled softly. “Of course. A mere slip of the tongue, I presume?”

“Y-Yes!”

“Exactly right!”

The two of them nodded vigorously, visibly relieved as they took the escape route that Flora had graciously offered to them.

Internally, I sighed at the almost farcical scene unfolding before both me and the gathering gaggle of onlookers who were inevitably drawn to Flora’s presence. The pretense was palpable.

“If it wasn’t in earnest, I’m sure Carolina can find it in her heart to forgive. Now, let’s apologize together, shall we?” Flora’s eyes softened kindly, as if she were channeling the ghost of the Holy Mother herself.



“Of course!” they eagerly concurred, then turned to me as one.

“Lady Carolina, please accept our apologies for our earlier words.”

“Likewise, Lady Carolina. We truly didn’t intend to offend you.”

With looks of remorse painted thick on their faces, they offered their apologies as Flora stood by, one of her hands resting reassuringly on each of their backs.

Noting my lack of humor, Flora, ever the perfect arbiter in situations like these, shot me a wry smile. “Allow me to apologize on their behalf as well. So, Carolina, do you think you can find it in you to put this episode behind us?”

All eyes were on us—or on my sister, rather. The insistent gazes of the crowd seemed to implore in a silent chorus, “Forgive and move on.”

It was hardly a situation where I could stand my ground and reject their apologies, so instead I said demurely, “If it puts your mind at ease, sister, I shall let this pass.” My forgiveness left my lips mechanically as a means of saving face for my sister, much to the collective relief of the room.

The two gossipers quickly voiced their gratitude, and Flora remarked with a radiant smile, “I do so love a happy ending!” As if on cue, the rest of the onlookers shared in her jubilation, their faces lighting up in unison.







Their chatter washed over me.

“I’m just relieved it all worked out. Thank goodness Lady Flora was here.”

“Oh, isn’t she just splendid? Where would House Sanchez be without their eldest?”

“She has it all, doesn’t she? Grace, beauty, intelligence...”

“And she’s a doting older sister to boot! What *isn’t* she capable of?”

“We need her in our family, we just do! We’d treat her like our own, we would!”

Voices laden with admiration and envy echoed around us. Yet Flora, gracefully aloof, seemed oblivious.

*Seemed* oblivious, but I knew she was not. The Flora they lauded was a carefully constructed facade, a far cry from the sister I truly knew.

Feigning concern, Flora sidled up to me, taking my hand and leaning in so close our faces nearly touched. “Carolina, are you all right? I know *the truth hurts*, but do try to keep your composure.” She was so close that her breath tickled my face. “You should know that you make such an excellent foil—how is it that you’ve managed to elevate me once again? Who said a disgrace like you couldn’t be useful? Well, to be fair, I suppose that you aren’t actually very useful most of the time.”

The real Flora, the side she revealed only to me, was the furthest thing from a “doting older sister” to ever exist. Even as her face remained the portrait of concern, venom dripped from her words. She was truly a woman who wore many masks.

“Now, be a good little wallflower, and do try to not draw too much attention to yourself. Surely even a disgrace like you can manage that?” Her giggle, light and airy, rang out as she pulled away. She didn’t even await a reply.

With an ostentatiously magnanimous smile that would make the Holy Mother blush, she placed her hand onto my head as if in benediction. “I must go now, Carolina, but should anything happen, all you need do is call out to me. Please, do try and enjoy the festivities.” She fell effortlessly back into the role of

“doting older sister” in an instant. She stroked my hair with the utmost tenderness. I wanted nothing more than to slap that awful, awful hand away from me.

“Ciao for now,” she cooed, melting seamlessly back into the crowd.

I had no idea what drove her to such lengths to keep up appearances. Why bother? If she loathed me so profoundly, why not simply distance herself from me? Her reputation was already immaculate. Surely acknowledging the true nature of our strained relationship wouldn’t tarnish her image. It wasn’t as if she—

A sudden, sharp cry cut through the hall, jolting me out of my thoughts. Turning towards the source of the commotion, I saw a man lying sprawled on the floor, a young woman pinned beneath him. Judging from their location on the ballroom floor, it seemed a dance had taken a disastrous turn. The man must have lost his balance and fallen on top of his dance partner.

But to fall during a dance seemed improbably clumsy. Perhaps he had been distracted by something—or *someone*?

The scene erupted into chaos.

“My poor Maria! She’s pinned—you’re crushing her!” wailed a bystander, likely the mother of the besieged young woman.

“How will you answer for your actions?” another voice rang out accusingly. “If she bears any mark from this, you’ll marry her, won’t you?”

“Enough!” someone else shouted. “Lady Maria needs help first! Someone, contact the nearest hospital and tell them—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

A melodic, assertive voice as calming as birdsong cut through the clamor. All eyes turned to its owner. “Rest assured, I shall tend to them,” my sister said with poised assurance.

A murmur of realization spread. “Of course!” cried a voice in the crowd. “How could we have forgotten the *Saint-to-be* graces our gathering tonight! There’s no cause for alarm!”



“Forget doctors, Lady Flora is here!” another assured the gathering at large.

The distraught noblewoman at the fallen girl’s side implored, “Please, Lady Flora, help my poor Maria. If her face were to be disfigured before we could marry her off...”

Flora’s grin was confident, a touch mischievous even. “Do not fret, milady. She’ll be flawless once more.”

Relief flooded the woman’s features. She whispered another plea for help, then fell silent. Flora nodded and then immediately began tending to both Maria and her dance partner. While the man only bore a few minor bruises, the same couldn’t be said of the girl whose body had cushioned his fall. Aside from bruises and scrapes, she seemed to have suffered a broken foot, and most troubling of all, a torn lip. While that might’ve seemed the more trivial injury, in high society, any blemish on the face meant months away from public appearances, and that was to be avoided at all costs.

That was now, however, a moot point.

Finished with her examination, Flora closed her eyes and clasped her hands in prayer. A gentle, luminous glow enveloped her, extending to Maria and the man. In mere moments, their wounds were mended, leaving not a single trace of the accident. It was this miraculous ability that was Flora’s chief claim to fame, the primary reason she was held in such high esteem.

At this, the crowd erupted into a chorus of extravagant praise.

“Incredible! They don’t call Lady Flora the next Saint for nothing!”

“She *must* be our next Saint, I’d simply have it no other way!”

“Lady Flora will no doubt go down in history as the greatest Saint this country has ever seen!”

“With her guidance, our nation will know nothing but peace!”

Amidst the torrent of effusive acclaim, my eyes sought Flora. She smiled with utmost pride as she accepted the heartfelt gratitude from Lady Maria and her mother. Her personality aside, I had to admit: when it came to raw ability, none seemed better suited for the mantle of Saint than Flora.

The title of “Saint” was reserved only for the most distinguished female adepts of holy magic. Earning this honor required successfully navigating a rigorous set of trials, after which this prestigious designation would be conferred jointly by both the king and the archbishop. The title carried boundless reverence and influence. Although the Saint was a position unique to Celestia, her authority confined primarily within Celestian borders, the long-standing history and legacy of our Saints ensured that their influence was felt even beyond the boundaries of our kingdom.

Flora seemed preordained for this illustrious role. Her profound mastery over holy magic, the healing aspect of which she so readily demonstrated, set her apart. Her aptitude was so apparent that many already regarded her as a Saint in all but name. Only women who had come of age could become the Saint, but Flora’s current status as “Saint-to-be” was seen by most as a mere technicality. The consensus was clear: her ascension to Saint was inevitable.

“To have such intellect and beauty, and the talent to be Saint on top of that. It’s almost unfair,” I murmured. She had everything, while I had nothing. Swallowing my words, which stuck in my throat with the weight of their envy, I cast one more lingering glance at the ever-perfect Flora before turning away.



After the soiree’s conclusion, the rhythmic clatter of hooves echoed in the night as a lone horse-drawn carriage bound for the Sanchez estate made its way down a moonlit road. Inside, both Flora and I sat together, a most uncommon occurrence. Typically, we journeyed separately, but today, due to our father commandeering most of our carriages for his own use, we found ourselves having to share a single conveyance (much to my chagrin).

I couldn’t help but harbor a smidgen of resentment. This was Father’s idea of a touching reunion after his latest weeklong absence? To take our entire fleet of over a dozen carriages for a simple trip to the royal castle? I couldn’t understand it. Yet, considering that this was my father, there was likely a deeper rationale for even a decision as inexplicable as this. I just hoped he would have the wisdom to return them tonight—otherwise, there’d be hell to pay.



My father was seldom present. Given his duties, extended stays at the castle were a standard part of his life, and entire weeks away were not unusual. Even on the rare occasions that he was at home, he largely sequestered himself in his study, sifting through the avalanche of ducal responsibilities that had piled up in his absence. Honestly, his perpetual busyness bordered on the absurd.

I let out a deep, contemplative sigh as I ruminated on my future—or lack thereof—and my discontent did not go unnoticed by Flora. Sitting across from me, she clicked her tongue. “What’s with that look? What, do you think I want to be here any more than you do? You should be grateful that your Saint-to-be is even willing to share her only carriage with the likes of you.”

Flora’s flawless features twisted in anger and disgust. Clearly, my evident unhappiness had struck a nerve. For many, the sight of such beauty marred by anger would be unsettling. But for me, it was all too familiar. I met her gaze without flinching.

My lack of a reaction only heightened her irritation. Shielded from public view, Flora’s fury could finally flow freely. “You ungrateful little brat! Is this how you treat your betters? To think you aren’t capable of even a modicum of appropriate respect... You really are *an unwanted little freak*.”

*An unwanted little freak.*

She knew exactly what to say to get under my skin. My composure cracked, and I bit my lip in frustration bordering on despair.

That was all the opening she needed. A sly, almost predatory smirk crossed the Saint-to-be’s face. “You know, Carolina, you’re quite the enigma. For someone born into House Sanchez, how is it that you bear no resemblance to anyone in the family?”

My face tightened, my discomfort evident. She knew precisely which of my insecurities to exploit.

Her grin widened. Eager to see me squirm up close, Flora left the seat facing mine and invaded the bench on which I sat, nestling up against me. She reached out with her pristine, pale hand and gently lifted a lock of my hair. “This dull gray hue,” she mused. “It’s neither icy blonde like mine or Father’s, nor the deep black of Mother’s glossy locks. The color of yours is *closer* to black, to be

sure, yet so far from the luster of Mother's gorgeous raven tresses. It's more akin to *ash*, don't you think?"

She made a show of blowing my hair out of her hand in the same manner she might dust off a tome before running her fingers through her own hair. Her silver-white locks shimmered in the moonlight, a dance of radiance against the dark night sky.

Despite my intimate knowledge of the malevolence at the center of her being, her ethereal beauty still rendered me momentarily spellbound. To be so beautiful that she could obscure the venom that lay beneath...

What a wicked woman she was, to the very core.

"But to your credit, what is gray but a shade of black?" she drawled on. "Your drab hair, unremarkable as it is, isn't the most downright offensive aspect of your appearance. No... That distinction goes to those vile, bloodred eyes of yours." She gently laid her delicate fingers on my cheek, against the corner of one of my eyes, before narrowing her own padparadscha-sapphire gaze. "I inherited my soft pink color from our mother, but you? Such a deep crimson. Father's eyes are green, so no... It couldn't have been him. Tell me, just from whom did you inherit them?"

I quivered, wordless.

"You really have to wonder why the household continues to say so fondly that you're 'the spitting image of the duchess.' Just how cruel can they be? After all, how could a disgrace like you ever hope to rival our mother's radiance? At best, you are merely a pale reflection."

Her words, sharp as knives, wounded me with every syllable. The invisible scars of my heart screamed out in agony, and a silent plea rose within me, begging her to cease her verbal onslaught. I had to give my supplication a voice. "Flora. If I've upset you, I apologize. Can we please—"

She cut me off. "Oh, I'm so sorry, dear sister..." Her words dripped with feigned contrition, while her features contorted into an unsettling sneer. "How could I forget the greatest tragedy of all? And how thoughtless of me to bring it up."



Dread surged within me; I knew exactly where this was heading. An internal scream resounded in my mind, begging her to refrain. Desperate to shield myself, I moved to cover my ears, but I was a fraction too late.

“You didn’t know our mother well, did you?” Her words took on a mocking lilt. “In fact, you couldn’t have. *You’re the one who killed her, after all.*”

I gritted my teeth, wrestling with the bitter truth. Our mother—Duchess Karen Sanchez—had succumbed to an ailment that overtook her soon after giving birth to me. Although I wasn’t the direct reason for her passing, it seemed logical to implicate me. Our mother had been the picture of health throughout her short life, and the first and only time she’d ever been seriously ill was directly after my birth. They said it was the postpartum weakening of her constitution that had proved to be her undoing. Even if I wasn’t the immediate author of her end, it was clear that my birth had played a crucial role in diminishing her vigor.

*If I hadn’t been born, perhaps she might still be alive.*

That endlessly tormenting thought scraped against my soul, the pain threatening to rend my heart in two.

“Mother was truly one of a kind,” Flora began, her voice tinged with melancholy. “Gracious, kind, compassionate... Much like the Holy Mother herself. She wasn’t extraordinarily brilliant or capable, but she was able to draw people to her in a way that Father or I never could. She did so very much for our family, and the flourishing of our realm under Father’s reign was due to her and her magnanimous spirit.”

Flora’s padparadscha-sapphire gaze bored coldly into mine as she extolled Mother’s virtues in this oft-repeated litany. The emotions therein were raw and acerbic, rife with resentment and loathing for my being.

“Which is why I’ll *never* forgive you—the one who robbed us of her. I’ll *never* accept that *you* bear her likeness. I’ll never accept *you*.” Flora’s final declaration lingered heavily between us. She held my gaze for a few seconds more, and then, seemingly satisfied, she returned to her seat. As she stared out the carriage window, I couldn’t help but notice what seemed like a flicker of sorrow, a hint of longing in her eyes.

How could it be? As her words slashed and wounded me, how was it that she looked more like the pitiable victim of a deep torment? Lost in my miserable thoughts, I softly closed my eyes, letting the rhythmic clattering of the carriage lull me into a daze as we headed towards home.



The rest of the journey was spent in silence. We finally arrived, and taking the coachman's hand, Flora and I both alighted from the carriage. Without so much as a parting glance, she quickly disappeared into the manor, leaving me to gaze up at the imposing walls of our residence. The windows were unusually dim for this time of night, which struck me as odd; it was too early for most to retire. Even given my and Flora's absence, the lack of illumination seemed peculiar.

As I pondered this somewhat trivial anomaly, our butler approached me cautiously. "Welcome home, Lady Carolina," he intoned. Then, with a more discreet inflection, he added, "His Grace is waiting for you in the drawing room."

His words took me by surprise. "Father is...?" I wondered aloud.

While Father had summoned me many times before, never once had it been at an hour this late. But...no. Even that wasn't quite as unexpected as the other bit of information. He'd summoned me to the *drawing room*?

The drawing room rather than his personal study?

"Do we have guests?" I inquired.

The butler paused for a beat. "I'm afraid I cannot say, milady." Perhaps commanded into silence by my father, he simply shook his head. Knowing him well, I knew that pressing further would be in vain.

With no other option, I braced myself to face whatever awaited in the drawing room.

"Very well. Please, lead on."



As the door closed behind me, I stiffened. The visitor, who was someone who should not, no, could not possibly be here, caught my startled reaction and



rewarded me with a glib smile.

I swallowed hard.

“Don’t just stand there, Carolina,” my father, Duke Raymond Sanchez, chided with a stern voice. “I have no recollection of raising a daughter who neglects basic courtesies.” He stood imposingly behind our guest on the sofa, his long, silver-white hair tied neatly at the nape of his neck and swaying slightly as he regarded me critically.

Feeling the weight of his world-weary and piercing emerald eyes, I hastily curtsied. “I humbly beg your pardon for my delayed introduction. I, Carolina, second daughter of House Sanchez, am deeply honored to meet...” I took a deep, steadying breath before I continued. “...Your Royal Majesty.”

Before me was King Nathan Phillips, the reigning monarch of Celestia and lord over my father, who was the duke and prime minister.

The king...

My father managed the vast responsibilities of a dukedom while also serving as the king’s most trusted adviser. He was the most capable man I knew, and yet the king was the one person he always spoke of in the highest regard. “Do not think lightly of him” had always been the constant refrain.

The obvious question struck me: why was he here? There had been no fanfare, no announcement of his visit, which meant that protocol had not been followed. Recalling the peculiarities of the day—the unusual deployment of our family carriages and the oddly dim lights of our manor—I pieced it together. First, the surplus of carriages had likely been a ruse to discreetly transport His Majesty from the castle, the guards being unlikely to take the time to check each one. Second, the dimly lit manor was a result of restricting the servants’ access to this wing. More than half of the manor was off-limits tonight, ensuring that almost everyone remained unaware of the royal visit.

Everything pointed to a singular conclusion: that His Majesty’s appearance here was an unsanctioned one, and that my father had moreover been the one to discreetly facilitate this clandestine meeting. His Majesty was infamous for his capricious nature, so I didn’t find it terribly odd that he would sneak out of his own castle, but my father had never once entertained any of his monarch’s

whims. In fact, he was always the one who sought to rein in His Majesty when his erratic moods took hold. So what was the game truly at play here? A sense of unease began to settle in the pit of my stomach.

His Majesty fondly narrowed his amethyst eyes, a mark of his royal lineage, and casually brushed a strand of his platinum-blond hair behind his ear in a gesture that was oddly sensual.

“Hey Carolina, long time no see,” His Majesty began, his tone almost inappropriately playful. “How long has it been, a few months? Been doing all right, I hope?”

“I have; thank you for asking. I trust Your Majesty is also in the best of health?” I replied, attempting to maintain formality.

“Absolutely! They say health is wealth, and if that’s the measure, then I’m a rich man indeed. I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve never been ill—not once in my life. Quite the feat, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed, Your Majesty,” I affirmed, a little taken aback. “The well-being of our kingdom rests greatly on your shoulders. My prayers are always for both your health and our land.”

He let out a light chuckle. “Then I shan’t let your efforts go to waste. I’ll be extra vigilant about my health.”

The longer this opening salvo dragged on, the more my suspicion grew. Why wasn’t he getting to the point? Surely His Majesty hadn’t come all this way just to make small talk? Although, if he was as impulsive as his reputation would have me believe, then perhaps he might have? But, no... It seemed unlikely my father would entertain such caprice.

His next question took me completely by surprise. “Say, I’m curious. Do you have a special someone in your life, Carolina?”

“A special...someone?” I repeated, incredulous.

“Yes,” His Majesty affirmed. “Surely a lady of House Sanchez has a fair share of admirers? Did any of them confess on the day of your academy graduation?”

My mind completely froze. The king was here to discuss my...romantic

prospects?

Just as I began to assume this entire visit was in fact nothing more than a mere social call, my father, silent until now, was moved to speak. “Your Majesty, that’s enough small talk. There are important matters at hand.”

Oh, good. It seemed there was a purpose for his visit after all. As I laid my anxiety to rest, the affable demeanor of His Majesty suddenly vanished, and the temperature in the room seemed to plummet. “Small talk? Did that sound like small talk to you, Raymond?” His Majesty asked, his tone suddenly serious. “Surely, you of all people understand the gravity of my question.”

My father’s breath hissed through clenched teeth. “Your Majesty...”

“At any rate, you have no right to tell me what I can and can’t do, Mister Prime Minister. Do remember why you’re here—to serve the Kingdom of Celestia.” The typically congenial monarch now wore a stern expression as he stared down his subject.

Left on the fringes of this conflict, I tried to piece together the motivation behind their strained exchange. Just what was this tension? Why such an atmosphere of uneasiness between the two of them?

My father met His Majesty’s gaze without flinching. “Your Majesty, I cannot lend my support to you in this matter. I may be prime minister, but before that, I am this girl’s father.”

“Oh? And you would defy the crown for her sake?”

“I would.”

My father’s answer had been instantaneous. For a moment, the king narrowed his eyes, as if assessing my father’s sincerity. Then, to my astonishment, he broke into hearty laughter. “That’s fantastic, just fantastic, Raymond! To think that you, old straitlaced Raymond, would defy me for the sake of your child!” His mirth devolved into a bout of knee-slapping. When it subsided, he reached up to give my father an approving pat on the chest. “You’ve grown, old friend, you really have. It’s heartening to see such a human, or should I say, *fatherly* side of you. In recognition of this newfound development, perhaps we can devise a compromise.”



My father's eyes flickered briefly at the mention of a "compromise," but he otherwise remained unreadable.

Having dangled the promise of a concession in front of my father, His Majesty pressed forward, "Once I've provided some context, we'll come back to my previous questions. You should find that acceptable, yes?"

Taking a moment to consider, my father gave a curt nod of approval.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. While I still had no idea what they were talking about, I was deeply relieved that the storm seemed to have passed. The last thing I wanted was to be the cause of a rift between the royal family and House Sanchez.

His Majesty sat up straight and turned to me. "Now that we have your father's consent, let's dive straight into the heart of the matter. Where to begin, let's see... Ah, how about with recent events involving our kingdom and"—here he looked at me significantly—"the Empire of Malcosias?"

My eyes widened. That was a name I hadn't been expecting to hear.

Also known as the Ruby Empire, the Empire of Malcosias was a mighty nation whose territories occupied most of the continent. They were a highly developed country, home to advanced magic and high culture—not to mention a proud, rich history and an absolutely *massive* military. The empire was a beast that our humble kingdom had no business provoking; if it saw fit to do so, it could wipe Celestia off the map in an instant!

"Now, while we've had our fair share of squabbles with the empire, they've all been small things—things that both sides are willing to overlook. Our recent transgression, however, was considerably less...*overlookable*, let's say. For you see, one of our own managed to commit a slight against a certain imperial duchess—a duchess who just happens to be the beloved sister of the reigning emperor, of all people. I'm sure you're beginning to grasp why neither side can afford to ignore this incident, yes?"

I listened to His Majesty's explanation with an expression somewhere between shock and disbelief on my face. I had no idea what "slight" this unnamed person could have possibly committed, but if it was enough to trigger a diplomatic incident of this magnitude...a simple "I'm sorry" definitely

wouldn't suffice.

Yet, I wondered, what did all of this have to do with me?

"I know that look," the king said with a sage nod. "You're thinking, 'What does this have to do with me?' aren't you?"

Caught off guard, I let out a surprised gasp, much to the amusement of His Majesty. He let out a bright chuckle at apparently having so precisely interpreted my thoughts. "Patience, Carolina. This next part is where you come in. You'll want to brace yourself."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty..."

Even with his outwardly composed and amicable demeanor, an undercurrent of intensity emanated from him. Instinctively, I straightened my posture, feeling a surge of nerves.

He stood up and began to pace slowly around me, creating an atmosphere in which I felt examined, almost scrutinized. "An envoy from the empire arrived the other day, bearing news concerning the incident with the duchess. Now, they've assured us that they have no designs towards escalating tensions with us, *but*"—he paused here, evidently for effect—"they were equally clear that such an incident cannot, and will not, be ignored. So they proposed a plan. As a gesture of our goodwill and in the spirit of reparation"—he halted his pacing directly in front of me before continuing—"we are to offer a suitable candidate for marriage to none other than their esteemed second prince." This revelation was punctuated with a snap of his fingers. I could barely pay any notice to his theatrics as my mind raced to grasp the implications of his little speech.

Prince Edward Ruby Martinez: the second prince of the Empire of Malcosias, as well as the commander and founder of an elite band of knights known as the Pyreborn. He was a master of both spell and sword, as befitting his status as their leader. Under his guidance, this fledgling knightly order had racked up countless military successes, earning them far-reaching renown. From this description, one might think Prince Edward ought to have been celebrated as a national hero, a symbol of Malcosian might, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

No, in fact, Prince Edward was feared by his own subjects—as a cruel slayer of

women and children, as a ruthless conqueror who shed neither blood or tears in his pursuit of glory. His moniker was the “Bloodthirsty Prince”—a reflection of his insatiable hunger for battle, a dubious honor for a man who loved war...for a man who was loved *by* war. Truly, it was a contemptuous nickname in every sense of the word. And to earn such a title from not one’s enemies, but one’s own countrymen? The cynicism of the situation was not lost on me.

“This has put us in a rather difficult position, as you can imagine,” continued His Majesty. “We are compelled to produce a suitable bride for Prince Edward, and quite quickly, I might add.”

“Is the matter truly so difficult?” I interjected. “Must not we only produce the highest-ranking unmarried noblewoman? What of the princess of the royal family?”

If memory served, her name was Estelle Phillips. Though she rarely made public appearances due to her poor health, she was indeed His Majesty’s daughter. The solution seemed clear.

His Majesty flashed a wry smile in response. “If you are referring to my daughter, then unfortunately she is already promised to the third prince from a neighboring country, a little piece of information we’ve refrained from publicizing due to her condition.”

*I see...* That would definitely eliminate Princess Estelle from the running. If her betrothed had been a domestic match, then perhaps the wedding could still be called off, but breaking an agreement with a foreign nation would be far more problematic.

In that case, the burden should fall to the next unmarried woman in terms of rank and status, but she...would never be allowed to go. Celestial nobility would be up in arms. After all, that woman was Flora Sanchez—the Saint-to-be. In fact, if it came down to it, I’d wager His Majesty would sooner forcibly cancel his own daughter’s engagement than let someone of Flora’s ability go, but then...

A chilling realization washed over me.

“Surely you can’t possibly mean to offer *me* as a bride to Prince Edward?”



His Majesty's face lit up with a knowing smile. "Precisely, Carolina! With Estelle and Flora unavailable, you emerge as the most suitable candidate."

In my mind, I'd dismissed the possibility, never imagining myself as even being in the running. So this unexpected turn of events felt like a blow to the head. And, once that initial shock wore off, a bitter understanding settled in: in the end, I was to be nothing more than a standin for Flora.

I'd thought I'd always known my place in the grand scheme of things, yet my heart grew heavy nonetheless. While anyone could fill my shoes, no one could truly replace Flora. She would never be chosen to go abroad, not while I was still here, uselessly existing. Clearly, this had nothing to do with me as a person and everything to do with my status—next in line after Princess Estelle and Flora. It was always going to be me, even if I *was* the Sanchez family disgrace.

I clenched my jaw, struggling to choke back tears as His Majesty continued on, indifferent to my plight. "Now that you know the who, what, and why, let's return to my original question: Carolina, do you have a lover right now?" He waggled a finger in my direction and smiled. The intensity of his gaze weighed on me, and I was convinced that the pressure I felt wasn't merely a product of my own imagination.

This was it. If I answered honestly, there was no doubt that I'd be forced into marriage with Prince Edward, and if I lied—well, I could hardly lie to my own king. Besides, would admitting to a romantic attachment even change anything? Unless the betrothal was to a foreign power, would His Majesty even respect such a bond, or would he merely sweep it aside for political expediency? Was he truly giving me a choice, or just the illusion of one? Fighting back the blur of moisture clouding my vision, I returned his amethyst gaze. "No, Your Majesty, I do not." The words came out easier than I'd expected, and my voice was calm—far too calm for the turmoil that gripped me from within.

His Majesty exhaled audibly. "Well, that's a relief. Believe me, the last thing I'd wanted was to break apart a budding love. And you're certain? Not even a fleeting fancy?"

"No, not particularly," I replied, a touch of resignation in my voice. "Romance

has never held much appeal to me, if I may admit it. If a union serves House Sanchez, I shall willingly step forward.”

He let out a hearty chuckle. “A pragmatic one, aren’t you? At your age, I’d expect a little more *head in the clouds*, a little more *dashing prince riding in on a white horse*.”

“I’ve never been one for idle daydreams, Your Majesty,” I replied, only a little bitterly.

Indeed, I’d always been grounded in reality, deeply conscious of my station and the role I was required to play. My worth to my house lay in a beneficial marriage. It was the only chance a disgrace like me had to repay my family for the patience they’d shown me all these years. Strip away the prospect of a strategic union, and what value did I truly offer?

“In that case, Carolina”—His Majesty’s tone shifted, becoming gravely earnest—“I have but one final question for you—nay, *a plea*. For the sake of our kingdom, I implore you to wed the second prince of Malcosias.” The playful monarch from moments ago was gone. Before me now stood a ruler, burdened with the destiny of an entire nation.

Meeting his intense amethyst gaze, I responded flatly, “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Little did I know at the time the extent to which that decision would change my life.



“Well, Carolina, Raymond, this is where we part ways. An envoy from the empire will arrive in three days’ time, so do make sure any loose ends are tied up before then. And remember, not a word about this to anyone else, do you hear me?” His Majesty listed this litany of instructions to my father and myself as we all headed out towards the rear entrance of the manor.

Father and I both flashed our fustled king wry smiles—this was the third time tonight that His Majesty had emphasized the need for secrecy. Perhaps he doubted the ability of the Sanchez family disgrace to keep her mouth shut, but even I knew better than to be careless with such sensitive information. It wasn’t as if I was one to engage in idle gossip like other noblewomen either. “Rest

assured, Your Majesty, not a word of this will leave my lips until the empire makes their official announcement,” I reassured him.

“Carolina can be trusted to keep a secret,” my father added. “It’s *your* general lack of reticence, Your Majesty, that concerns me. A bit of wine and you spill more secrets than a town crier. You shall, of course, be abstaining from drink until their engagement is public.”

“I-I’ll do no such thing!” His Majesty took my father’s unexpected decree rather less than gracefully. “No! Please! Anything but that!” he pleaded, clutching at my father, his eyes shimmering with mock tears. Despite their ostensible difference in rank, I couldn’t help but wonder who truly held the reins in this relationship. It suddenly dawned on me exactly why the king’s notorious impulsive streak had never caused as many problems as one might expect.

“Your father is unbelievable,” His Majesty whined, turning a puppylike gaze upon me. “Never have I ever dealt with anybody so unyielding! It must have been tough for you too, being raised by this stubborn old coot.” In his theatrical moment of vulnerability, this whimsical monarch looked to me for solace. For all that I knew that this was (at least half) in jest, the moment made him suddenly feel more human, more relatable as he desperately sought an ally in his playful misery.

“I won’t deny that it hasn’t always been the easiest thing to be his daughter,” I conceded. “But I’ve always trusted Father’s wisdom. When he acts, he always does so with an eye to the greater health of the kingdom as a whole, and for that, I deeply respect him.”

“Carolina...” It was not His Majesty who whispered my name, but the man we were discussing. My father’s visage, one I’d always considered to be quite youthful for his age, suddenly crinkled, betraying an expression that wasn’t quite joy, wasn’t quite anger, but one more akin to...some strongly suppressed emotion that I could not name.

As I stood there perplexed, wondering how to interpret my father’s strange aspect, the king, clearly feeling as if he’d transformed into a third wheel, suddenly spoke. “Well, I think this is my cue to exit. I’m not so obtuse a man as



to not know when I'm intruding on a touching father-daughter moment." His Majesty seemed simultaneously peeved and oddly pleased about something as he stepped into the waiting carriage. He signaled the coachman to depart as he closed the window curtains, but almost immediately, he popped his head back out. "Raymond, a word to the wise, from one friend to another. If you've ever considered being direct, now is the time. Speaking with her won't be as straightforward once she's been sent to the empire." He flashed a sly wink and, as if on cue, the carriage began to move.

My father made a soft click of disapproval, perhaps begrudging the king for stealing the final word.

*Being direct? About what?* From the king's tone, it seemed he was alluding to something concerning me. "U-Um, Father, what did His Majesty mean?"

He brushed off my question. "It's nothing important. Disregard it."

"But Fath—" My protest was interrupted by a sudden sneeze, a stark reminder of the evening chill's assault upon the lightweight fabric of my dress. I shivered slightly, rubbing my arms for warmth. Although spring had arrived, the nights yet retained winter's bite.

"You must be freezing in that gown. Here." A cozy weight settled on my shoulders: my father's cloak, still warm from his body. It provided more comfort than just its heat; it enveloped me in his affection and concern. "Thank you, Father."



He mumbled a quiet “Mm-hmm,” and our conversation petered out. Neither of us particularly dexterous with our words, a fierce awkwardness yawned between us. The silence was palpable, with only the evening wind’s mournful wail breaking the stillness. *This certainly is an uncomfortable situation... Should I say something? But what do I say...?*

“Carolina.”

“Y-Yes?!” I practically yelped.

His usually imposing emerald eyes softened, revealing a hint of an unexpected tenderness lying beneath. His silver-blond hair fluttered in the wind, his face a stoic mask. Suddenly, he grasped my shoulders. “Carolina, be honest with me. This marriage with Prince Edward—you’re not having second thoughts, are you? If you are, I’ll speak to His Majesty and convince him to call this whole thing off.”

I could hardly believe my ears—or my father’s soundness of mind for that matter. This was the man who had always put clan and country above all else, and yet, was he even aware of what he was saying—of the gravity of his words? “Father, if you break off the engagement now... The repercussions it would have on House Sanchez—on Celestia...”

His eyes blazed, his fingers digging into my shoulders. “I know, Carolina, I know!” The raw intensity in his voice took me aback—it was wholly uncharacteristic of him. He shook his head vehemently, as if trying to banish an internal maelstrom of conflicting emotions. “Do you think I can’t see the madness in my own words? But how can I possibly stand silently by as my own daughter is offered up to the wolves?”

His words struck me with the force of a tidal wave. All the odd interactions over the course of the evening, the strange tension with the king—it suddenly became clear. All night long, my father hadn’t been operating in his capacity as the prime minister, acting from a place of duty or politics; instead, he’d been coming at the situation as a father, terrified for his daughter’s future.

Throughout my short life, in my heart of hearts I’d constructed a narrative in which I was unloved—a mere burden, a disgrace that my father couldn’t wait to be rid of. After all, he was always the calculating type, weighing every decision



carefully. Why would someone like me, a glaring liability, deserve anything more than his indifference? But in this moment of ferocious and unexpected affection, the scales fell from my eyes. He had loved me—fiercely and protectively, even if his ways of expressing it were cryptic and hard to decipher. A warmth swelled within me, quickly turning into a rush of tears. The realization was both overwhelming and liberating. “A-All this time, I believed you didn’t care for me... That I was this...disgrace, unworthy of your affection.”

“Nonsense, utter nonsense!” cried my father. “You are my flesh and blood, aren’t you? Born of Karen and me. Why would I need any other reason to love you with all my heart? I vow to you now: for as long as I draw breath, you shall never find reason to doubt my love for you!”

His proclamation, laden as it was with genuine passion, seemed almost to dare me to contradict him. Suddenly, it was as if a dam had burst inside me, releasing a deluge of emotions that I had denied myself for all this time. How could I have been so foolish? To have been loved so deeply and to have never even sensed it?

“I’ll say it again so there can be no mistake: I love you, Carolina. If this engagement brings you unhappiness, I will move mountains to undo it.” My father’s sincerity bore into me. “So tell me, honestly: how do you feel about it?”

The intensity in his eyes conveyed it all. He was ready to risk everything, use any method available to him—all for my well-being. A single word from me, and he’d fight to annul this marriage, consequences be damned.

But I couldn’t ask him to walk that treacherous path on my behalf. “I do not oppose the engagement to Prince Edward,” I began, hesitating slightly before admitting, “Even if the prospect of residing in a foreign land does frighten me a little...”

“Do you speak from your heart?” he pressed. “Do you genuinely have no reservations?”

“Yes,” I said, after taking a moment to gather my thoughts. “If I must admit a grievance, it does sting a little—the thought of being someone’s substitute. It hurts to feel as if there’s no particular reason it *had* to be me.”

My father sighed deeply in a manner which betrayed a mix of exasperation

and tenderness. Perhaps he felt he'd opened his heart only to have his concerns gently deflected. Still, I had been nothing but sincere. My words echoed the very depths of my feelings; this was no touching tale of a young maiden lying through gritted teeth for the sake of family or nation.

"You really are just like Karen," he mumbled. "All too ready to push yourself and your needs to the side for the sake of others."

His words took me by surprise. *I'm...just like Mother?* I'd often been told by servants who'd known Mother that I was "the spitting image of the duchess," but I'd brushed it off as mere flattery. After all, I hardly knew anything about her, and Flora did everything in her power to deny even the merest modicum of similarity between us. But if my father, who had loved her the most and known her the most profoundly, saw aspects of her in me, then perhaps there was truth in it.

"Father," I began hesitantly, "I'm...like Mother?" The mere act of giving voice to the sentiment made my heart flutter and my cheeks blaze.

He gazed at me with an expression that was both nostalgic and kind. "Yes, you remind me so much of her. Your selflessness, the grace you show others, and the diligence you so readily demonstrate—it's as if she stands before me right now." His lightly calloused hands tenderly stroked my head. The motion was admittedly a little underpracticed, a bit too rigid, but full of love nonetheless.

Hearing such heartfelt words from him, especially about my resemblance to Mother, was overwhelming. To others, it might have seemed like a simple remark, but to me, it felt like a validation of my entire being. "Father, if you have the time, would you mind telling me more about Mother? I'd like to know more about her before I leave this place," I pleaded, fearing this might be my last opportunity to understand her legacy.

Perhaps he'd caught the sincerity of my intent, because the warm smile that lit up his face assuaged my fears. "Of course. But let's head inside. You'll catch a cold if we stay out here."

As he guided me towards the manor, his reassuring hand on my back, I couldn't help but smile, feeling cherished and understood at long last.



For that entire night, Father regaled me with tales of my mother.

He spoke of their playful chess matches, describing the day she had finally outmaneuvered him after countless attempts. He told me of her midnight kitchen escapades, and the delicious surprises she'd craft while others slept. She'd been an indomitable spirit, tirelessly dedicated to her tasks, and yet, she'd always found time to lighten the mood by teasing him. He recounted their outings with Flora, about how they'd loved to pick flowers together. And finally, he tenderly recalled how she had left this world: as a soul never once having known hate or bitterness in her heart.

Father shared it all, as though wanting to make up for all the time that had slipped us by over the years. As he spoke, it was as if he was unfolding the pages of a cherished diary, each word heavy with the weight of golden memories and profound emotion.

As we talked and talked and talked, and as the night slowly gave way to the day, I unwittingly drifted into slumber. When next I woke, I found myself ensconced in the comfort of my own bed. *H-How did I get here?* My groggy morning brain complained. *Wasn't I in Father's study?*

Still shaking off the remnants of sleep, I sat up and cast a glance at the clock on my wall. Its hands accusingly pointed to eleven thirty-five.

*Eleven thirty-five?! Panic surged within me as I realized the time. I had to change, rush to the dining hall, but... I'm still in my evening dress?!*

Alarmed, I glanced down at my crumpled gown, and without wasting a second, I reached for the servants' bell.



Fully bathed and dressed thanks to the tireless help of my maids, I hurried towards the dining hall. My sister and father were already seated, enjoying a hearty breakfast—or lunch, rather.

"Good morning, Father, Flora. Please excuse my tardiness," I greeted.

"Good morning, Carolina," my father replied. "It's all right. My apologies for droning on and on last night." His voice was shaded with its customary reserved tone, yet now, I could sense the love hiding behind every syllable. *So last night*

*wasn't just a dream...* I mused with relief.

"No, no," I replied with a dismissive wave. "I was the one who asked to hear about Mother, after all. No apology is required."

He motioned towards a vacant chair. "Well, please, sit."



From my perspective, and surely from the perspective of anyone who might have been watching this scene play out, things could not possibly have appeared to be more heartwarming. As I would later discover, though, in the midst of this sea of calm, an unseen storm was silently brewing.

Had I not been so utterly absorbed in the glow of my father's hitherto unnoticed love, I might have noticed the daggers my elder sister Flora glared at me. I might have realized that she was seething with enraged wonder at what Father and I had been talking about. I might have heard her whisper under her breath, "Mother? Why would they be discussing her?" I, however, remained oblivious, too engrossed in unusually warm dialogue with our father to remain vigilant towards Flora's deep-seated anger.



"Carolina, are you free tomorrow afternoon?" Father inquired.

"Yes, my schedule is open."

"In that case, would you accompany me on a visit to your mother's grave? It's been some time since my last visit, and regrettably, Flora is promised elsewhere."

*A visit to Mother's grave?* I'd always refrained from visiting because of Flora's constant presence, but considering this was likely my last chance to visit before my departure, and that Flora wouldn't be there...

"I'd love to, Father."

I'd happily and innocently accepted his proposal, completely unaware of the darkness emanating from my sister beside me.





After finishing my meal and sorting out the specific details of my outing with Father, I returned to my room to make preparations for my impending relocation to the empire. Retrieving a sizable trunk from the depths of my closet, I began packing only the essentials. "Take only what you need for the journey itself," His Majesty had advised. Explaining that the Celestian and Malcosian royal families would ensure I had everything I needed in Malcosias, he'd emphasized the importance of traveling light to avoid arousing any suspicion.

As I contemplated which items were indispensable for my trip, the door to my room flew open, and in flounced a *very* displeased Flora. "Carolina! Did you really think I'd have nothing to say about allowing Mother's murderer to pay her grave a visit? And what was all that between you and Father? What did the two of you discuss yesterday?" Her eyes burned with accusation as she shot me with a venomous glare.

*Ah, right. She heard everything that we said at lunch...* I reminded myself with an internal sigh. Gently placing the clothes I held on to my bed, I turned to Flora. "I wasn't aware I had an obligation to report each and every conversation I have with Father to you, nor did I realize you held the authority to dictate my comings and goings." Perhaps it was the knowledge that I'd be out of the house and free from her baleful influence in three scant days, but a newfound boldness surged within me.

My retort further inflamed Flora. "Obligations? Authority? Spare me that rhetoric and just answer my question like the disgrace you are!"

This was a rather miraculous leap of logic if you asked me, but then again, it would soon quite literally be Flora's job to manifest miracles, so I supposed it made a kind of sense. Nonetheless, I wouldn't be here to witness her miraculous future as Celestia's Saint. I would be leagues away, beyond her grasp and dominion. So instead of backing down, as was my usual wont, I summoned up a bland smile. "Yes, I'm a disgrace, it's true. But where does it state that a disgrace is duty bound to heed her elder sister? If that's all you came to say, then I suggest you leave. I'm busy, if you haven't noticed." I gestured to the door.

Rage painted her face a fiery hue. "You dare! One meaningful conversation

with Father and suddenly you grow a spine? Keep this up and I promise there will be hell to pay!”

“Grow a spine? I wouldn’t dream of it. However, should *you* keep this up, I might just do so, and then I might tell Father all about this conversation.”

Flora wavered ever so slightly at the mention of our father, but she quickly masked it. Truth be told, invoking the authority of others for purposes of intimidation was against my nature, but with Flora, I felt like I had no choice. Arguing with her was an expenditure of my precious remaining time here—time that already seemed all too short.

“Are you threatening me?” she asked in a low voice.

“Is that what it sounds like to you?” I responded calmly in kind.

Flora clicked her tongue, seemingly finally accepting that I wasn’t willing to be pushed around at the moment. “Fine, I’ll let you go—this time. But don’t presume to maintain such uncharacteristic cockiness. You can’t rely on that tactic forever.” She shot me a final, piercing glance before storming out of my room in a huff.

A wry smile graced my lips. I was amused that she’d resort to such a meaningless insult when faced with defeat. I let out a deep, soulful sigh. “Goodness, am I never doing that again... I won and yet my hands won’t stop shaking...”

Having stood my ground against my sister for the first time in my life, my entire being trembled violently, whether out of fear or elation, I couldn’t tell. What was unmistakable, however, was the profound feeling of achievement emanating from deep within my heart.



The following day, Father and I journeyed to Mother’s grave. Perched atop a hill that overlooked the sweeping landscape below, her final resting place was surrounded by a sea of blue and white hyacinths swaying gently in the breeze. I recalled that in the language of flowers, blue hyacinths symbolized “unwavering love” and white ones “quiet enchantment.” Despite his stoic demeanor, it seemed that, deep down, my father was quite the romantic.

“Carolina, this way,” he beckoned.

“Ah, of course.”

He guided me by the hand, leading me with care through the vibrant meadow, ensuring no flower was crushed underfoot as we made our way to my mother’s grave. Etched into the pristine white stone were the words, “In loving memory of Karen Sanchez.” Maintained meticulously over the years, the surface was devoid of any moss or blemish. It had remained the same throughout all these years, its familiarity a comforting anchor amidst the whirlwind of changes in my life.

We stood, enveloped in a shared silence for a few moments, and then both of us crouched down beside the grave. I closed my eyes, letting the delicate hyacinth scent, carried on the warm zephyrs of spring, envelop me. It was a tranquil moment in time.

“Hello, my love,” my father spoke first, slowly spinning his gentle words into a delicate thread of affection. “It’s been far too long. I’m sorry for not visiting more frequently—the time has eluded me as of late. It will soon be sixteen years since you departed this world. Have you found peace on the other side, I wonder? As for me, life without you remains an adjustment I can’t seem to make. Despite my efforts to forge ahead, I find signs of your absence everywhere.”

Compelled by the emotion in his voice, I blinked open my eyes. There was sorrow and desolation in his demeanor—but also contentment and serenity. His gaze, his voice—they radiated an immeasurable depth of love for my departed mother. Despite the origins of their union having been political in nature, a genuine, deep connection had evidently flourished between them—a kind of love I could only yearn for.

“And Karen, I can barely fathom this myself, but can you believe that Carolina’s almost sixteen? Where has the time gone, truly? Our daughters, the children your travail brought into this world, are blossoming into remarkable young women. Though I’ve missed out on so much of their lives, occupied as I am with my duties, it still deeply pains me to see them leave my side and venture out into the world.” His voice then dropped to a whisper, laden with

regret. “I only wish I could’ve done more.” This was his final utterance before he turned towards me. The emerald of his eyes shimmered with melancholy. It was an unspoken prompt, signaling it was now my turn to speak.

I paused, trying to summon appropriate words, but before my mind could consciously wrap itself around what I ought to say, my mouth seemed to move on its own. “Hello, Mother. It’s been so long. I’ve been well since last we spoke. Sometimes it seems as if you blessed me with the health you lacked...at the end.” Taking a breath, I took a moment to gather my thoughts. “I’m getting married, Mother—to the second prince of Malcosias—can you believe it? I always knew I’d be taking that step sooner or later, but I’m not sure I could’ve ever predicted this. Life truly does unfold in unexpected ways, doesn’t it?”

As I voiced the news of my impending nuptials, intentionally omitting the political motivations behind them, a familiar shadow of doubt hovered on the periphery of my consciousness. It was an age-old uncertainty that haunted my every step. A question I never dared vocalize, for what point was there in seeking an answer from silence?

“Perhaps there is no point.” I addressed myself cryptically. “But if it means you finally stop running...”

My father cast a puzzled glance in my direction but remained silent. Perhaps it was the resolve evident in my expression that gave him pause.

“Mother, I fear this may be my last visit here, so there’s something I need to ask.” As the words trickled out, my confidence began to falter. Drawing in a ragged breath and tightly clutching my fists, I clung desperately to my wavering resolve.

*No more running. Today, it ends.*

“Are you glad it was me who stayed behind, Mother?”

A sharp gasp echoed beside me. I didn’t even turn to confirm the expression on my father’s face as I continued laying bare the insecurities that had burdened me for years. “The Celestian nobility call me the ‘Sanchez family disgrace.’ My intellect is average, my physique ordinary. In looks, I’m unremarkable. Unlike our ancestors, I lack brilliance, nor do I possess some extraordinary ability. Moreover, my existence is the reason you’re no longer

with us.” I paused, taking another shallow, sharp breath. “Do you ever regret bringing such a disappointment into this world?”

The weight of my confession threatened to break me, rendering the final words into barely more than an incoherent whisper. I tried my best to maintain my composure, but I couldn’t—not when I was giving voice to a sentiment that questioned my very right to existence. Yet, this was a catharsis I had yearned for—a chance for closure—even if the silence remained unbroken in response.

My father seemed on the brink of speaking, but a gentle shake of my head stifled his words. I noticed him quietly close his mouth, and with deliberate grace, I rose to my feet. “You needn’t answer,” I assured the silent monument, strength infusing my voice once more. “After all, even if you did, Mother, I wouldn’t be able to hear it. I apologize. It must break your heart to be questioned whether you regret bringing me into this world. I’m truly sorry if my words hurt, but...I don’t regret asking.”

I turned back to her grave, fixing my gaze upon it, as though trying to imprint its every detail upon my memory. “I may not have the chance to return, Mother, but please—watch over me, from wherever you are. I’m done running from my fate. I’ll show you just what the Sanchez family disgrace is capable of.”

A renewed sense of confidence washed over me. Striving to embody the poise befitting the daughter of a duke and the respect owed to a departed parent, I offered the most reverent bow I could manage, honoring my mother’s memory.

“Farewell, Mother. Until we meet again.”

As I delivered these parting words with the grace and decorum of a perfect lady, the tender caress of the spring breeze seemed to urge me forward. Perhaps it was nothing more than mere coincidence, but deep within, I felt it was my mother’s touch, nudging me onwards.

Now, with a heart finally at peace with my past, I was poised to embrace the future that awaited me.



A scant three days after His Majesty’s visit, at first light, the front of the estate buzzed with activity. It was the day of my departure. With Flora and our



servants believing I was leaving for a graduation trip, only a few attendants and my father came to bid me farewell. Despite the relative paucity of the gathering and the chill of the brisk morning air, warmth and gratitude swelled within me. My father was here, after all.

Indeed, he was here when perhaps he should not have been. He looked utterly exhausted, likely from staying up all night to address a backlog of work—work that had piled up due to taking half a day to go visit Mother’s grave.

“It means a lot to me that you’re here, Father. I know how incredibly busy you are,” I said.

“Of course,” he responded warmly. “You’re leaving home—it’s only right that I see you off.”

It was a somewhat brusque string of words, yet I keenly felt the tender sentiment behind every syllable. It was curious to think how just days prior, I might’ve brushed off his attendance as a mere formality. But now, everything felt different.

I was beyond grateful that we’d achieved a reconciliation before I left. Had we not, I feared that I might’ve been burdened with regret. My wish was that we could have found our way to each other sooner, but it wouldn’t do to be greedy now.

Meeting his gaze, seeing those emerald eyes tinged with sorrow, the urge to say, “I wish I didn’t have to leave,” nearly overcame me. I fought the tears, tightened my lips, and with as much grace as I could muster, I bowed deeply. “Thank you for everything these past sixteen years.”

Despite my effort to keep steady, my voice betrayed me, wavering ever so slightly. A rush of tears threatened to spill from my eyes again, but I choked it back as best I could. I wished, more than anything, to retain my composure in this final moment, but there was just too much between us left unsaid. Keeping my head bowed, unwilling to reveal my tear-brimmed eyes, I gritted my teeth and held my peace.

But in that deafening quiet, something unexpected broke through. Without a word, my father reached out and gently drew me into his embrace—an embrace so warm, so comforting. “Carolina Sanchez,” he murmured, his voice

close to my ear. “You are my pride and joy. I will be forever grateful that you were born to Karen and I.”

His words, tinged with a hint of slightly strained emotion, echoed the affirmation I’d yearned to hear all my life. In that moment, I felt like I truly belonged—that my existence wasn’t just some cruel twist of fate. Tears now streaming down my face unchecked, I hugged him back. Perhaps my confession from yesterday had been weighing on his mind, shaping his response to me now. He had done his best to comfort me, and yet, I couldn’t help but smile inwardly, noting that he didn’t add, “Your mother would say the same.” It was just like him to not speak for those no longer with us, nor did I need him to. His words alone were more than enough.

“Thank you, Father. Your words give me peace. I’ll carry that warmth with me into the empire.”

“There is no need to thank me for feeling how I feel.”

Seeing him stick to his stoicism, even in a moment as poignant as this, brought a bittersweet smile to my face. Slightly pulling away from him, I glanced up; oh, he was *crying*. I’d never seen his face display anything more expressive than a scowl, and yet here he was. Crying like a child—over me.

“I won’t ask you to be exceptional, or to be better than others,” he said, his voice steady despite the tears. “Just lead a happy, healthy life. That’s all I want of you.”

“Of course, Father.”

With his final wish firmly entrusted to me, he slowly let go. The sudden realization that this was goodbye gripped my chest like a vise, but I knew I had to move forward—for our family’s sake and for my own.

He gently stroked my hair, attempting a smile. “Take care, Carolina. Be kind to yourself.”

I sensed his loneliness, his reluctance to let me go. Still, he didn’t try to hold me here. He pushed me forward with all his might. Drawing strength from his unspoken support, I mustered up all my resolve and forced my own lips to smile. “I will. Take care, Father. Goodbye!”

Before my courage could falter, I turned away from my father and the only home I'd ever known. *You'll be okay*, I reassured myself. *Reluctance doesn't equal regret. You have what it takes to thrive in an unknown land.*

*You'll be fine.*

With renewed determination, I boarded the royal carriage. A soft sniffle from behind reached my ears, but I didn't look back. I forged ahead, focused on what was to come.

As the carriage jolted into motion, I gazed out the window, watching my cherished home and my more cherished father recede into the distance, growing smaller and smaller with each passing moment. Finally, when both were on the edge of disappearing entirely, I turned from my past and faced my future.

## Chapter Two

The carriage's gentle sway continued for what felt like half an hour before it started to slow. I was just finishing some touch-ups to my tear-smudged makeup, and I peeked through the window to see a gathering of individuals and carriages approaching my own. It was the Pyreborn—the band of imperial royal knights with whom I was set to rendezvous. To ensure secrecy, I was to travel with their unit for the remainder of the way to the empire. It had been the emperor's idea, the perfect cover for our clandestine scheme.

The reasoning was sound. Parading me over the border accompanied by the Celestian or Malcosian armies might draw unwanted attention from the nobility, possibly even risking a leak of our plans. The Pyreborn, on the other hand, already happened to be returning from an expedition, so their presence would not incite undue suspicion. And beyond their capability to fend off threats like mana-beasts or bandits, considering the bastion of strength that they were, this arrangement came with a significant bonus: the chance to acquaint myself with Prince Edward prior to our audience with the emperor.

However, the plan was not without its downsides. Most notable was the absence of my trusted servants; I'd agreed to come alone as a show of good faith to the empire. Though they had promised to assign me handmaidens and guards, ensuring I wouldn't be making any long-term sacrifices, I would've felt just a little more comfortable traveling with a familiar face or two.

With a deep sigh, I stowed away my cosmetics as the carriage rolled to a stop. Through the window, a sea of armored men and their vehicles now dominated my view. "So this is the aftermath of an expedition..." I mused to myself, amazed by the sheer size of the convoy lining the road.

Taking the coachman's hand, I stepped down from the carriage. Immediately, all eyes swerved to fix themselves on me. I'd heard that the Pyreborn had many commoners in its ranks, and their unusually direct stares, while not contemptuous (as far as I could tell anyway), unsettled me nonetheless.

Spurring my stiff body forwards, I rallied my nerves, sank into a graceful curtsy, and addressed them with all the formality I could muster. “Honor and greetings to you, valiant knights of the Pyreborn. I am Lady Carolina of House Sanchez. With deepest gratitude, I place myself under your protection—I pray I haven’t kept you waiting long.” I rose from my curtsy, trying to gauge their reactions; I wasn’t hoping to win over hearts and minds, by any means, but I at least hoped for a hint of ease in their demeanors.

Then, a carriage door adorned in crimson and gold swung open, and the atmosphere dramatically shifted. A towering, armored figure emerged. The world seemed to pause, the ensuing silence so profound it felt as if nature itself held its breath.

Anxiety welled up within me, and I dared to glance in the hulking man’s direction. Fiery red hair, vibrant like the crimson lotus. Deep-set eyes, the color of golden zircon. Those eyes bore into me with an intensity that was entrancing and intimidating all at once. His face, with its pronounced features, was the epitome of raw masculinity. Even beneath the armor, the contours hinted at a physique that had been carved to perfection. Standing almost at six-and-a-half feet, he exuded an aura that surely could enthrall any woman.

His voluminous cloak, matching the colors of the carriage, billowed out behind him as he approached. There was no mistaking him. Everything about him—his stature, presence, visage—screamed of his identity. He was Edward Ruby Martinez, the second prince of Malcosias, commander of the Pyreborn, and...my intended.

While I’d heard many tales of him, seeing him in the flesh was an altogether more memorable experience. His stoic countenance emanated a commanding vigor, powerful enough to hush a wailing infant. It was little wonder he elicited such fear from his subjects. If only his demeanor were slightly softer, more approachable, I mused, he’d surely be the object of countless romantic fantasies. His features were, without a doubt, made to cause members of the fairer sex to swoon.

Stopping just before me, Prince Edward spoke. “At ease, Lady Carolina Sanchez. You’re right on time.”



Taken aback by his forthright manner and impassive gaze, I managed a shaky, “Y-Yes!”

Contrary to the rumors, he exuded neither arrogance nor condescension. I’d braced myself for a prince filled with self-importance, perhaps one who might chastise me for keeping him waiting, but I sensed no such attitude in his mien. While his expression was stern and his words blunt, he did not strike me as malicious. Then again, one meeting was hardly enough to judge a man’s character.

*Why would the rumors portray him so differently, though?* As the thought skipped across the surface of my mind, Prince Edward moved to speak again. “Right. I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I am Edward Ruby Martinez. Second imperial prince and commander of the Pyreborn. Address me however you wish. I fear we will be in close company for some time, after all.”

Unexpectedly, he extended a hand towards me. In our world of rigidly defined gender norms, a man willing to shake hands with a woman was exceedingly rare. After all, a handshake was between equals, and most men thought of a woman as anything but. (Unless, say, they were the Saint-to-be.) While his gesture might just have been a simple handshake to him, it warmed my heart to think he might already regard me as his equal. “Thank you, Your Highness, for your graciousness,” I said, extending my own hand in response.

“Of course,” he replied. Our hands met, and his firm grip enveloped mine. His hand felt rugged, reminiscent of my father’s, but unique in its feeling and shape. Before I could ponder his touch any further, he withdrew his grasp. “I suggest we discuss the particulars of the engagement in my carriage, where we can be more discreet. You’ll be riding with me. You should find that agreeable, I trust?”

“Indeed, I do,” I answered, granting him a gentle smile. “You are most thoughtful, Your Highness.”

For a fleeting moment, I thought I detected a glimmer of surprise in his eyes. But it vanished as swiftly as it appeared, leaving behind his now-familiar stoic expression. “Right. Please, follow me.” With an air of one who wishes to deflect attention, the prince led the way towards the carriages.

I was left momentarily befuddled. *What was that all about?* Pushing aside my musings, I hurried to fall into step behind him.



As soon as we boarded the prince's carriage, the convoy moved out. I stared out the window at the landscape blurring past me in an effort to distract myself from the unexpectedly gratuitous jostling of the carriage. Clearly the knights prioritized speed and agility over comfort for their vehicles. While I'm sure the added maneuverability did wonders for their warlike expeditions, the relentless rocking soon threatened my composure, and an unrelenting queasiness began clawing at my insides.

*Ugh, I feel sick.* Despite having known this would be the case and steeling myself for the journey, it still proved too much for my weak, aristocratic sensibilities. With all my willpower focused on quelling the nauseousness rising from within, I struggled to maintain my decorum.

My discomfort was obvious enough to be noticed by Prince Edward. "Some fresh air will do you good," he said. "If not, we can ask the driver to slow down."

"Th-Thank you. My apologies," I managed. With a swift movement, he opened the window, allowing the crisp spring breeze to permeate the carriage. The cool air on my face was an immediate relief. "That's much better, Your Highness. I do apologize for the trouble," I said.

"That's quite all right. We've all been there," he replied, his tone measured but not unkind. "Truthfully, we should've arranged a more comfortable carriage for you. That was an oversight."

"No, no..." I politely dismissed his concern.

His words, though brief and to the point, hardly seemed befitting of the notorious "Bloodthirsty Prince." We'd only barely been acquainted for an hour, yet his every action and word contradicted the rumors that preceded him.

While I grappled with my newfound impressions of the prince, the man beside him handed me a blanket. "Please, do us the honor of using this should you feel cold," he said, his mellifluous tenor a stark contrast to the prince's rumbling baritone. His warm smile was genuinely inviting.

Accepting the blanket gratefully, I draped it over my lap. “Thank you. My legs were starting to feel the chill,” I responded. “Excuse my rudeness, but you are...?”

“Ah, I’ve been remiss in my introductions, have I not? I am the councillor to His Imperial Highness, Teodore Garcia, at your most humble service.”

A more shocking revelation had never been delivered in a more matter-of-fact manner. Teodore Garcia was a name I’d heard before. The second son of a viscount, he was vice commander of the Pyreborn, a position he had earned due to two exemplary qualities: his extraordinarily sharp and discerning mind and his formidable magical prowess. Not only were his strategies often touted as a guarantee of victory, he was also an adept mage, capable of wielding every school of the arcane arts. That a viscount’s son like him stood beside the prince was a testament to both his skill and the merit-based values that the Pyreborn embodied.

Yet beyond these acclaimed talents, he had one more lethal weapon at his disposal—his stunning appearance. With lustrous blond hair, alabaster-like skin, and captivating green-yellow peridot eyes, his delicately androgynous features might’ve led me to mistake him for a woman if I hadn’t known any better. Enhancing this allure, a pair of black-rimmed glasses sat perfectly on his slender nose, adding an intriguing academic touch to his already mesmerizing visage.

The rumors had done him little justice. Dressed as a woman, I mused, would he even outshine Flora in sheer beauty?

“Is there something on my face, milady?” The beautiful blond man flashed me a wry smile.

I’d stared too long. Caught in the act, I quickly averted my gaze and stammered out a hasty reply. “M-My apologies! Your features are just so...captivating. I didn’t realize I was staring.”

“Is that so?” he asked, disarmingly suave. “Why, to be admired by Lady Carolina... What an honor indeed.” He fixed his peridot gaze on me, his smile growing wider; to my relief, I could detect no hint of offense or anger in his eyes.

Prince Edward’s voice, gruff and commanding, interrupted our exchange. “If

we're done with the banter, we have a lot to get through today, so please."

*R-Right! We still haven't discussed the engagement at all!* I suppose one could argue that the fault lay with me for feeling sick, but still!

Lord Theodore let out a quiet chuckle. "Such impatience, Your Highness. If only you approached your administrative duties with such admirable fervor... Or shall we say zeal."

"Is this really the time and place for that?" His Highness admonished, a touch sheepish.

Teodore chuckled again. "I suppose it's not. Well, we shall simply have to table that discussion for later then, shan't we?"

As I observed Lord Theodore take pleasure in seeing Prince Edward tense up and divert his gaze, it became apparent to me that he had a dark streak to him. *How...unexpected.* My initial impression of him had been to believe him to be completely genuine... But then again, his angelic smile *did* seem a shade too practiced...

Lost in my thoughts, the world around me faded to a murmur. It was Theodore's voice, saying "...right, Lady Carolina?" that suddenly pierced through my daydream, jerking me back into reality.

Startled, my voice stuttered out in a nervous squeak. "Y-Yes?" *I-I didn't say that thing about his smile out loud, did I?* "Um, yes, what was your question, Lord Theodore?"

He only smiled at me. "Question? No questions, my lady, I merely thought we might turn the conversation towards the matter at hand. I'm certain you have no shortage of concerns as they pertain to your imminent nuptials."

*Oh, good.* It seemed my thoughts had not been as transparent as I'd feared. I took a deep breath and nodded.

"Excellent. I shall take the liberty of explaining," Theodore continued smoothly. "His Highness is certainly not built for the task."

Silence from Prince Edward.

"Yes, of course, thank you," I replied, curious about their odd dynamic. Even

after being told point-blank that he was inept at explaining, Prince Edward retained his stoic demeanor. Had he not heard Theodore's words? Or had he just been unable to refute them because they were accurate? A mystery indeed.

"First, let us discuss the all-important matter of timing," Theodore began. "Your engagement is to be announced precisely two weeks from now, at the Malcosias Founder's Day Fete."

"Two weeks?!" I blurted out. That was far too soon. While I understood the need for haste given the current state of relations between our countries, I needed at least *some* time to prepare! Then again, I supposed that there would be no better occasion than their national day of celebration to announce a momentous engagement. The advantages were too numerous to ignore. The Malcosian Founder's Day Fete was a grand affair graced by royalty from all across the realm. It would be the most impactful way to announce our betrothal, as well as the fastest means of disseminating the news.

I recognized all of that, but still... I needed more time. "Is there no hope of postponing the announcement?" I asked.

"Regrettably, no. The wedding itself will follow two weeks after the announcement; in other words, a month from today. Delaying the announcement would throw off the entire timeline," he explained briskly.

"So...it's set in stone?" I asked numbly.

"Essentially. Preparations are already underway on our end. Any changes to the timetable at this late date will be terribly difficult to accommodate."

I let out a deep sigh. They had never intended to give me a say in all of this. In fact, why did I even think I had the right to one? This entire marriage was political—choice had been denied me from the outset.

"An awfully unreasonable schedule, wouldn't you agree?" Theodore continued blithely. "But worry not, milady. I swear on my name to support the pair of you fully, ensuring that both the announcement and wedding proceed without a single hitch."

"Lord Theodore..." His frank encouragement was refreshing and touching in a way that empty consolation would not have been. Dark streak or not, he



certainly seemed to have integrity. My concerns over the tight schedule remained, but complaining wouldn't change anything now. *It's never too late to admit defeat, so why not wait on admitting any until after I've tried and failed?* "Understood. I'll do my best to keep pace!" I promised.

Teodore's eyes sparkled with mischief as he broke into another of his practiced smiles. It pained me a little, marring slightly the perfection of his beauty, to know that I could now discern the shadow lurking behind it. "That's the spirit," he said with an easy laugh. "What with participating in wedding preparations and coming to grips with imperial customs and homemaking, all while juggling history and magic lessons, you'll be busier than you have ever been. I do so hope that your charming, eager spirit can keep up with it all."

He looked positively gleeful as he detailed the impending (and unending) chaos that was my to be my schedule. I could feel an involuntary twitch tug at my cheek. *Perhaps you ought to lead with the schedule next time!* I silently screamed. *I take it all back. There's no integrity to him at all.*

"Happy thoughts, Lady Carolina," he said bracingly.

"Yes..." It almost came out as a whisper.

Seemingly content at last, this beautiful blond man ended our conversation with a cheerful, "That's all for now." Beside him, Prince Edward's eyes conveyed his silent empathy.

*While I appreciate the sentiment, Your Highness, I'd appreciate your assistance instead. I have no idea if I will manage to survive this month...*



A full day of travel later, the tedium of the journey broken up by Teodore sharing important insights about life in the empire, as well as by intermittent naps, the convoy halted for the evening in a forest.

The knights immediately sprang into action, setting up camp. I observed them through the carriage window as they went about their work: fetching water, conjuring fires using magic, and a dizzying array of other duties, all of which they undertook with precision. A pang of guilt gnawed at me. They were diligently setting everything up while I remained idle in relative comfort. I

contemplated offering my help, but I feared that my lack of experience might be more of a hindrance than an asset; after all, this was my first time ever sleeping under the open sky. I tried consoling myself with the thought that it was perhaps unconventional for a noblewoman like me to get the chance to experience camp life at all. Although the more I thought about it, the more it seemed that ever since my engagement to Prince Edward, “unconventional” had become my new normal.

Lost in such reflections, I let out a wistful sigh. A lone knight stationed outside my carriage promptly turned my way. “I apologize, milady. You’re worried about sleeping on the hard ground with the rest of us, aren’t you?”

The young man bowed his head in apology. His manner of speaking hinted at common birth, but he was nonetheless polite. Kind, even.

“I did ask the commanders if it’d be okay to at least have you stay at an inn, but my request was denied, citing safety concerns. I offer my sincerest apologies that I couldn’t be of more help,” he continued.

His shoulders were slumped in defeat, which I took as a sign of his sincerity. I couldn’t detect a trace of duplicity in his features, nor did he seem to be seeking my favor to suit his own ends. As the realization that his concern might be genuine dawned on me, I felt a wave of embarrassment wash over me. After a lifetime of dealing with the malice and thinly veiled hostility that had always seemed to surround me, I discovered that I had no idea how to respond to his earnestness. “Thank you for your concern, truly. But I’m fine. Admittedly, the prospect of my first night in a camp is a tad daunting, but I understand the necessity. You needn’t concern your...” I hesitated, a sudden curiosity taking hold. “Your pardon, sir, but I have realized that I have no idea what your name is. Would you indulge me in sharing it?” I offered him a soft, reassuring smile.

His face lit up, and there was such an unguarded, childlike quality to his grin that for a fleeting moment he seemed no older than a boy at play. “It’s Collett!” he replied enthusiastically. “Just Collett. I’m a commoner, after all. A commoner, and yet here I am, with Lady Carolina herself asking for my...” His voice trailed off, and the joy vanished from his face as if it had been nothing but an illusion. In one fluid motion, he reached for his blade, while his gaze pierced the shadows.

Something was clearly wrong. Even I could tell. “Collett? What’s hap—”

“Lady Carolina, get down!”

Scarcely had his warning echoed when a rain of arrows hurtled from a thicket, no more distant than a stone’s throw away. With a dazzling display of martial skill, Collett’s blade danced, sending shafts and arrowheads clattering to the ground.

“Pyreborn, to arms!” he cried out. “Bandits in the southern thicket! Expect more from hidden vantages!”

Upon hearing Collett’s clarion call, every knight in the proximity abandoned their mundane tasks to draw forth steel. The camp’s earlier conviviality was smothered by a palpable tension, with each warrior poised for combat.

*Bandits? Here?* I could hardly believe my ears. And they were daring to attack the Pyreborn? I was aware that the wilderness harbored dangers, but I hadn’t anticipated that I would encounter them on my first day!

A frantic shout from Collett pulled me from my stupor. “Lady Carolina! Keep your head down! Whatever you do, do not leave the carriage!”

Of course. My life was no longer just my own. I had a duty to protect myself—for my future husband, for my country. With that weight pressing down on my shoulders, I ducked hastily, but fate was unkind in its timing. Another volley of arrows sailed through the air, and one, bypassing Collett’s vigilant defense, zoned in on the carriage window—on me. Time itself seemed to dilate. Noticing his defensive lapse, Collett whirled, abandoning his own guard in an attempt to intervene, but how could flesh and blood hope to outpace a speeding missile of wood and iron?

Terror and desperation seized me. Was this the end of my journey? Would I meet death here, having failed in my duty? Unable to repay my father’s kindness?

I wouldn’t—I couldn’t let that be my fate.

“No!”

A singular thought consumed me: the vehement refusal to die. As if in answer

to my desperation, a tapestry of crimson unfurled before my eyes, obscuring the world outside—a wall of flames had roared to life, devouring the arrow, erecting a protective barrier around the carriage, and shielding me from further peril.

This mesmerizing sea of red...it evoked in my mind an image of Prince Edward; his hair was the same color. The blazing inferno stood mere inches from me, and yet the flames didn't inspire fear. Instead, I found solace in their hypnotic beauty.

But even as this veil of momentary calm descended upon me, another issue reared its ugly head. "Th-The carriage..." I stammered in dawning horror, "...it's ablaze?!"

The old aphorism "out of the frying pan and into the fire" had never seemed so bitterly appropriate. *So much for being benevolent magic!* I thought wryly as the flames, which had once been my salvation, turned treacherously against me.

Surely a military-grade carriage could withstand a blaze, I reasoned. But such reassurance did not extend to its vulnerable occupant. Frantically, I turned towards the door on the other side, only to find that exit too was being consumed by the very same flames. I was trapped—those mere seconds of hesitation having sealed my fate. The idea of dashing through the flames tempted me, but doubt plagued me when I recalled earlier witnessing the fire instantaneously vaporizing an arrow into ash. The risk seemed monumental. Even if I managed to escape alive, the aftermath would be harrowing—would anyone wish for a bride marred with disfiguring burns?

"This isn't fair!" I screamed in frustration. "Damn it all, at least give me a chance!"

Tears welled up in my eyes, and my body went limp. Seeing no way out, I lamented my utter powerlessness one last time. If only I possessed the might of a seasoned warrior, if only I possessed the wisdom of a powerful mage, if only I were as strong as a member of the Pyreborn—then maybe, just maybe, this wouldn't have been my fate. Why did I have to be so weak?

"Father..." I murmured to the roaring flames. "I fear this is where my journey

ends. I couldn't uphold my vow to you. Forgive me, please. Forgive your wretched, helpless daughter."

Just as I felt I had come to terms with my inevitable demise, the crack of splitting wood and the deafening clang of metal disrupted my mournful reverie.

"Pull yourself together," boomed a familiar voice emerging from the flames. "I can't have you dying on me now, can I? My bride-to-be."

I looked up, and there he stood—the commander of the Pyreborn. He had blown the carriage door wide open with a single, forceful kick. "Y-Your Highness?" I stammered, utterly stunned.

Without a word, he reached forward and wrapped his arms around me. Cradling me like a princess, he whisked me out from the blazing inferno with astonishing calm.





“My apologies,” he began with a voice that was simultaneously steady and laden with concern. “That was my fire magic. I intended to use it to shield you, but I misjudged its ferocity. For the distress and danger that it caused you, I am truly sorry.”

He cast his eyes down, away from mine, but I caught a flicker of genuine regret in that usually impassive gaze. True, his wayward magic had nearly caused my undoing, but it had also shielded me from that stray arrow. Ultimately, it was his actions that had left me unscathed; I was hardly in a position to scold him for saving my life. While “all’s well that ends well” seemed a sentiment too pat for this particular moment, I was simply relieved to be alive. Gathering my composure, I met his eyes. “Your intentions were noble, even if the fire was admittedly a little...alarming. Still, you saved my life, and for that, I’m truly grateful.” I attempted to reassure him with a genuine smile, hoping to alleviate some of his guilt.

For a brief moment, I saw a hint of astonishment in his eyes before he muttered a simple, “I see.” Impassive once more, he quelled the flames with a wave of his hand. After confirming that every last ember had died out, he began to stride purposefully forward, still holding me in his arms. *Where are we headed?* I wondered.

“I’m taking you to safety,” Prince Edward said, answering my silent question. “The bandits are just about handled, but we need to ensure no stragglers remain before you can move freely about.”

I nodded blankly, though my thoughts were anything but. The Pyreborn were legends in their own right, but to witness their prowess firsthand was something else entirely. It was true that I’d heard there wasn’t a single mediocre member in their ranks, but the sheer speed and precision with which they’d responded to this ambush was nothing short of breathtaking. They were stunningly competent veterans of the battlefield.

Absorbed in my musings, I barely registered our arrival in front of a solitary tent. It stood defiantly, the lone surviving shelter amidst the storm that had swept through the camp. The fiery-haired prince scanned our surroundings before he gently set me down. “You’ll be safe with the knights here. Once we’re

certain the threat is fully eliminated, I'll return—"

His words were abruptly cut off as a knight, his face as pale as a sheet, burst from the tent. "Commander, you're needed at once. It's Collett. He's...!"

*Collett.* The name hit me like a tidal wave, and I felt the color drain from my cheeks. The memory of his selfless defense, his reckless attempt to protect me, flooded back into my mind. In his moment of vulnerability, had he...? No, I couldn't bear the thought.

I tore past the tent's entrance before I could even think, and what I saw inside wrenched at my heart. "Collett!" I gasped in horror. There he was, lying in a low cot, bathed in a pool of his own blood. His breathing was shallow, his pallor ghostly, and crimson stains seeped ominously through the bandages wrapped around his torso.

"This is my fault..." I whispered. "This is all my fault!" Guilt and regret threatened to consume me. If only I'd listened to his command a second earlier, if only I'd put myself out of harm's way like he'd told me to, then this wouldn't have happened. A kind, selfless soul was now on the brink of death—all because of me! Oh, what a cursed harbinger of misfortune I was!

Suddenly, my vision went black. "Don't look," came the increasingly familiar baritone of Prince Edward's voice. I felt his hand gently covering my sight, a comforting warmth amid the chill of despair.

But comfort didn't equate to relief.

"Ron, continue treating Collett," the prince commanded. "I'll fetch Teo. He might be our only hope to save Collett's life."

"Yes, sir!" The young man from earlier, Ron, responded with urgency. "I'll do everything I can to stabilize him until you return!" Peering through the gaps between His Highness's fingers, I caught a brief glimpse of Ron, who was evidently a healing mage. Drawing on healing spells and potent herbs, he fought fiercely to anchor Collett's fleeting life to this world, determined, unyielding, and desperately clinging on to that last sliver of hope, while I looked on, ineffectual and powerless.

Edward's voice, resolute yet soft, broke into my thoughts. "I'm sorry, but this

is where you must remain,” he told me. “Since this is the only tent we have a barrier over right now, it’s the safest. But...” He paused for a moment, gently lifting his hand from my face. He circled around in front of me, positioning himself between me and Collett. His expression was as unreadable as always, but a tender understanding shone in his eyes. “You don’t need to look. The weight of Collett’s death is too heavy a burden for a young maiden to bear. So please, turn away.”

In his voice there was an undertone of plea, a vulnerability I hadn’t expected. His golden zircon eyes shimmered, betraying a hidden agony. My eyes widened ever so slightly—was he concealing his own pain for my sake?

The realization dawned on me. He was a leader, grappling with the potential loss of a cherished comrade. His anguish ran deep, likely far deeper than I could fathom. In such a situation, I should have been the one to comfort him, yet here he stood trying to shield me. In giving into my own self-serving panic, I’d robbed him of his rightful moment to grieve. A surge of frustration welled up within me at the pain brought about once again by my own failings, but... No. Self-pity wasn’t the answer right now. There would be a time for reflection, for atonement, but now was not that time—not when I could still act.

I was the Sanchez family disgrace, a mere standin for Flora. Would my presence (or absence) truly make a difference one way or the other? After all, I didn’t know how to wrap a bandage, nor could I tell a medicinal herb apart from a common weed; and yet, despite my utter inability, doing nothing in this moment felt like a betrayal. “I can’t do anything, so I *won’t* do anything”? An inadequate excuse for the weak-willed. “Disgrace”? A convenient shield I’d used, a crutch to justify my inaction. No longer.

“I understand,” I said, my voice steady. “I’ll wait here, but I won’t turn away. I’ll stand here and hold space for the reality of Collett’s injuries. Even if it means witnessing his last moments...I won’t hide from it.”

In the silence that followed, I met Prince Edward’s gaze, challenging him. Surprise flashed in his golden eyes, just for an instant, before his stoic mask resettled. “Very well,” he replied calmly. “Do as you see fit.”

“Thank you.” Relief mingled with determination as I exhaled. The prince had

respected my will, and with his approval, I felt bound to my resolve. There would be no retreat.

“Good luck, then. I’m going to get Teo.” With a flutter of his cape, Prince Edward strode hastily out of the tent—too hastily for a man who went to such lengths to appear unshakable. He was hiding it well, but I could nonetheless sense his unease. Yet his ability to mask his turmoil so successfully was a testament to his leadership.

I returned my focus to Collett. There was more blood than before, darkening the bandages and seeping into the cot. His skin was deathly pale. The human body, I recalled, was roughly sixty percent water by weight. Lose too much, and life slips away.

Gazing at Collett, so vulnerable, as precarious as a flame in the wind, I was reminded of—no, struck with—the brutal fragility of life. At that moment, all I wanted to do was turn away.

*Turn away? Get a grip, Carolina Sanchez! Didn’t you just decide to not turn your back on him? Were you truly going to spew such brave words only to falter now? Did you really think that was going to fly? Square up and face reality, no matter how cruel it might seem!*

I gritted my teeth as I chastised myself. As if to chase away my wavering feelings, I locked my gaze onto Collett and caught sight of Ron changing out his bandages. A fleeting glimpse of the wounds made me wince; they were alarmingly deep. As Ron tirelessly worked to save Collett, another sharp pang of inadequacy struck me. Here I stood, mired in my own miserable thoughts, while perhaps the only thing I could offer Collett in this dire moment was a prayer. The weight of that truth, my own powerlessness, pressed heavily on me, and yet if that was all I could do, I felt compelled to do it.

Drawing strength from Ron’s dedication, I clasped my hands together, letting my eyes drift close.

*O heavenly Father... Nay, any deity that might hear my plea, I beseech thee. Collett, who fought so valiantly to shield me from harm—please, grant him your protection. I implore you, spare him this agony—*

“—and let him live!”

It was then that it happened. As my voice, praying fervently for the safe return of Collett's soul, burst forth from my thoughts and then faded into silence, a miracle descended upon the earth, overturning all we had held to be true.

Ron's startled voice pierced the heavy quiet. "Wh-What? His injuries...!"

My eyes snapped open, and what I saw was beyond any comprehension. Blood no longer marred Collett's form. The wounds, so grievous that even stabilizing him had seemed impossible, were gone—vanished, as if they'd been nothing more than an illusion.

They'd *vanished*? And without a trace, without a scar? Was that even possible? As improbable as it sounded, could it be that my prayers were...? No... No, that would be absurd. It had to have been Ron's doing—he was, after all, a healing mage.

"What...? How?" the mage in question stammered out. "Collett was on the brink—I was sure of it, and yet..." He shook his head. "No... No, my healing magic isn't potent enough to mend such severe injuries." He then turned to me with an uncertain, half-accusing gaze. "Was this your doing, milady?"

Ron seemed so certain of it—this was not his handiwork. But it couldn't have been me either. I hastened to deny his silent accusation. "N-No, it couldn't have been me. I'm nonmagical!"

"Nonmagical, you say?" he echoed in disbelief.

I nodded vehemently, as if that would settle the matter once and for all.

My statement carried more weight when paired with an understanding of the underlying principles of magic in our world. Just as there were magic users capable of performing feats that bent the very rules of reality, there were also those that could not so much as make a feather tremble. The capacity to harness and wield this unseen force hinged on several intrinsic and readily definable factors.

Firstly, the very fabric of our world was steeped in "mana," a ubiquitous and invisible element. It flowed all around us, even in the air that we breathed. Some individuals had the innate ability to absorb this mana, converting it into

an energy known as “arcane power” within their bodies. The efficiency and the rate of this conversion varied among individuals, determining both the quality and quantity of their power.

Secondly, magic, as most understood it, was the external manifestation of these internal arcane energies. Through magic, practitioners could achieve feats that defied natural laws. However, not all magics were universally accessible. Each practitioner had affinities towards certain schools of magic, and attempting to dabble outside one’s school was said to be more or less impossible.

Lastly, determining the extent of magical aptitude wasn’t an inscrutable mystery—it could be tested for. The Celestian church possessed a unique magical implement that could identify which schools of magic an individual was capable of harnessing, if any. But that was all it could discern—the presence or absence of magical potential and its affinity—not the depth or potency of one’s power.

Along with my sister, I had undergone this examination many years ago, and I had been determined to be nonmagical. I hurriedly explained this fact to Ron.

“I-If not you, then who?!” he demanded, visibly torn between gratitude for the unforeseen power that had saved Collett and trepidation about its nature. Even as he struggled to comprehend this unexpected turn of events, I shrugged off my questions—I was simply overwhelmed with relief that Collett was safe. Despite his pale complexion, presumably from the blood loss, he seemed stable.

Just as I was beginning to relax, a rush of movement caught my attention. Two imposing figures stormed into the tent.

“Ron, report! What’s Collett’s status?!” Lord Theodore demanded, his voice echoing with urgency.

“Is he dead?!” Prince Edward forcefully inquired.

Both must have rushed over as fast as they could; I could see sweat beading on their brows. In the face of their questions, however, Ron remained silent and agitated.



“I said, report!” Lord Teodore’s tone grew sharper as his patience thinned. “Do you hear me? I need a status report—now!”

“V-Vice commander, I don’t know how to say this, but...”

“Out with it, man!” snapped the beautiful blond man, his comeliness only slightly marred by agitation.

Slowly, Ron drew a deep breath, steadying himself. “Collett, he’s... He’s completely healed.”

There was a stunned pause. “I... Huh?” the vice commander managed to stammer.

“He’s *what*?” Prince Edward echoed, his voice tinged with disbelief.

They looked at each other, then down at the undamaged figure on the cot. While Collett’s attire was yet in tatters, the skin beneath was entirely unscathed. Their expressions morphed from shock to bewilderment.

Prince Edward seemed especially taken aback. “What the hell has happened here?” he bellowed.

“I’m as baffled as you are,” Ron answered. “All I know is that I saw Lady Carolina deep in prayer. Then all of a sudden, Collett’s wounds vanished. I swear, I had no hand in this.”

“Her Ladyship is known to be nonmagical,” Lord Teodore retorted. “Explain to me how an ordinary person devoid of magic might restore such grievous injuries?”

Ron shook his head, as bewildered as the rest. “I... I can’t.”

Lord Teodore sighed deeply. Seemingly accepting that Ron wouldn’t be able to provide the answers he was looking for, he began his own inspection of the patient. Given the situation, I decided to let slide the curious fact that he seemed to be familiar with the records of my magical aptitude.

“Judging by the amount of blood on this cot, it is most evident that Collett’s injuries were grave indeed,” he murmured, mostly to himself. “And considering how little of it has subsequently dried, I’d pinpoint the instant of healing to mere moments ago. He still looks rather anemic, so while I won’t say we are

completely out of the woods yet, the immediate threat to his life is over.” Pausing, he stroked his chin with his graceful fingers in a contemplative pose. “Phenomenal work, whoever did this. I’d certainly buy them a drink if I could.”

The room fell into silence, and Ron began cleaning the blood from Collett’s body. As calm finally seemed to descend, I breathed for what seemed like the first time in ages. “He’s going to make it...” I whispered, more to reassure myself than anyone else. “That’s... That’s great to hear...” As if on cue, my legs gave out, and I crumbled to the ground, unaware of the fiery-haired prince’s keen gaze on me as I melted into a puddle of skirts.

“Carolina,” he said gently. “A word, please?”

Startled, I looked up at him and stammered back a hasty affirmation.

Prince Edward gracefully lowered himself to kneel next to me on the ground. His entrancing golden zircon eyes held mine, though his face gave nothing away. “Firstly, thank you for standing by Collett. Your bravery is commendable.”

I quickly interjected, “Oh, no, my lord, it was my choice, but I’m not certain I’d call it brave.”

He nodded. “Call it what you will, your actions spoke volumes. And secondly...” His voice momentarily faltered. “I must admit, I imagined you to be another coddled aristocrat, a fragile young lady who knew nothing of what it meant to take her place in the real world. But you’ve proven me wrong. To stand by someone in their darkest hour takes strength—strength I mistakenly believed you lacked. I’ve misjudged you. And for that I apologize.” He then did the unthinkable—from his place next to me, he bowed deeply in humility, still managing somehow to make the gesture look unbelievably graceful from a kneeling position.

I didn’t know how to respond. It was one thing to apologize when you’d been mistaken, but to display such genuine remorse over a private judgment that I might have gone my whole life without knowing he’d ever held... It was either an act of brutal honesty or an astonishing lack of tact.

I paused in contemplation, the silence between us stretching a beat.

In the end, I decided that it didn’t matter whether he suffered from an

overabundance of honesty or an underabundance of tact, his actions sealed it for me: though I'd known him for less than a day, the fiery prince was a person of character, a genuine soul nothing like the unsavory caricature the rumors had painted. "I accept your apology, Your Highness," I responded, my voice soft yet firm. "But please, do rise. A prince shouldn't be so quick to bow."

His eyebrows quirked in surprise. "Funny—you sound just like Teo." As Prince Edward raised his head, I noticed Lord Theodore's face twisting into a dubious but amused expression behind him.

It seemed that Prince Edward had another lecture in store for him. I smiled sympathetically. Did his direct manner of speech get him into trouble often, I wondered? Considering he seemed completely unaware of his tactless nature, it seemed likely.

Prince Edward, noting my gaze, asked, "Is there something on my face?"

"Oh, nothing. It's nothing at all," I replied, suppressing a smile.

The foreboding darkness of Lord Theodore's disapproval swelled from behind, and yet, Prince Edward still seemed none the wiser.

I expected that it wouldn't be long—perhaps a couple of minutes—before the fiery-haired prince would find himself shielding himself from yet another "constructive" barrage of scathing criticism.



Before long, we, the Pyreborn, had rounded up the remaining bandits. After handing them over to the local guard, we returned to our camp and resumed preparations for the night's rest. Thankfully, aside from Collett, there were no other serious injuries.

After ensuring that my fiancée Carolina was settled in an appropriately comfortable tent, I made my way back to the medical tent where Collett was being treated. As I walked, I found myself reflecting on Carolina, the woman I was ordained to marry.

Lady Carolina Sanchez, second daughter of the ducal House Sanchez and younger sister to Flora Sanchez—the woman slated to become the next Saint of Celestia. I had been told that Carolina's grades at the Celestian academy had

been above average, but not exceptional. Her appearance, though not particularly striking, belied the true beauty that lay underneath. She was invariably mild-mannered, perhaps some would say too demure.

Given all of this, she'd seemed the ideal candidate for a marriage of convenience. In truth, her temperament and status were the only reasons Teo and I had entertained her as a suitable match—she was simply all too useful for our own ends. Her pedigree ensured she would fit seamlessly into the royal family, her status was sufficient to avoid dragging our image down, and while the balance of power between us was suitable, it was not equal. The subtle dynamics favored us, suggesting she'd be easy to control.

Her discerning nature guaranteed that she wouldn't misuse her status in the imperial family, and her tact ensured she wouldn't cause any undue scandals. On top of that, her obedient nature made me confident that she would willingly maintain appearances for the sake of our alliance, expecting nothing deeper in return.

She seemed, in all aspects, the perfect facade for our political machinations. Accepting her as a candidate had seemed like a straightforward choice, but...

"She's nothing like I imagined," I murmured to myself.

Yes, Carolina was gentle and reserved, but she also possessed an unexpected candor and resilience. When confronted with adversities, the mere thought of which would cause most ladies to flee, she'd faced them head-on. Witnessing her stand firm beside Collett while he'd hovered between life and death had been profoundly moving. Even as a seasoned warrior, familiar with the sight of death on the battlefield, such moments never became easier for me.

A fleeting image of her unyielding, brave expression brushed past my mind's eye, bringing with it an unanticipated sense of calm. Somehow, the fortitude in the determined set of her face seemed to lend me strength.

"I need to know more about her," I muttered under my breath, the words surfacing from a sudden impulse. But before I could dwell further on this newfound determination, I found myself standing before the medical tent once more. Taking a deep breath to steady my nerves, I pushed through the tent flaps. The first thing I saw was Teo, engrossed in checking Collett's blood

pressure.

I suppressed a wry smile. Here was the most prodigious mage in the empire, concerning himself with a task so far beneath his station that it seemed laughable. Then again, him being here at all was arguably even further beneath him.

Teo's place, by all accounts, shouldn't have been anywhere near here. As one of the most exceptional mages the empire had ever produced, he'd been expected to join my father as a mage of his court. Yet due to my own desires and Teo's will, that plan had been derailed, and he'd helped me to found the Pyreborn instead. But all things considered, the outcome hadn't been so different from the original intent. My father's main motivation for bringing Teo into his court had been to shield him from becoming ensnared in the unceasing power struggles of the aristocracy. With the emperor's backing, no noble would dare challenge Teo, ensuring a peaceful equilibrium. We'd merely changed Teo's title from "imperial court mage" to "vice commander of an order of royal knights." The latter might have sounded less glamorous, but with me as the commander, it somewhat balanced the scales.

Given the ad hoc establishment of the Pyreborn, we weren't particularly favored by the empire's nobility. In fact, it perhaps would've been more accurate to say that they despised us. Whispers and unsavory rumors followed us incessantly. Despite our countless achievements on the battlefield, our worth and valor remained unnoticed and uncelebrated. The constant snubs were, to be frank, disheartening.

Contemplating the challenges that lay ahead for the Pyreborn, I sighed deeply. At this, Teo, having finished with Collett, raised his gaze to meet mine. "What could possibly have our unflappable prince looking so morose?" he said with a playful lilt. "Has the sky finally started to fall?"

"What, a man can't sigh without being interrogated?" I shot back before turning my gaze to Collett. "How is he?"

Teo shrugged, seemingly disappointed I wasn't in the mood for verbal sparring. "Stable, aside from an alarmingly low blood pressure. This stems from the blood loss, if I had to guess. He'll need a good few days to recover, at the

very least.”

“He can’t ride like that,” I muttered. “We should get a wagon for him.”

“Yes, I agree,” he sighed. “However, we only have one free wagon after the attack. We command five in total, but four of them are hauling supplies.”

“So put him in the free one,” I said, wondering why we were even having this discussion.

He sighed again, with more emphasis this time, his gaze sharp on me, suggesting I was missing something obvious.

I was confused. This had never been a big deal before. Teo and I could just ride on horseback as we always did in these situations. “I don’t understand. Did you want that wagon?” I asked.

“No,” he replied, his patience with me clearly wearing thin. “Though yes, I could’ve used it to catch up on work. But that’s beside the point.”

I was stumped. What could he possibly be hinting at?

Teo sighed for a third time, rubbing his temples theatrically as if to ease a sudden headache. *Are you truly this dim?* he seemed to be saying. “Did you forget about Lady Carolina? Your fiancée? You would have her share a carriage with Collett? With a commoner? With another man? Alone? Are you beginning to see the problem now?”

“I’ll accompany them as well, then,” I offered simply.

“And where exactly would you fit your well-muscled bulk, Your Highness? Were you hoping we dump out some supplies on the side of the road and commandeer you a larger wagon instead? You know, this would be easier if only *someone*, I cannot think of who, hadn’t transformed the royal carriage into a heaping pile of ash.”

I felt a pang of guilt. “I didn’t *mean* to do that. But for some reason, my power just...surged. Like I...couldn’t control it.”

Even I could tell that sounded like an excuse, but I didn’t know how else to explain it. I’d attempted to cast my fire magic as usual, but I’d felt an unfamiliar warmth swell up inside me, and before I knew it, the entire carriage had been

ablaze. It'd been an embarrassing lapse; control over one's magic was one of the first and most fundamental things a mage learned.

Teo remained oddly silent. I'd expected him to rip into me by now, but no scathing insults seemed forthcoming. I glanced up at him, and instead of a jest, he said quietly, "You too, Your Highness?"

His peridot eyes had widened behind his glasses, and I felt my own eyes mirror his surprise. "You felt it too, Teo?"

He nodded. "And yet, my magic didn't run amok."

"I'm sorry! I lost control, all right? I didn't ask for it to happen." Teo's infallible habit of pointing out my flaws always stung, and I couldn't help but react.

"Well, I can't say that's exactly encouraging. Adding you to the list, that brings our count up to twelve people who've reported the same phenomenon. Call it an unexplained surge of power, an act of god, what have you, but as it stands, you aren't the only one who's managed to accidentally destroy a carriage."

I ignored that. "So what's our next step? Are you going to look into this?" I asked.

"I suppose so, yes. I can hardly afford to ignore the testimony of twelve different people. Plus, I was already planning to investigate what happened with Collett."

I muttered my agreement. An unexplained source of power, even if not directly harmful, posed a potential threat. If the phenomenon had been caused by a person, I was keen to find them—and meet them, if at all possible.

Teo's voice brought me back from my thoughts. "Back to the immediate concern, the matter of the wagon. In case it wasn't obvious, my suggestion of ditching supplies was a witty jest. Perhaps a less...robust man could join them? I can't imagine that Her Ladyship would be too terribly enthused to be stuck in a cramped carriage with two other men, but I'm sure she'd prefer it to being stuck with...all of you."

His plan seemed the most realistic, even if his last statement was a little uncalled for. It clearly provided the best possible accommodation for both Carolina and Collett. Even a man as simple as me could see that. Yet something



about it didn't sit right with me. I struggled to pinpoint the vague discomfort in my chest. The thought of Carolina in close quarters with another man, even if it was one of my trusted knights, left me...uneasy.

I could feel Teo eyeing me suspiciously as I grappled with my inner turmoil.

But then, I arrived at the one course of action that would neatly solve all of our problems. "No. Carolina will ride with me—on horseback."

"Huh?"

At my unexpected decision, Lord Theodore let out an unseemly (and decidedly disapproving) noise.

I chose to ignore that as well.



As dawn broke the following morning, our convoy embarked for the Celestia-Malcosias border. I found myself, for reasons which escaped me, riding double with Prince Edward on horseback. Before our departure, Lord Theodore had briefly mentioned, "The wagons are reserved for the injured Collett and our supplies—you'll be riding." Yet he'd omitted the vital detail that I'd be sharing a saddle with Prince Edward—how convenient!

I swear, that man... His casual omission of crucial information had been no oversight, I was certain of it. Obviously, I would assume that I was riding solo. (Who in their right mind would assume they'd be riding double unless told otherwise?)

*And before anyone tells me that perhaps he genuinely didn't know whether or not I was capable of riding, I won't accept it!*

Lord Theodore was far too well-informed about me for that. I couldn't believe it... I'd even changed into my riding habit! Riding double with the commander... There were pranks that a lady could stomach, and then there was this!

I could do nothing but grumble internally as I clung to the saddle, but soon, I wasn't capable of even that. We accelerated to a breathtaking pace. The wind gusting against my face, the scenery morphing into a blur, the rhythmic galloping of the horse beneath me, and the warmth of Prince Edward pressing

against my back—it was both thrilling and terrifying. Perhaps riding double was the best choice after all. While I did have basic riding skills, keeping up at this speed on my own seemed unimaginable.

In truth, I felt that we were going far too fast. Every jolt threatened to unseat me, and my body swayed precariously with the horse's movements. *If I fell out of the saddle at this speed, what would become of me...?* This terrifying thought gnawed at me.

As I hung on for dear life, feeling the sting of tears starting to well up in my eyes, my riding partner seemed to sense my discomfort. "Are you all right?" Prince Edward's voice reached me despite the whistling of the wind in my ears. "You look like you're about to fall at any moment." Without waiting for a reply, he shifted my weight in the saddle, stabilizing my position.

Finally feeling a sense of security, I let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Your Highness."

His concern didn't wane. "Of course, but are you all right? If this pace is too much, I can slow down," he offered.

"Oh, no, please!" I insisted with a shake of my head. "I wouldn't dream of being the reason for a delay in our arrival."

He paused, seemingly weighing my words before firmly encircling my waist with his arm, pulling me tightly against him. Feeling his broad chest against my back, I stammered, "Um, Your Highness...?"

"Now you can lean against me. Isn't this more comfortable?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Y-Yes, but..."

"I won't hear any complaints. You falling is a risk I cannot take," Prince Edward declared. "You really ought to take better care of yourself before you try to help others, milady. Pretending that you were comfortable with the speed we were going just now was...reckless, to say the least. You put yourself in jeopardy simply to avoid inconveniencing me."

His words hit a tender nerve. I mumbled an apology and fell into silence. Deciding to accept his offer, I relaxed against him, discovering an unexpected

comfort in the steadiness of his presence. How strange. The fear of falling that had gripped me just moments ago now seemed a distant worry. The analogy was perhaps uncouth, but supporting myself against his solid frame felt akin to leaning against a tree trunk. Just what sort of physical training had he undergone to craft such a formidable core of muscle?

“This is much better, Your Highness!” I felt compelled to say. “I feel as safe as houses now!”

“That’s good,” he replied. “In the future, if you have concerns, please voice them. You are my fiancée after all.”

“I-I will!”

*He referred to me as his fiancée...* The title, albeit one rooted in political convenience, sent a flutter to my heart and a warmth to my cheeks. Even in the absence of romantic intent, it was comforting to hear. For the first time, a glimmer of hope about our arranged union sparked within me—even if love didn’t enter into it. After all, love was hardly a requisite in the cold, calculated exchange that a political marriage represented.



We crossed into Malcosias without incident, and after another week of travel, we arrived at the capital of the empire. Moving down the main avenue towards the royal castle, the lively hum of the city struck a familiar chord. It was a scene that could have been lifted straight from back home—the playful shrieks of children darting through the crowd, the cadence of merchants peddling their wares, the rhythm of everyday life humming along. I drank in the sights with a contented sigh, all from my discreet vantage point within a carriage. The optics of Prince Edward and myself at close quarters on horseback were (obviously) a bit too ripe for the gossip mills. So once we crossed into the empire, he and I were ushered back into the seclusion of the last available carriage. Luckily, Collett had recovered well enough by that point to ride on horseback without difficulty or complaint.

As the imperial castle loomed ever larger on the horizon, I found myself reflecting on the journey. “It’s strange,” I muttered, a hint of melancholy in my voice. “The road seemed endless when we started, and now it feels like it ended

all too soon.”

The prince, his hair glowing like a cascade of flames in the soft sunlight, caught my gaze as he arched a curious brow. “If you’d like to continue traveling, I’d gladly escort you wherever you want to go, as long as it’s within our borders,” he said softly.

His proposition caught me off guard. I found myself studying the earnestness in his eyes and the gentle curve of his lips that had just framed such an inviting promise, staring at him so directly that I worried I might be veering into rudeness. Was he joking? No, from what I knew about him, he wasn’t the type to do so. In that case, was he serious about offering to take me on another journey? I’d been on the receiving end of many invitations for “next times” that were said more out of courtesy than any real intent, but this felt different. This felt...sincere.

I smiled graciously. “I’d love to, my lord. I can think of no one better to accompany me than you, Your Highness.”

His expression flickered for a moment to something unreadable, but then he mirrored my smile with his own. “Then journey we shall, my lady. It’d be my pleasure.”

The whimsy in his words sent a flutter through my heart. His smile was almost lazy, a clumsy half-curve that was utterly disarming on such a handsome face. In that moment, he seemed to embody the archetypal prince dashing in on a white horse, ready to whisk me away into a world spun from fairy tales. *How unfair, Your Highness...* And had his words always carried such a soft, mellow lilt? It felt as though a veil of stiff, royal decorum had lifted, revealing a gentleness I hadn’t witnessed before. Was this the real him? Was he perhaps warming up to me? The notion filled my heart with a sweet, buoyant hope.

As his smile lingered, I luxuriated in a warmth that felt as unexpected yet welcome as rays of sunlight dappling through a veil of spring leaves. I basked in a newfound and glorious optimism for my future.

## Chapter Three

Our carriage meandered through the lively streets of the capital, gradually drawing us closer to the imposing gates of the imperial castle. As we traced a path around a grand fountain, the carriage gradually came to a halt in front of the castle's majestic facade. Dominated by shades of resplendent crimson and gold, the ramparts stood as a testament to the royal family's grandeur. An army of maids stood awaiting us, and poised with an air of readiness, they sprang into action upon our arrival, meticulously rolling out a red carpet leading to the castle's entrance. This lavish reception, especially the privilege of being ceremoniously escorted right up to the main gate, was a courtesy extended to me solely in my official capacity as an envoy from Celestia. I was grateful for this veneer of formality, as I had no doubt my entrance would've been relegated to a less conspicuous backdoor without it.

I straightened my posture, the weight of representing Celestia anchoring my resolve. I managed to brace myself just in time for the solemnities ahead when the carriage door swung open. The maids, having adeptly laid out the carpet, now flanked it in two perfect lines. Their efficiency was matched only by their discipline. Eyes respectfully lowered, no chatter among them, not even a hint of restlessness. This level of professionalism, though perhaps a baseline expectation for castle attendants, was a cut above what I'd witnessed back in Celestia.

Lost in my admiration for their competence, I'd hardly noticed Prince Edward had already alighted from the carriage and was expectantly holding his hand out to me. I muttered a word of gratitude as I took hold and descended the carriage, stepping gently onto the plush carpet I'd ever had the pleasure of treading on.

Casting me a reassuring glance, Prince Edward initiated our procession down the carpet, his hand subtly overlapping mine. He modulated his ceremonial stride with an ease that surprised me, his pace deliberately measured to match my steps, embodying the grace expected of an imperial prince. As we

approached the threshold, the air around us swelled with anticipation before the voices of the maids resounded in harmonious unison: “Welcome to His Imperial Highness, Prince Edward. And welcome, esteemed envoy of Celestia.”

We cleared the columns of perfectly bowed heads, the echo of the flawless cadence of their greeting lingering in my mind, but my appreciation of their welcome soon gave way to the tightening knot in the pit of my stomach. We were now en route to the throne room, where a formal introduction to the reigning emperor and empress awaited us. Under ordinary circumstances, my nerves would not jangle in such a cacophony prior to formal introductions with foreign dignitaries, but the Malcosian sovereigns were far from ordinary.

His Imperial Majesty, Eric Ruby Martinez, was a legend among spell-swords, the most formidable warrior mage that the realm had ever witnessed. His mastery over lightning magic, a domain a notch above fire, rendered him a fearsome fighter, praise echoed by every adversary he’d ever faced. The tempests of lightning and thunder he unleashed upon the battlefield had earned him the epithet “the Lightning Emperor.” Though his presence on the front lines had become a rarity following his ascension, his martial exploits during his tenure as crown prince were etched in legend. His heroic saga had been immortalized in everything from picture books to novels, his legacy nestled firmly within the hearts and minds of his subjects.

Beside him stood Her Imperial Majesty, Vanessa Ruby Martinez. She was a rare user of frost magic, earning her the sobriquet “the Frost Witch.” While her displays of martial strength may not have mirrored the emperor’s, she had once showcased her prowess by vanquishing a slew of formidable mana-beasts to safeguard her subjects. Initially, her stoic demeanor had made her seem cold to those she ruled, but her heroic act had kindled a rising tide of popularity. Even her characteristic icy impassiveness had been recontextualized by her people into a revered trait.

Together, the imperial rulers were figures of awe and respect, commanding the unwavering loyalty of their subjects. There was no room for any shortcomings on my part during this introduction. Though these monarchs were known to be tolerant, it remained to be seen whether such leniency would extend towards a representative from a nation that had wronged them. As we

ventured deeper into the castle's echoing corridors, I struggled to contain the tension etched across my face. As we passed by each individual, a respectful head bowed in deference. Despite my attempts to soothe myself, my nerves held my sinews too tightly wound to reciprocate even their simple gestures of respect.

At last we found ourselves before the grandiose double doors that served as the gateway to the throne room. Standing sentinel were two guards whose presence was as commanding as the doors themselves.

"Prince Edward and the envoy from Celestia, here to seek an audience with Their Imperial Majesties." Prince Edward articulated his words with a ceremonial cadence.

"Prince Edward and the envoy from Celestia," a guard echoed with a formality that matched the gravity of the occasion. "Their Imperial Majesties await within."

It was clear our arrival had been anticipated. Each guard took hold of a door handle, and as they did, a surge of terror swelled within me. *What if I make a fool of myself, and they deem me unworthy of Prince Edward? What if they banish me?* My hands trembled with the weight of what-if's.

Indifferent to my inner turmoil, the doors inexorably parted to reveal the throne room. A sea of towering pillars, flags, and banners bearing the emblem of Malcosias filled the expanse. My eyes traced the red carpet that led to the throne, where the emperor and empress sat in state—the sovereign rulers of this grand empire.

"Second Imperial Prince, Edward Ruby Martinez, and the envoy of Celestia have arrived." The guard's voice resonated through the vast, echoing hall. Cued by his proclamation, I crossed the threshold. My stomach churned with a blend of awe and fear. *Will I navigate this meeting without faltering?* I couldn't help but wonder. Despite Lord Theodore's assurance that Their Majesties viewed this union favorably, a storm of worry brewed within me. *What if they reject me? What if they throw me out? What if they demand my sister instead? If they say that to me, I don't know what I would—*

"It'll be okay." Prince Edward's soft baritone whisper broke through the



turmoil of my frayed thoughts.

His private assurance, meant only for my ears, instantly laid rest to the storm of anxieties roiling within me. How could three little words from a man known for his impassiveness, inexpressiveness, and curt demeanor inspire such comfort? *What'll be okay?* He didn't even specify, and yet the warmth in his whisper kindled a gentle glow in my chest. It was as if a candle flame had been lit, casting a soothing light across the dark expanse of my fears.

That comforting ember remained alight as we proceeded towards the center of the room. We halted before the dais, and with a sense of finality, Prince Edward released my hand (much to my dismay, I was surprised to realize).

"Father, Mother, I have returned," Prince Edward said gravely. He pressed his right hand across his chest and executed a knight's salute with practiced precision.

Beside him, I mustered all the grace I could and curtsied deeply. "Your Imperial Majesties, it is an unparalleled honor to stand in your esteemed presence. I am Carolina Sanchez, an envoy from the Kingdom of Celestia, here to extend greetings on behalf of my homeland."

The rehearsed introduction, a product of Lord Theodore's rigorous drilling over the past week, flowed from my lips. In response to my words, I discerned a subtle softening in the gazes that Their Majesties directed towards me. Evidently, I'd managed to make a favorable impression. A silent note of gratitude to Lord Theodore fluttered through my mind.

"Edward," finally came the grandiose voice of the emperor. "Your expedition has borne fruit, as the reports have duly noted. Well done. And you, Lady Carolina Sanchez; your presence graces our court. Welcome to the Empire of Malcosias. You are our honored guest." With eyes of molten gold and a fiery crown of hair reminiscent of his son's, the emperor flashed me a genial smile.



The royal audience concluded without incident, and afterwards we transitioned to the dining hall, ready for a well-deserved meal.

The setting was idyllic, an outdoor patio, warmed by the sun's gentle rays, a

light spring breeze in the air. The food...oh, need I even mention the degree of its perfection? And yet, as I settled into my seat, ready to partake in the meal, the remnants of my earlier nervousness just wouldn't go away.

They couldn't—not when the root cause was still seated right before me. The emperor, wearing an affable smile, sat directly across from me at the table, with Prince Edward and the empress flanking him.

One simple utterance from His Majesty towards the end of our audience had ensured my presence at this table. *My lady, would you care to join us for a luncheon? We have a lot to talk about, and, well... You'll forgive me for wanting to dine with the future wife of our son, of course?*

There was but one conceivable response to an invitation to dine with the royal family of Malcosias, and that was a resolute, resounding, and unequivocal “yes.”

They were my family now, after all, and if I was to survive here, I could not afford to disappoint them. I'd been prepared to extend any courtesy, say whatever was required of me to guarantee a polite and peaceful coexistence, but this...unexpectedly intimate proximity was perhaps a hurdle too high, too soon.

First and foremost: *why were they staring at me so intently?* A trio of intense, imperial gazes were fixated on me as I nibbled away at my salad, doing my best to distract myself from their scrutiny. *Am I a spectacle to all of you?* I screamed in silent indignation, smothering the urge to say it out loud. Was this a form of initiation? Intimidation? Harassment? I wasn't sure what I'd done to deserve this treatment, but if I'd truly transgressed in some manner, I'd much sooner apologize and be out of their way!

In some ways, this ordeal felt harsher than any disdain I'd faced from Flora. My stomach didn't just grumble with the force of my apprehension; it roiled and heaved as I struggled to maintain composure and continue my largely unsuccessful attempt at eating. It felt nothing short of a miracle that any morsel of food managed to go down my throat and stay there!

Suddenly, Her Majesty spoke. “You've touched nothing but your salad, Lady Carolina. Do you prefer vegetables? Or perhaps the chicken is not to your

liking?" She swept a lock of her long, pastel-blue hair behind her ear, her gaze unyielding. She was utterly unreadable, and her beautiful emerald eyes evoked several emotions, the most notable of which was fear.

*Prince Edward is definitely her mother's son*, I couldn't help but think as I pasted on a strained smile. "Oh, heavens no, I'm not a picky eater. I just had a little too much to eat for breakfast is all," I managed to say in place of, *It's a tad hard to eat when I'm being watched this closely!*

"That's strange," came the voice of Prince Edward. "It seemed to me that you had less than your usual this morning." His brow furrowed, as if ruminating on my statement in genuine confusion.

*Of course*, I reminded myself with an internal groan. *How could I have forgotten how socially dense he is...?* I knew he wasn't trying to be malicious—he was merely oblivious—but at this moment, the two qualities might as well have been one and the same. "P-Perhaps to someone such as yourself, that might not have seemed a lot, but I assure you—"

"Really? A small piece of bread and a tiny portion of salad hardly seem sufficient by any measure."

"W-Well, you see—"

"Unless that's what passes for usual fare for a lady? If so, Mother—" Here he turned to the empress. "—you're quite the glutton, aren't you?"

"What?!" I sputtered. "No, no! I assure you Her Majesty is far from a glutton! That was not my intended meaning—not at all! I usually eat a lot more myself!"

Intentional or not, oblivious or not, Prince Edward was definitely doing his best to get me hanged for lèse-majesté! "Then why haven't you touched anything but your salad?" he pressed.

"Your Highness, I—"

"You claim you're not picky or small of appetite," he insisted. "So, why?"

"I..."

I felt like crying. He'd meticulously, if inadvertently, cut off every single avenue of escape I had. I felt like a fugitive, a murderer relentlessly hounded

and pursued by the authorities until cornered at the edge of a precipice. My eyes flitted around, grasping for any way to avoid taking the metaphorical leap, when I accidentally met the empress's gaze. "Carolina," she said gently, her voice carrying a note of understanding. "If we've given you any cause for discontent, feel free to voice your concerns. If the terrace isn't to your liking, we can dine inside."

"My mother's right, Carolina," chimed in Prince Edward. "If there's something bothering you, speak."

"Indeed," affirmed the emperor. "There should be no walls between us. We're to be family after all. Speak your mind."

That was unexpected. I'd been deceitful, had lied straight to their faces, and yet there was no trace of anger in their eyes. Far from it. They sought to understand, to accommodate. The emperor even acknowledged me as "family"...

The folly of my behavior hit me all at once. My guarded demeanor, my anxiety, my nerves—in hindsight, they all seemed ridiculous. These were good-hearted people; it was so obvious. It had always been so obvious. Right from the moment I'd stepped foot through their door, they'd welcomed me with open arms, intending to treat me as one of their own, and yet here I was, making a mockery of their goodwill.

A warmth blossomed in my chest, quelling the turmoil that roiled beneath. Taking a deep breath, I resolved to reciprocate their generosity with honesty.

I met the soft smile of the emperor, the stoic face of the empress, and Prince Edward's stony gaze by turns. He nodded slightly, as if once again whispering, "It'll be okay." Emboldened, I returned his nod and slowly spun my words into a thread of candor. "If I may be so truthful, the intimidating thought of dining with the imperial family of Malcosias took its toll upon my appetite." I paused there, swallowing the tremor in my voice as I searched for the right words. "And I must confess, the acute awareness of your intense scrutiny did little to ease my anxiety. I am deeply sorry for my deceitful excuses, and humbly I beseech your forgiveness."

I bowed my head low from my seated position. Silence ensued. When I dared

to lift my gaze, I found them exchanging puzzled glances among themselves. Another knot tightened inside my stomach. *Wh-What's happening?*

Prince Edward was the one to break the silence. "Were you both staring, Father, Mother?"

"Well, when one gains a daughter-in-law as lovely as Lady Carolina, how could one do anything but stare?" the emperor replied, his face breaking into a warm, unapologetic smile.

"I couldn't help myself," the empress agreed. "We've only sons, so I feel elated to have a daughter. And I was lost in the color of her eyes. That rich, red color is just like your and Eric's hair."

"Indeed," Prince Edward agreed. "Though I'd venture to say her eyes hold a deeper ruby-red shade than ours."

"The ruby holds a significant place in our country's heart," the emperor mused. "To wed a bride with such eyes, Edward—I can think of no greater blessing."

Prince Edward offered a soft murmur of agreement, and once again, all three gazes shifted back to me, perhaps to admire my eyes anew. Yet this time, the scrutiny only felt a little unnerving rather than outright uncomfortable. Was I hearing them right? These eyes of mine that had been called vile and offensive all my life, now likened to a cherished gemstone? The words, warm and unexpected, seemed to nurture a fragile bud of self-appreciation within my chest. For the first time I could remember, I began to feel slightly more comfortable in my own skin.

"It's quite serendipitous to have a child with eyes of a ruby hue marrying into our family," the empress remarked, her gaze still fixated on my face. "I believe it's clear what stone the engagement ring should bear. Pigeon blood—the illusion ruby—is my recommendation. It's quite the rare stone, but given the resources at our disposal, I'm sure it will be no problem to secure one."

"A pigeon blood ruby?" Prince Edward interjected. "Can we procure one in time?"

"I have my ways, don't you worry," the empress replied. "If I recall correctly,

the Kingdom of San specializes in them.”

“Indeed,” the emperor confirmed. “I have diplomatic ties with their sovereign. Obtaining one should be a simple matter.”

“Thank you, Father,” Prince Edward said with a nod of approval.

In no time at all, the conversation had transitioned from the hue of my eyes to the gemstone of my engagement ring. The atmosphere was so lively, so warm—so unlike the rigid mealtime scenes I had known in my youth. Observing their camaraderie, a wave of emotion engulfed me. To become a part of such a kind, welcoming family felt like a dream. It seemed as though I had exhausted all the luck from this lifetime and the next to find myself in this heartwarming tableau. I slightly narrowed my eyes, attempting to etch this tender scene into the canvas of my memory, a cherished moment I never wished to relinquish.



The luncheon extended into the early afternoon, eventually concluding when the emperor was summoned by his prime minister. Prince Edward escorted me to my guest room, affording me a moment’s respite at last.

As the prospective princess consort, I was entitled to an entire palace within the castle walls, but to maintain my temporary guise as an emissary, a solitary room would suffice for the interim. I couldn’t say I didn’t understand; eyebrows would indeed be raised if a mere “envoy” were to take up residence in a palatial abode. Lord Theodore had mentioned that the soonest I could move into the royal apartments would be in two weeks, after the announcement of our engagement. However, he’d also noted that there was scant precedent to determine the proper lodgings for affianced princesses, hinting at a more probable delay of at least a month. Still, this arrangement was hardly disagreeable. I was not royalty, so merely residing within the royal castle was an incredible privilege—or a valuable learning experience, I should say.

*I ought to wholeheartedly revel in such an “experience,”* I considered in jest, easing myself into the cushions of a nearby lavish sofa. But just as I had sunk into its plushness, a rap on the door broke the silence. “May I enter, Lady Carolina?” inquired a voice from the other side.

The voice was unfamiliar, its pitch vaguely feminine. Suppressing a flicker of

annoyance at having to compose myself yet again, I rose gracefully. “Yes, you may enter.”

“Excuse us.”

“Scuuuse us!”

The door swung open to reveal not only the apparent owner of the initial feminine voice, but an unfamiliar man as well.





I eyed them both warily. The woman to the right, given her modest attire, appeared to be a handmaiden, and one of noble birth at that. The tiny subtleties in her gestures and the poise in her posture were telltale signs of someone who'd been raised since birth to be in the company of lords and ladies. Beside her stood a figure that bore the unmistakable swagger of a knight or a guard—the sword at his hip confirmed as much. Weaponry was not allowed on the castle grounds unless in the possession of one of the two aforementioned parties. And given the man's somewhat uncouth manner of excusing himself just now, I was inclined to peg him as a knight. The guards would never be so impolite.

The juxtaposition before me was stark—the handmaiden, prim and proper, and the knight, rugged and unrefined. A wry smile tugged at my lips as I took in the contrast.

The handmaiden spoke first. "Lady Carolina Sanchez, it is my honor to serve Your Ladyship starting today. My name is Marisa Kissinger. I am privy to the truth of your engagement to Prince Edward, and I am at your full service."

Following this succinct introduction, she bowed gracefully, achieving a precise ninety-degree angle.

Her name stirred a distant memory. The Kissingers hailed from a comital lineage, with Marisa being their third-born daughter. Rumor had it that she was a contender for consideration as the most beautiful woman in the empire, and those whispers painted quite the picture: her black hair was a cascade of midnight, a net to ensnare the gazes of men; her deep blue eyes were like the boundless ocean, drawing all who dared look into them into their abyssal depths. Her skin was as white as fresh snow, and her lips bore the soft hue of spring blossoms. She carried an aura of sensuality, yet maintained a veil of purity, a paradox that gripped the men of the empire in a delicate choke hold.

When I had first heard such tales, I had dismissed them as fanciful exaggerations. Yet now, beholding her visage in person, I found myself reevaluating my assumptions. Her beauty was almost ethereal, and I could see why her fame extended beyond the borders of the empire.

But for someone like her to be serving as a handmaiden... I couldn't fathom

how that had come to pass. Surely, a woman as lovely as Marisa had no shortage of suitors? Brushing this maelstrom of thought aside, I returned her greeting. “A pleasure, Marisa. It heartens me to have a handmaiden acquainted with the truth of my situation. Are you the only handmaiden assigned to me, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I advanced a step and extended my hand for a handshake. Her eyes flickered briefly, then resumed their careful blankness. With barely a pause, she clasped my proffered hand. “The honor is entirely mine, my lady. And to address your query, yes. For the moment, I am the single handmaiden assigned solely to Your Ladyship. There might be other maids attending you sporadically, but I’ll be your constant companion for now. The upcoming Fete has stretched our staff thin, I’m afraid. Additionally, it seems wise to keep the circle privy to your engagement small.”

“I see,” I replied, conjuring up a warm smile. “Then I shall try not to impose unduly upon you. Managing someone single-handedly can’t be easy, so do let me know if I’m asking too much of you.”

I gently squeezed her hand before releasing it. Reflecting on what I’d gone through in the past week, I’d felt compelled to tell Marisa to pace herself. Bereft of their presence for the first time, I’d come to learn just how reliant I was on my maids. Their unflagging support had been my bedrock, and without them, even trivialities such as changing outfits had become untenable ordeals.

Despite the plain sincerity in my words, Marisa’s eyes widened, and to my astonishment, the knight next to her erupted into hearty, bellowing laughter. “Did I hear that right?” he managed between roars of amusement. “I gotta thank the commander for assigning me to you later, because that was gold, pure gold! I mean, you’re the *commander’s fiancée*! Here I was, imagining what kind of high and mighty noblewoman I’d been charged with safeguarding, and the first thing I hear from you is *that*? Oh man, never have I been so wrong. There’s a heart of gold under that noble exterior, isn’t there?”

“Um...” was all I managed to utter, slightly taken aback, yet oddly warmed by his exuberance.

His scruffy lime-colored hair bounced as he continued to laugh, the corners of

his eyes crinkling in amusement, his irises glowing with the warm hues of the setting sun. His features weren't unrefined, but his unrestrained hollering gave him a wild, untamed edge. It was the kind of wide-mouthed, unabashed laughter that would have the nobility clutching their pearls and tutting in disdain. For some reason, however, I found it not unpleasant at all. Perhaps it was his childlike abandon that I found so endearing.

Once he'd finally managed to contain his amusement, he raised his head and wiped the tears from his eyes. "The name's Owen, Owen Klein. Yup, you heard that right. I'm a baron's son. I know what you're thinking, I know. Like, 'This guy? Really?' Commander assigned me as your personal escort, so here I am. Thrilled."

The young man, now introduced as Owen Klein, flashed a bright, genuine smile and extended a hand my way.



That night, I drifted into a peaceful slumber, comforted by the knowledge that I'd successfully navigated my introduction into Malcosias as an envoy. The next morning, I was up with the lark, making my way towards the lecture hall for my scheduled lessons on imperial manners and customs. Yet, upon arrival, it wasn't the face of the instructor that greeted me, but instead the poised and dignified presence of the empress.

I looked around—perhaps I'd missed the instructor—but no one else was here. There were only five minutes left until the lessons were scheduled to start, and the instructor wasn't here? How unprofessional.

Unless...

I shot a glance at Marisa, who'd accompanied me here. She responded with a terse and somewhat apologetic nod, as if whispering a silent, *I'm sorry*.

I glanced back at the icy empress. A soft smile adorned her lips, her eyes twinkling with playful cunning, as though I were a helpless butterfly ensnared in her delicate web.

With a silent acceptance, I connected the dots and curtsied tentatively. "Good morning, Your Majesty. Would I be mistaken in assuming that Your Eminence

will be my instructor today?”

Her eyes sparkled with unspoken mirth as she regarded me. “You would be most correct. I will be your instructor today. In fact, I made it my business to serve as such. You see, I’ve always dreamed of teaching a daughter—it’s such a shame we’ve only sons. When the news reached me that you were to become a part of our family, my heart soared. A daughter-in-law at last.”

Her words stirred something profound in me, and I pondered whether or not she truly grasped the impact of her statement. Did she understand the depth of acceptance she was bestowing upon me? Of what it meant to be welcomed into her arms so readily? The way she reached into the untouched corners of my soul with such effortless ease mirrored the automatic kindness I had seen in Prince Edward.

Compelled by her sincerity, I sought to reciprocate with heartfelt sentiments of my own. Waving away the flutter of embarrassment, I took a soft, trembling breath and let my thoughts flow. “I, too, am profoundly grateful to be joining such a loving family—to gain such a loving mother—Your Majesty. To be personally tutored by Your Eminence is an honor beyond words. I can only hope to meet your expectations.”

A subtle shift in her gaze preceded her step towards me. With each stride, I perceived a faint blush tinting her cheeks. Her beauty intensified up close, and it left me in awe. Her mere presence emanated an aura of grace and refinement, the epitome of the very concept of “empress.”

“The honor is entirely mine, Carolina,” she replied gently. “I must confess, this marks my inaugural venture into teaching, so it will be a journey of discovery for both of us.” Her face maintained a serene impassiveness, yet a mischievous glint shone through. Marisa presented the empress with a tome titled *Imperial Manner & Etiquette: An Introduction*. My future mother-in-law began to leaf through the pages nonchalantly, casting a glance at the ornate clock adorning the wall. “We’re a tad early, but shall we get started?”

“Yes, ma’am!” I responded with fervor.

The prospect of being personally tutored by Her Majesty filled me with exhilaration. I inhaled a deep breath, steeling myself to embrace this unique

opportunity with every fiber of my being—utterly oblivious to the fact that the stringent pedagogy of the empress would soon have me teetering on the verge of tears.



Over the course of the ensuing lesson, I immersed myself in the world of imperial etiquette and customs. From the most basic of greetings and courtesies to the most nuanced gestures and choreography of social functions, I tried to absorb it all, etching every detail into my mind until it all blended into one single amorphous blur.

While the tenets of imperial decorum largely mirrored the customs of Celestia, making the transition somewhat simpler for me, the sheer breadth of material was overwhelming. I'd have to review it all back in my room to cement my understanding. *Alas, there goes all my free time*, I bemoaned internally. I was no genius like Flora. For those of us with ordinary minds, there was no substitute for hard work and dedication.

I couldn't hide my fatigue, and it didn't escape Her Majesty's notice. "You've done well, Carolina. Though I fear I may have covered too much, too fast," she said with a hint of concern (or at least as much concern as her icy visage could express). "You were just such an *apt pupil*, I got ahead of myself."

I snapped out of my tired stupor. An apt pupil? Me? The Sanchez family disgrace?

No matter what effort I had put forth in the past, it had always circled back to the same damning comparisons: "*Flora can do better.*" "*That's good, I suppose, but there's one of House Sanchez who can effortlessly surpass this.*" Even when praise did come my way, it carried the backhanded sting of Flora's name. "*Good job! You're almost at Flora's level!*" Each word of comparison, perhaps said in earnest and meant to spur me on, only served to build a wall between my efforts and the recognition I craved.

Why was I forever doomed to stand in Flora's shadow? I yearned for nothing more than to be seen for myself, to be told that I was enough just as I was. This curse, this relentless comparison, had become my unshakable companion. And yet, in this quiet room, with a few simple words, Her Majesty had casually

severed the chains that had bound me to the unending and unspoken competition between my sister and myself.

A joy, raw and untamed, rose up within me. I was certain no one could fathom the storm of emotions swirling in my soul. Clasp my hand over my heart, as if to keep it from dancing out of my chest with joy, I whispered, “An apt pupil? Me?”

It was a selfish quest for reassurance, a detour from the lesson at hand, borne from a desire to once again hear the affirmation I’d craved for so long. Nevertheless, I couldn’t stop myself from voicing the silent plea that had lingered within me for years.

*You are enough.*

How I longed to hear those words. I didn’t seek perfection, nor a place atop some distant pedestal. I knew I could never rival Flora’s brilliance, nor did I possess a singular talent to boast of. Yet for all that, I wanted to believe in my intrinsic worth. Raised with the education befitting a lady, I had earned grades that were respectable, if not slightly above average. I was no prodigy, but the term “disgrace” objectively seemed far too harsh a label, clinging to me merely because of the lineage I was born into—I was well aware of that. I wasn’t flawless, exceptional, or enormously talented, but I *was* a Sanchez, and that alone deemed me a disgrace by comparison.

It wasn’t a matter of regretting my birth as a duke’s daughter, but rather a lament for the towering expectations imposed upon me, ideals that loomed like distant, unattainable peaks. A sharp pang of sadness pierced through my chest at the thought that perhaps, in another life, born to another house, my modest efforts might have garnered praise.

It might have been unjust to burden the empress with my insecurities, to seek solace for a pain she hadn’t caused. Yet at that moment, I didn’t care. I simply wanted someone—anyone—to see me, to accept me as I was. As I gazed up at Her Majesty, my expression conveyed the silent plea of a lost child seeking validation. Her eyes unwaveringly met mine. I couldn’t discern what emotion swirled behind that sharp, emerald-tinted gaze, only that it was something warm, a tenderness that seemed to harbor everything I’d ever longed for.

“I’d certainly say so.” Her voice finally broke the silence, carrying a gentle note of affirmation. “A sign of your intelligence, I’m sure. You’re quick to remember and eager to learn as well,” she mused. “Yes, no doubt about it. You are an exceptional student.”

She paused and gently placed an icy hand to my cheek, tempering the tumultuous warmth that surged within. “You are now my cherished daughter, Carolina. Know that I hold immense pride in calling you one of my own.”

*Oh, I thought, her words echoing in the void of my disbelief. She certainly affirmed a hell of a lot more than my worth.*

For a fleeting moment, it felt as if time stood still. Then, the emotion flooded me all at once. *How cruel you are, dear empress, my heart murmured. How am I supposed to stop the inevitable rush of tears when you utter such endearments as “cherished daughter”?*

The walls around my heart trembled, but Her Majesty’s siege was far from over. “Carolina, there’s no merit in measuring your worth against others. You are uniquely you, and that is a distinction no one else can claim. That’s the essence I see and cherish. Thus, I ask that you do not allow fear or a sense of unworthiness to plague you any longer. We are to be family, and I want you to feel like you belong. I would like you to feel comfortable asking for what you deserve and nothing less. Should you have any concerns, come to me, anytime. I will always extend my hand to aid you.” She uttered all of this with a quiet but unyielding sincerity.

Her words resounded with an accuracy bordering on the uncanny, as if she knew of every silent battle I’d fought with my sister’s shadow, every cruel whisper that had trailed my steps back in my homeland, and every concealed bruise on my self-esteem. With a few tender words, she’d grabbed the source of my insecurities by the scruff of its neck and rendered it powerless in the face of her acceptance.

Her pale, soft thumb caressed my cheek. I felt so much warmth, so much love from that gesture that for a split second, I almost couldn’t hold my emotions back.

*It’s really okay for me to ask for more? To be vulnerable? To no longer have to*

*bear the weight of my struggle alone?*

A solitary tear finally broke through my defenses. I felt it meander, ever so slowly, down my cheek. Through the veil of shimmering moisture, my gaze met the tender emerald scrutiny of the cerulean-haired empress. She extended her hand with a fearless grace.

Gently placing my hand atop hers, emotion choked my voice as I mustered the strength to whisper, “Thank you—so very much,” before the tears took hold and I could stem their tide no longer.



That was the day I cried like a small child before the empress. After the lesson, I trudged back to my room, my head hung low in shame.

As I reflected on this, my most unsightly lapse to date, I reached out to automatically convey a sandwich to my lips. Biting off a corner of my lunch, a sigh rippled from my core. *Emotions were running high, yes, but to cry in front of the empress?!* I screamed internally. What utterly unseemly behavior for a sixteen-year-old girl. Never mind the empress’s assurances that it was all right; it should’ve never escalated to that point in the first place.

*I don’t even know how I’ll face her again...* I lamented, forcing down a reluctant bite. Just as the gloom began to nestle deep within me, Marisa reappeared. “Sorry to disturb you during your meal, Your Ladyship,” she said, her steps pattering softly as she approached. “There’s been a change in the schedule. Your afternoon lectures have been relocated to the Pyreborn headquarters. Owen will accompany you and provide a tour.”

“The Pyreborn headquarters? Yes, that will not be a problem. Wait, the *Pyreborn headquarters?!?*”

“Yes. Lord Theodore requested the change,” Marisa explained. “He wished to get some work done while conducting the lecture.”

*He wants to teach and work at the same time?! Was that even possible? No, no, that’s not the problem here!* Why had the plans changed—and so suddenly at that? What had happened so suddenly that necessitated a venue change from my rooms to the knights’ headquarters?



Despite the whirlwind of questions and grumblings swirling in my mind, I realized I had no right to complain when I was the one lucky enough to be taught. I decided to quash such ignoble thoughts and accept the change in plans without complaint.



After lunch, I traveled to the Pyreborn headquarters with Owen as my dutiful escort. The journey itself was utterly unremarkable—just a simple walk across the royal castle grounds. The Pyreborn, like all of the empire’s esteemed chivalric orders, had their base of operations on the premises. Perhaps this way they would be always at the ready should an urgent call to arms arise.

As we strolled along the connecting colonnade to our destination, my curiosity caused me to survey our surroundings with eager eyes. The headquarters, stark in its austerity, stood in contrast to the grandiose expectations one might hold for a knightly order of such renown.

My inquisitive gaze did not go unnoticed by Owen, who let out another of his hearty laughs. “That bad, huh?” he chortled. “Sorry to disappoint, but this is it. If you were expecting something more glamorous, then unluckily for you, our commander isn’t that kind of guy. But if it’s finery you’re after, perhaps I could interest Your Ladyship in another knightly order?” he added in a mocking lilt.

I quietly nodded in acknowledgment at Owen’s unorthodox explanation. Such plainness did indeed feel befitting of Prince Edward. Even as we crossed into the entry hall, the part of the building meant to leave a first impression upon guests from both within the castle and without, not a vase nor a painting could be found adorning its barren interior. “This is Prince Edward’s doing? I can’t say I’m surprised,” I murmured.

“Right?” Owen quipped with a quick grin. “That man cares so little for appearances you almost gotta respect him for it. ‘No level of opulence will change the fact that we are knights. What is required of us is strength, and strength alone.’” His impression of the prince’s voice was crude but immediately recognizable. “That’s a direct quote, by the way; says it every time the topic of renovation is brought up. Pretty odd *for a royal*, don’t you think?”

I blinked in surprise. *For a royal...?* Setting aside the fact that Owen clearly

meant this as a compliment, taken out of context, that could be construed as quite the dangerous thing to say. While I had no objections to his casual manner of speaking, this was the royal castle. Here, even a trivial misstep could be one's last. I felt compelled to offer a gentle corrective before his words could truly land him in hot water. "Be mindful of your words, Owen. A scornful dismissal of something as being 'for a royal' is not an appropriate statement for you to make. What if someone heard you just now?"

To my surprise, my caution was met not with gratitude, but instead with a petulant look of defiance. "Do you really think I'd just go around saying that anywhere? Come on, this is Pyreborn HQ. No one here's gonna get their knickers in a twist over a few words."

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and if this common wisdom was indeed true, then I feared I may have just inadvertently laid another brick on that infamous path. Furrows etched into his brow, Owen raked an irritated hand through his tousled, lime-green locks. It was evident—he was not happy. Though upon further reflection, perhaps I too would be annoyed if some newcomer who'd never once stepped foot into the castle's hallowed halls presumed to offer their unsolicited counsel.

I sighed inwardly. Owen had been here much longer than me after all. I supposed that since everything had gone so well for me since coming to the castle, perhaps I'd felt emboldened to act beyond my station. "My apologies, Owen. It wasn't my place to scold you in such a manner. But perhaps a modicum of discretion would be prudent, even here? You do entertain guests from time to time, do you not?"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Can we move on already?"

His response was clipped, still defensive in the face of my apology. *Well, at least nobody can blame me for not trying*, I grumbled in my mind. I let out a sigh, audible this time, and cast a glance at a nearby clock—scant time remained until my scheduled lesson. Seeking to move past the awkwardness, I addressed Owen again. "Would you kindly show me to the meeting room? We haven't much time left."

"Roger that. Let's signal a charge to the meeting room at once," Owen said,

brightening up again after the change in topic. “If there’s one thing the vice commander hates, it’s people who are late.”

“Thank you,” I said, flashing a conciliatory smile at him.

He gestured towards the west corridor, voiced a cheerful “this way,” and set off with a decisive stride, not a trace of his earlier annoyance in his features.

This man... I couldn’t tell if he was too easygoing or an unmanageable handful...



“This is it. Just knock. Vice Commander should already be inside.”

“Thank you, Owen.”

I peered up at the stark white door before me. “Meeting Room One,” the simple placard announced. I swallowed, made a tentative fist, and rapped lightly, thrice.

“Carolina Sanchez, here for her lesson,” I called through the wood.

Lord Theodore’s familiar tenor, muffled yet distinct, beckoned from within. “Ah, is it that time already? Please, come in.”

I couldn’t help but think his voice lacked its usual vigor. Fatigue, perhaps? It was plausible—he had just returned from an expedition after all. There must’ve been mountains of paperwork for him to slog through, not to mention the ongoing preparations for the upcoming Fete. Yes...even before factoring in the need to tutor me, he was likely overworked beyond words.

A twinge of guilt for yet again adding to someone’s burden tugged at me, but I shelved the feeling in the bookcase of my insecurities and pushed open the door. As Owen and I entered the chamber, I could see that there stood Lord Theodore, flanked by a long, wooden desk and a blackboard, a piece of chalk dangling between his limp fingers. There was no point mincing words: he looked like he was about to collapse at any moment. Dark, sunken circles underscored his eyes in a shade so appalling that he must’ve not gotten a wink of sleep since we’d returned to the castle. I had no idea how far this man could push himself, but surely he’d not only reached that limit, but gone well beyond!

As my eyes flitted between the mountains of paper on the desk and the shell of a man responsible for them, the reason he'd requested the change in venue became clear: he couldn't even spare the time to travel between here and my room. That was the true extent of his busyness.

"Good afternoon, Lord Theodore," I said gently. "It looks like you have quite a lot on your plate. Are you holding up all right?"

"Thank you for coming over on such short notice, my lady. And I appreciate your concern. Yes, I suppose I have been rather busy, but I've been through much worse—until I approach four days and four nights without sleep, you needn't concern yourself with me."

*Four days and four nights?! Just how much sleep was this man sacrificing on a day-to-day basis? I'd been joking to myself about how he'd looked ready to collapse, but perhaps I hadn't been so far off from the truth. Please take better care of yourself, I implored him in my mind. Your words don't sound very convincing when you look like that...*

Abruptly, Lord Theodore clapped his hands together—a signal to move on. "It's almost time, so why don't we get started?" he said briskly. "And don't mind His Highness; he'll be attending these lectures as well."

"Of course, His Highness is always welcome to— Wait, Prince Edward?!" My voice lost itself in an undignified squeak as he nonchalantly delivered this news. I could only stare at the blond man's distractingly beautiful face, frozen, mind reeling.

*He did just say Prince Edward was here, didn't he?! I didn't mishear, did I?! And this was the first time I was hearing of it, yes?! Why had he left that information out in the message that had summoned me to this place? As a matter of fact, that was exactly the kind of critical information with which one ought to preface the rest of the message!*

Slowly, I turned around, and to my astonishment, there sat Prince Edward, a few strides away from the long table.

*How did I not catch sight of him at once? How did someone with hair and build as conspicuous as his escape my notice? Does he have the ability to make himself imperceptible?*

Silly question after silly question skittered through my mind, yet each one paled in importance to the realization that had just struck me—I'd just ignored a member of the imperial family! I had to address him at once and apologize for the slight.

Straightening my posture, I cleared my throat with deliberate emphasis. Gracefully lifting the hem of my skirt, I executed a practiced curtsy. "Your Imperial Highness, please forgive my earlier inattention. I, Carolina Sanchez, am deeply honored by your esteemed presence."

Though I assumed that this most formal introduction-cum-apology would exonerate me completely, Prince Edward didn't seem to care for it in the slightest. "It's fine, really. I'm at fault as much as you are for springing this on you," his deep baritone rumbled. "More importantly, come—sit, so we can begin our session," he added, lightly patting the seat right next to him as if offering it to me. *There are plenty of available seats, so why that one...?* I wondered, only a little panicked.

His graciousness (and choice of seating) was unexpected, but I wasn't about to question a royal indulgence. "Of course, Your Highness," I managed to reply. I left Owen standing against the back wall and made my way over to Prince Edward. Settling down with an elegant fluidity, I was mindful of and took great care to smooth out any wrinkles that marred my skirts in the motion. Then I prepared my materials, flipping open the provided textbook and taking my pen in hand.

But something was wrong. All the while I did this, I couldn't help but feel Prince Edward's piercing gaze. He was staring at me. What for? *This is a little distracting, to say the least...* But then again, compared to yesterday's family luncheon, this was practically a walk in the park.

I stole a quick glance his way. He hadn't even bothered to arrange his own materials. He just sat there, his attention fixed on my profile. I tightened my grip on my pen, as if that would somehow minimize the alarming weight of his gaze, but nothing I did eased the relentless pressure of his regard. I even glanced at Lord Theodore with a silent plea for help, but he ignored me. "Now, if you would open your textbooks to page thirteen, we'll start with the fundamentals of imperial history and work our way up," he said instead,

indifferently soldiering on in the face of my awkwardness.

Following his direction, I flipped to the indicated page as he turned around and began writing on the blackboard. I briefly skimmed the paragraphs before me, noting the overview of Malcosian history as well as the celebrated exploits of their first emperor.

Turning to face us once again, Lord Teodore began his lecture. “After the empire was founded roughly seven hundred years ago, it rapidly expanded its borders through war and conquest. The architect of these triumphs was none other than the first emperor himself, a leader who often personally wielded his power on the front lines, securing victory after victory. His prowess earned him the title ‘the Grand Sage,’ and he is revered as such to this day. Now, here’s a question for you, my lady: Why have all members of the imperial family adopted the middle name ‘Ruby’?”

“Oh,” I stammered back. “Do you mean to ask me to identify the significance behind their middle name?”

“Precisely,” he affirmed.

Panic fluttered within me; I hadn’t been expecting to be cast into the crucible of interrogation so quickly. I fumbled for a response, searching his face as if I might discover the answer written there. Yet instead of salvation, all I found was his knowing smirk, a cruel shove that threatened to drown me in the cold, dark waters of my own ignorance.

I didn’t want to answer the question. Truth be told, I had no idea *how* to answer it, but I knew an admission of uncertainty wouldn’t be enough to placate Lord Teodore. I further racked my brain, trying to come up with a plausible guess. Every descendant of the Malcosian imperial family line bore the name “Ruby,” a custom seemingly rooted in the first emperor’s legacy—a connection to which Lord Teodore had hinted—but as to the precise nature of this link, I was at a complete loss...

As I sighed in frustration, my eyes wandering and fruitlessly attempting to alight on some clue, a gentle tap on the shoulder distracted me. “Here.”

It was the soft whisper of Prince Edward’s voice; he’d slid a note towards me. I looked down—the scrawl was barely legible. (How typical of a man!) I

squinted, and I just managed to make out the words... “The stone of victory...?” I hazarded.

“‘Stone of Victory’ is partially correct,” Lord Teodore responded, seemingly unperturbed by the little scheme that had unfolded before his very eyes. “The ruby does bear that moniker within the empire, but there is more to the story. Would you like to go for full marks?”

I conceded defeat. “No, sorry, I don’t know.”

“Then I shall explain it to you,” he said, offering me a glib smile. “The ruby’s importance reaches back to the first emperor and his mother. She once gifted him a pendant set with a ruby, a pendant which he held very dear, never forsaking it—not even in the heat of battle. This gem became his talisman, one he believed was the source of his numerous victories. And his subjects, witnessing his devotion—”

“They began to venerate the stone in imitation of the emperor?” I ventured, cutting him off.

“Yes, exactly,” he said, his smile broadening as he offered a nod and even a silent round of applause. His approval felt only *slightly* patronizing, but I pushed that discouraging thought away, driven by a greater urge to know more.

“The ruby is held in high regard within the empire—that’s been made abundantly clear, but how does it relate to the imperial middle name?” I pressed.

Lord Teodore’s eyes twinkled behind his glasses. “I was just getting to that,” he assured me before launching into another explanation. “Simply put, it’s tradition—a practice preserved from the time of the first emperor until now.”

“Tradition...” I echoed. “Do you mean to say it all started when the first emperor named his children ‘Ruby’?”

“Indeed,” he replied. “The first emperor bestowed the middle name ‘Ruby’ upon his progeny in the hope that they’d inherit the stone’s blessings. His children would go on to do the same thing, and so would their children, and so on and so forth until voilà—a tradition was born.”

“I see...” I fell into deep thought. *The blessing of the ruby...* To a foreigner like

me, the ruby was just like any other precious stone, but in Malcosias, it obviously transcended mere adornment—it was a sacred symbol. “Does its significance extend to ceremonial uses, say perhaps in gift giving?”

“Not quite,” Lord Teodore corrected thoughtfully. “Ceremonial? Most certainly. As a common gift? I wouldn’t say so. Rubies are typically only given to husbands and sons marching off to war to wish them victory and safe return—well, by the rich, anyway. You’ll also find them set in *wedding rings* to convey something like ‘till death do us part.’”

Lord Teodore had placed a peculiar emphasis on the words “wedding ring,” to which Prince Edward responded with a subtle nod. I was reminded of the similar discussion that had taken place at the dining table yesterday. While the choice of ring for my impending arranged marriage was of small importance to me, I now had a greater understanding of why a ruby would perhaps be the most suitable choice as a representation of our unified bond.

Lost in what I considered to be idle thoughts, I didn’t think much of it. Yet, from the edge of my awareness, I caught Prince Edward quietly murmuring to himself.

“Yes, I think a ruby should do just fine after all.”



“That’s enough about imperial history; let’s move on to magical studies, shall we?”

After an intensive hour delving into the depths of the empire’s history, Lord Teodore appeared ready for a shift in subject. With a decisive sweep of his eraser, he wiped clean a mural’s worth of exhaustive lecture notes, preparing the blackboard for the next segment of our studies. I drew out a clean sheet of notepaper as well, my gaze lingering on the stack of freshly inked notes that already sat before me.

Just as the annals of Celestian history prominently featured the ancestors of House Sanchez, the Malcosian records were replete with tales of the imperial lineage, particularly the exploits of past emperors. Although one might suspect a slant of political bias in these historical accounts, a cursory review of the many impressive feats undertaken by the emperors easily dispelled such notions. The



extensive documentation was merited through their indisputable feats of valor and strength, not merely by virtue of their title alone.

The familiar rasp of chalk on slate cut through my musings, drawing my attention back to Lord Theodore. “Given my unfamiliarity with Celestia’s magical traditions and the caliber of their education on the matter, I trust you’ll bear with me as we begin with the basics of magical theory,” he said as a preface. “First, the term ‘magic’ is defined as the supernatural manipulation of arcane energies. These energies manifest in various aspects, not all of which our bodies are happily able to channel. Should one attempt to dabble in magic outside of their natural affinities, the internal arcane energies will strongly reject the undertaking, which will lead to a vehement disruption of one’s internal arcane balance.”

I noted this new information both in my ledger and in my mind. I was aware of the prohibition against straying from one’s magical affinity, but the underlying reasons for it had eluded me until now. Malcosias’s dedication to magical studies already seemed impressively rigorous.

Lord Theodore quickly readjusted his spectacles before proceeding. “Next, let’s briefly touch upon the emergence and determination of magical abilities. My lady, you must be aware that in your own homeland, as well as in neighboring lands, it is believed that one’s magical affinities are innate—that is to say, inherent and immutable from birth. That is, however, a misconception.”

“What?!” I couldn’t help but gasp. “It is?”

“Yes,” he affirmed, dryly amused by my reaction. “The magical affinity of children is fickle and unstable. It might appear, it might depart, it might even shift entirely. While it must be said that there is scant precedent for the former—that is, for one to suddenly altogether lose or gain magical ability—the fluctuation of the affinities themselves is a relatively normal occurrence. It is not entirely unusual for an individual aligned with fire magic to wake up one day and find a connection to holy magic instead.”

A sense of wonder washed over me as I processed his words. “I...I didn’t know that,” I muttered, my thoughts racing. The revelation that magical potential might not be a fixed attribute from birth challenged my entire conceptual

framework of magic. That being said, the more I considered it, the less controversial it seemed. I had heard of cases of Celestians suddenly losing their ability to use certain kinds of magic. The Academy had taught us that such confiscation of power was divine retribution for provoking the wrath of God, but could it instead be chalked up to the volatile nature of magical affinity itself?

“However, know that this period of instability tends to resolve itself around fourteen to sixteen years of age,” Lord Teodore went on. “By then, one’s magical potential and affinity are believed to be largely fixed. This is the so-called ‘stable period,’ and ever since the empire came to recognize this key stage in magical development, imperial citizens have been mandated to test their magical affinities twice in their lives—once at age five, and again at sixteen. The results of these tests are treated as confidential, kept under lock and key by the state. After all, one’s magical potential is considered sensitive personal information. Access to such data is strictly limited to prevent misuse and public outcry.”

Prince Edward interjected briefly. “I believe that access to those records is generally restricted to the royal family and heads of various magical institutions.”

“Correct,” Lord Teodore acknowledged. “Though if I were to be pedantic, I’d point out that in exceptional cases, such as in a high-profile magical crime investigation, a request for these records might be made by the principal detective. However, given the infrequency with which such requests are approved, I seriously doubt anything short of a potential breakthrough in the cold case of the century would warrant such an exception.”

I marveled at the empire’s rigorous approach to magical privacy—mandatory testing was one thing, but treating the results as sensitive personal information was quite another. It emphasized how deeply ingrained magic was in the culture of Malcosias, as well as the sophistication of the social practices surrounding it. Back home, nothing as esoteric as the knowledge of magic held any place in daily life; rarely did the concept ever seep into common discourse (the odd political spectacle notwithstanding). Here, however, I suspected that the educational emphasis on magic presented a unique set of challenges for the

governing authorities.

Lord Teodore continued, “When this system was first introduced, it was met with skepticism, with citizens fearing potential abuses of these reports. The tight control we exercise over this information occasionally veers into the realm of the ludicrous, but it was our answer to those concerns. The current system, though more relaxed than it once was, still reflects the caution of those times.”

He let out a deep sigh. His tone conveyed a hint of frustration with what was clearly a perpetual struggle, as if the delicate balance between security and civil liberty was a perpetual burden that weighed on his mind. I quietly processed the influx of new information as I observed his troubled expression.

We’d barely progressed past the lecture’s preamble, and yet I’d already learned so much. I’d known that Malcosias was progressive in its approach to magic, but absolutely not to this degree... I still couldn’t wrap my head around what I’d just learned about magical instability and the volatile nature of magical affinity. Though I had heard of cases of the latter, the former was completely foreign to me. To acquire magical ability later in life—was that even possible?

As that thought skipped across my mind, it inadvertently escaped my lips. “Perhaps...I could harness magic too, someday?” I muttered, more to myself than anyone else. I knew the possibility was low—near zero, perhaps—but still, if there was even the slightest chance, I wanted to know for certain.

At this, the beautiful blond man opposite me offered a smile, tinged with a wry edge I hadn’t seen before. “While it is exceedingly rare for an individual to acquire magical abilities later in life, it is not entirely without precedent. Perhaps we could arrange for your testing after everything has calmed down a bit—after the Fete and your wedding.” He locked eyes with me, and his tone grew stern. “However, I must emphasize—such cases are extremely uncommon. It would be prudent not to harbor too much hope, my lady.”

His warning was uncharacteristically blunt, perhaps meant to steel me against the potential disappointment of being found to be nonmagical again. *While I appreciate the thought, Lord Teodore, I said inwardly, I’ll be fine. I know better than anyone to not expect too much from myself.*

Time and again, I’d raised my hopes for myself only to have them shattered;

over and over, I'd believed in my own abilities only for my confidence to be crushed by the weight of reality. But even so, this slim possibility, this tiny beacon of hope, dangled before me, called to me.

I resolved to embrace it—for one last time. It was to be my final struggle against my mediocrity, a last-ditch effort in my stubborn quest in search of something more. And should it prove fruitless, then I would relinquish the pursuit of being remarkable once and for all.

"Your counsel is most valuable, Lord Teodore," I said, forcing a calm smile to my lips, "I shall consider it with the gravity it deserves."

Acknowledging his kind intentions, I gently banked the smoldering flame of expectation within me, banishing it to the inner recesses of my heart.



The rest of the lecture on magical theory was utterly fascinating. I found myself wholly absorbed, and before I even knew it, the lecture drew to a close. It was the conclusion to a thoroughly illuminating afternoon. The material presented was largely unfamiliar yet undeniably intriguing—I hadn't found myself disengaged for even a moment.

As I put away my materials, Lord Teodore's words still fresh in my mind, the man himself addressed me without lifting his gaze from the documents through which he was leafing. "That reminds me. My lady, we've yet to brief you on our encounter with the bandits. Would you like to hear the report?" Only then did he look up, casually brandishing the stack of papers in his hand in invitation.

I hesitated, unsure of the propriety of my inclusion in such a briefing. After all, while I had been present, I had merely been a civilian under their protection. I must have stayed silent for a beat too long, because Prince Edward spoke up. "Let her hear it. She was directly involved—she has a right to know."

"Then know she shall," Lord Teodore said, giving his liege lord a nod and adjusting his spectacles. "Let's start with a dossier on the bandits who ambushed us. They were a contingent that had, for that night, claimed the region surrounding our encampment as their base of operations. They were your typical highwaymen, eking out a living by waylaying passing travelers and carriages and relieving them of their valuables. In that context, a detachment of

knights seems an odd choice of target. It seems, however, that desperation rather than stupidity fueled their assault on us. You see, the recent souring of ties between Malcosias and Celestia has resulted in a marked decline in traffic—merchant and noble alike—through those parts. With their usual prey thinning out, they were undoubtedly feeling the pinch in their coffers, which compelled them to assail us despite knowing we were a formidable and well-armed company.”

“Normally, bandits would never attack an armed convoy of knights,” Prince Edward agreed. “No matter how well organized they might be, it would never be worth the risk. The fact that they did so regardless speaks to just how dire their situation must have been.”

I was wholly taken aback. “I hadn’t considered that even bandits might feel the pinch from the strained ties between our countries...” I was aware that trade had suffered due to the escalating tensions, but the idea that the ripple effects might reach even common thieves had never crossed my mind—not that the revelation elicited any sympathy from me towards those who made their living preying on others.

As a matter of fact, if a life of crime no longer seemed to be working for them, surely an attempt to make an honest living would have been the more sensible route compared to ambushing a group of knights?

Lord Theodore went on, “The matter of their punishment will likely fall to the Celestian authorities. At any rate, I’ve been informed of as much since returning to the capital. Though I’m not privy to the details, I would hazard that they will not be getting off lightly. They did, after all, imperil royal lives.”

“I see...” I murmured. “Thank you for letting me know all of this.”

With the briefing concluded, Lord Theodore set aside the papers he’d been reviewing. As he shuffled them, I pretended to be satisfied by his vague words concerning the bandits’ punishment.

*Not be getting off lightly?* I thought sardonically. *Just say “executed”—every last one of them.* Anything less would be a surprise, given the likeliness of the empire’s demand for a harsh reprisal. The priority now was to stem any further diplomatic fallout, making harsh measures inevitable. Contemplating the

bandits' grim fates, I felt an uncomfortable stirring of emotion. It was not sympathy, yet it left a bitter taste.

I must've been making quite the sour face, because Prince Edward suddenly spoke up and changed the subject. "Speaking of the journey, it seems to me that we encountered no mana-beasts during our trek to the capital. The odd wyvern or two circling high above, yes, but other than that, we were unbothered."

"Now that you say it, yes, you're right," Lord Teodore responded thoughtfully. "Our return journey was indeed devoid of any mana-beast encounters. Mind you, I wouldn't wish to bemoan our good fortune. Because of that lack of delay, we managed to return on schedule within a week as planned, but..."

"Are such encounters common?" I asked out of genuine curiosity. "I've not crossed paths with any mana-beasts myself, but then again, I've rarely ventured beyond the Celestian royal capital or our ducal borders."

The term "mana-beast" was an all-encompassing term for any being or creature composed wholly of mana. In my sixteen years, I'd only briefly glimpsed such creatures once or twice, a testament to my sheltered upbringing. To one nurtured amid security and opulence as I was, the notion of them existing at all bordered on make-believe. I recalled one of the few times I'd encountered them, at an auction where small mana-beasts were offered for sale as pets. The little things had been so terrified of me that they'd scampered to the far corners of their enclosure when I approached and hissed aggressively when I'd attempted to talk to them. As a result, I'd been barred from attending such auctions ever again.

Lost in this recollection, I suddenly realized that neither Lord Teodore nor the prince had answered my question. I looked up at them—they were staring at me, blankly.

"Um, surely even within the bounds of your own domain, you've seen a mana-beast or two?" Lord Teodore finally asked.

"You mean in the wild? No, not at all," I responded. "Only those held captive as pets."

He emitted an odd grunt. "No physical wall or magical barrier could guarantee

a total exclusion of mana-beasts..." he muttered, seemingly to himself. He addressed me again. "What of wyverns and their ilk? Surely you've seen mana-beasts soaring high above?"

"No, I'm afraid not," I replied. "I've heard tales of the havoc wrought by mana-beasts, but they all seem to have taken place before my time. Nowadays, such creatures exist in stories. I've personally never encountered any wild mana-beasts."

The two of them continued to stare at me in silence, as if I myself were one of the dangerous creatures of which we spoke.





This reaction confused me, to say the least. *Did I say something I shouldn't have? I'm sure I haven't seen a mana-beast in the wild even once over the course of my entire life, but is that really so strange?*

As I internally questioned the reliability of my own experiences, the Prince and his councillor launched into a sotto voce side conversation. “There *are* no physical or magical barriers that can guarantee total exclusion of mana-beasts, right?” Lord Teodore asked His Highness, seeking confirmation of his previous conjecture.

“If you don't even know that, Teo, how in the hell would I?” Prince Edward snapped back.

“Merely reflecting out loud, Your Highness. Also—language.”

“Oh, sorry—but no, that's not it! Is that even possible? Is Celestia privy to the use of some special magic? To have not encountered a mana-beast all this time—that can't be right, can it?”

“You're asking the wrong person—I wouldn't know. At any rate, that confessional backwater—I mean, *holy country*—has no interest in the arcane, so the prospect of them harboring mystical secrets beyond Malcosian knowledge seems far-fetched, and besides...”

The Prince and his councillor continued their squabble with the liveliness of schoolboys. Somehow, my offhand remark about mana-beasts had sparked a fervor more heated than any simple conflict with brigands. As I observed their animated back-and-forth, almost all of it flew over my head aside from a most curious utterance from Lord Teodore that caught my attention.

“To think the powers of their Saint would extend this far...”



“Excuse us.”

“Bye, commanders!”

Even after almost twenty minutes of their ceaseless debate, there seemed to be no resolution in sight. Owen and I, feeling like we'd overstayed our purpose, opted for an early exit.

As the echo of the meeting room's door closing behind us rang through the empty halls, I let out an internal sigh of relief.

At last, my first full day at the castle was finally over.

After this, no further organized activities awaited me. Dinner, a review of the day's teachings, and then bed. A sense of achievement glowed dimly within me as I followed Owen down the lengthy hallway. He marched ahead with a spring in his step, humming contentedly—a stark contrast to his earlier lecture-induced lethargy. Although I'd tried my best to keep my eyes on Lord Theodore for the past few hours, it had been difficult to avoid the occasional glance at Owen as he braced himself against the wall, struggling to stay awake. I'd truly worried that he might start snoring.

He let his jaunty tune fade away and then remarked, "To think that blockhead was at the lecture too. I guess sometimes pigs really do fly, huh?"

"That blockhead? Are you referring to His Highness?" I asked, half-incredulous.

"Yup. The man hates hitting the books, probably more than anything. Rumor has it that when he was a kid, he used to skip out on class to practice his swordsmanship. He's the type that likes to work out his body more than his mind. So yeah, watching him sit all quietly next to you—that was a shocker. Hm, but I suppose with the vice commander there he would be on his best behavior, wouldn't he? Still don't know why he's in the classroom now of all times, though..."

Owen ended his little rant with a contemplative tilt of his head. It did strike me as more than a little odd that the prince would join me for lessons, especially given the fact that he must have grown up receiving an elite imperial education. If he were the scholarly type, then perhaps I could understand seeking out the odd extra lecture, but from Owen's description, he seemed anything but.

I let out a soft "hmm" in thought, when suddenly Owen spun around to face me, a light of realization in his eyes. "Aha! Maybe the commander was caught in his little scandal of scholarly subterfuge, and the vice commander, upon finding out just how many classes he actually skipped, mandated he retake

everything? You'd be the perfect cover! It'd be suspicious if the prince were to suddenly start retaking classes by himself, but with you there, nobody would—"

An unseen voice from around an upcoming corner abruptly cut short this conspiracy-laden and fantastically outrageous monologue. "How many times must I remind you not to openly speak ill of the commander within these halls, Sir Owen?"

As we rounded the corner, the owner of the mysterious voice revealed himself.

"Collett!" I practically yelled.

"You remembered my name..." My fully recovered guardian angel seemed delighted. "Long time no see, milady. I trust you've been well?" he asked, greeting me with an elegant bow. Dressed in his private attire, he seemed to glow with health and vigor as he flashed me a bright smile. The man beside me, however, appeared far less enthused by this reunion. I caught what seemed to be a scornful "ick" under his breath as his face contorted with displeasure. Did Owen harbor a grudge against Collett? The young commoner struck me as a benign soul, so I was curious as to what aspect of him Owen found disagreeable.

"I'm doing quite well, thank you, Collett," I responded. "And you? I was informed you were recuperating on leave."

"The ol' body's doing just fine, milady. Almost too fine, in fact! I'm itching to get back into it, but I've had to settle for working on paperwork at home. I came by to turn in some documents when I just *happened* to hear Sir Owen here say something incredibly rude," Collett said, fixing my escort with a reproachful glare. Attempting to shield himself from the hostility, Owen rolled his eyes and turned away.

*Ah, now I see. Owen, outspoken and unrestrained; Collett, pure of heart and virtuous of soul. The two were like oil and water—fundamentally incompatible. I suppose I can't blame Owen for wanting to keep Collett at arm's length.*

Collett was just getting started. "Not only did you make a mockery of the quality of royal education, you debased the civil official who proctored the exams! Not to mention your implied disrespect to the commander, who let me

remind you, passed his exams fair and square. Careless talk like this could lead to accusations of lèse-majesté. You ought to think before you—”

“Yap, yap, yap, yap, quiet down will ya?” Owen cut in. “What’s it matter to you anyway? What I say or don’t is none of your business.”

“Oh, yes it is!” Collett countered, not backing down. “You outrank me in seniority, don’t you? What if the Pyreborn were to take a reputational hit because of your reckless remarks?”

Collett was right on every count, but Owen turned away again, as if to say, *Out of sight, out of mind*. “Whatever. Like we had any reputation to lose in the first place.”

“Sir Owen!” Collett’s voice carried a mix of frustration and earnest appeal. “Just because our standing is not the highest, does not mean you’re at liberty to make it any worse! If you were aware of the amount of trouble you put our commanders through because of your impulsive behavior, you’d—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Listen, I got escort duties. Me and Little Miss Princess over here have somewhere to be, so we’ll be seein’ ya, all right?”

“L-Little Miss...? Y-You...!” Collett sputtered in utter disbelief at the insolence that had just reached his ears.

Owen then flashed me a look. *Come on*, his dusky eyes urged.

It seemed that this knightly order’s resident loose cannon had no intention of listening to Collett’s words (despite their validity), which placed me in a difficult position. Owen’s behavior was justifiably problematic. This wasn’t just about how it affected me—he was also a danger to himself. Thus far, perhaps the position of his father, the Baron Klein, and the rest of the Pyreborn had been able to cover for his behavior, but it was clear that his luck could not last indefinitely. Furthermore, the idea that by saying nothing I would be contributing to his demise left a bitter taste in my mouth. So, going against my initial resolve from earlier in the afternoon to let such comments slide, I chose to address his behavior once more. “Owen, I must agree with Collett on this one. Your earlier remarks were rash and imprudent. His Highness might be tolerant, but who’s to say that tolerance would extend to those who surround him? Had it been anyone other than Collett overhearing us, they might not have

hesitated to accuse you of insulting the royal family.”

Owen, upon hearing my concern for him, reacted more or less exactly as I expected, and his visage soured even further. He stared at me, his displeasure palpable, but I met his gaze steadily, unwavering in my conviction.

I did not dislike Owen’s forthright manner of speaking or his jaunty demeanor, but his unbridled speech tested the limits of what I found acceptable. This was not a matter of demanding he change who he was at his core or pretend to be somebody he wasn’t. He could continue to act without pretense around me or His Highness for all I cared; my concern was that he learned to recognize when and where his unrestrained words were appropriate. Did my eyes convey all of that? I was sure they didn’t. But eventually, he gave me a nod—in form, if not in spirit. “Fine. I’ll be more careful with my words. Will that be all, my lady?”

His tone was far from remorseful. Downright resentful, even. Nevertheless, I chose to interpret this as him offering a rare olive branch in his own reluctant manner—and the gobsmacked expression on Collett seemed to confirm as much.

“Yes, that will be all,” I responded in an even tone. Although I must admit that I inwardly smirked at his sulky displeasure, I chose to let the issue rest. There was no more point in arguing with someone so unreceptive than there was in attempting to teach a stone to swim. Besides, time was on my side for addressing these concerns—or so I believed.

In time, I would rue this leniency, lamenting my naivete for not addressing the issue more sternly when I’d had the chance to do so.



After such a hectic day at the royal castle, I found sanctuary in the quiet of my private chamber. I sank into the plush cushions of my sofa, the weight of the day lifting as I lost myself in a good book.

Reaching the end of a paragraph, I casually flipped the page. It was a leisurely read—a children’s story rich with grand adventures and harrowing escapades. The tale spun the saga of an ordinary commoner who rose to become a revered sword saint, facing numerous trials in his quest to slay a malevolent dragon. The narrative may have been clichéd, but I always found comfort in the depictions

of the protagonist in such stories, whose success through their unwavering spirit and tireless determination resonated with me deeply.

After all, at least for the duration of the book, I could live in a world where hard work and dedication were unfailingly met with reward. It was a concept that soothed me during moments of painful self-reflection.

As I absorbed the words on the next page, immersed in the protagonist's journey, an arm draped in black slid across my field of view, delicately placing a cup of steaming hot tea before me.

"Thank you, Marisa." I spoke without looking up at the arm's owner.

"Of course, my lady," she replied quietly.

The demure beauty finished her task by arranging a selection of baked treats on the table, offered a graceful bow, and then withdrew. Her meticulousness and silent compliance was a breath of fresh air after an afternoon spent in the company of Owen's obstinance. For a brief moment, I couldn't help but think she reminded me of my father.

"Tell me, Marisa, do you enjoy reading?" I asked as she turned to another task.

"Reading, Your Ladyship? When time allows," she replied. "And you, my lady?"

"Nearly every day," I announced with a touch of pride. "It's a cherished pastime of mine."

"That is wonderful, Your Ladyship," Marisa said, her voice a perfect balance of gentle encouragement and polite disinterest, bringing to an end my brief venture into her private world.

*Drat*, I cursed. That had been the perfect segue into a casual conversation—or so I'd thought—but it had lived and died in all of two scant heartbeats.

But no, it was too early to give up. If the conversation couldn't yet stand on its own two feet, I was determined to help it limp along until it could.

"Say, Marisa," I tried again. "What sort of books do you usually like to read?"

"Treatises and encyclopedias, if I had to identify my most common pursuits.

My latest read was a botanical field guide.”

“I-Is that so...?”

Out of all the answers I’d expected, “botany” was assuredly not among them. Her tastes were rather more...*astringent* than I’d expected. I’d certainly waded through my share of dense texts, but it was more accurate to say I’d scrutinized them for study rather than perused them for pleasure...

“What about novels, Marisa?” I asked again, desperate to keep the sputtering flame of discourse alive. “Do you enjoy fiction? Perhaps a treasured romance novel? Those were in vogue for a while...”

“Novels? I’m afraid I...” her voice dwindled to a murmur as she seemed to make an effort to delve deep into her memories. Then, as if struck by a sudden clarity, her demeanor brightened, and her ocean blue eyes met mine.

“*Cinderella*, perhaps?” she suggested tentatively. “From my youth.”

*Cinderella*... The mention of that specific title struck me in a very particular way. I knew of it, of course—a story about a downtrodden maiden, her vile step-relatives, and the princely savior who at last ushered her into a blissful ever-after. Its cultural impact was such that even someone who had never encountered the story directly was versed in its basic outline, though I myself could not claim to have read it in full. Romance had never been of interest to me—or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was a genre I’d consciously avoided. After all, there had always lingered within me a distant apprehension that a piece of romantic literature might somehow upend my convictions about love and matrimony, and frankly, the thought of that happening unsettled me greatly.

“*Cinderella*?” I echoed, a mischievous smile touching my lips. “Now there’s a surprise. I wouldn’t have pegged you for a reader of romance. Tell me, what about it did you like so much?”

It was a stock question, but oddly enough, it seemed to stop Marisa in her tracks. I watched her curiously, intrigued by her momentary lapse into silence.

She appeared to struggle with finding an answer to my question, which I hadn’t anticipated to be particularly challenging. It hadn’t been my intention to corner her into discomfort. I was ready to let the matter drop altogether when

suddenly she found her voice, barely above a whisper. “I’ve always adored the scene where the prince comes searching for Cinderella,” she confessed. “I had it in my mind that perhaps, a prince of my own would come to *rescue* me as well one day. How foolish of me—to harbor such a silly dream.”

She cast her gaze softly downwards. Although her expression revealed very little, I managed to catch the faintest shimmer of sorrow in her placid blue eyes.

That fleeting look struck a chord, stirring a vague sensation I couldn’t immediately place. Her choice of the word “rescue” also lingered in my mind. Perhaps she meant nothing by it, but I couldn’t help but think there was a hidden depth to her simple wish. I found myself drawn to her gaze once more, and this time, it hit me—the source of my discomfort. The expression in her eyes—the eyes of a young maiden completely given to despair, teetering on the brink of hopelessness—had been mine just a short while ago.

It was a curious revelation. Taken in by her beauty, I’d painted her life in broad strokes of glitz and glamor, of contentment and ease. But it was becoming clear that her reality wasn’t as straightforward as I’d thought.

I allowed my gaze to linger for just a moment longer before releasing a wistful sigh. Wanting to lighten the mood, I slipped my lips into a reassuring smile and snapped my book shut. “Well, some would argue that the depiction of men who seem too perfect for this world is what fiction was made for,” I mused, exhaling a pensive breath. “Every girl has dreamed of it at least once, haven’t they? The silly hope for a dashing prince riding in on a white horse, whisking us off to a world spun from fairy tales?”

My words were a deliberate deflection, crafted to casually steer us away from wandering down the path of her unintended revelation. She seemed yet oblivious to her slipup, responding with a simple nod and an agreeable, “Indeed.”

As curious as I was, I felt it improper to delve into the private life of someone I scarcely knew. Moreover, was there anything more reprehensible than a master who exploited her status to coax forth the secrets of her servants? Marisa was an excellent maid, and if I had to respect her privacy in order to keep her around, then I intended to do just that. With that resolve, I let the



subject drop.

Deciding it was time to draw the evening to a close, I rose from the sofa, my expression bright with a practiced smile. “I think it’s time I turned in, Marisa. I’ll see to the lamps myself—you may retire. Thank you for your company this evening, and good night.”



The following morning brought more lessons on imperial etiquette with Her Majesty, which required me to retrace my steps to the lecture hall from the day before. I was not, however, met with the empty classroom of my previous session. I was instead greeted by a room brimming with racks of beautiful gowns and dresses. Tables and boxes overflowed with accessories and jewelry, occupying every spare inch of space. At first, I doubted that I was in the correct place. The array of dresses and finery suggested nothing short of the highest quality. Had I inadvertently interrupted a tailoring appointment for someone else?

*Someone else?* The realization dawned on me, followed by a mental eye roll at my failure to grasp the obvious. It wasn’t *just* “someone else”—it was the empress, no doubt about it. In the royal castle, who could command such a lavish enterprise but a member of the royal family?

Scanning the room, I indeed spotted the empress with what appeared to be a detailed catalog in hand, intently giving instructions to a maid. *Well, it looks like my lesson isn’t happening today*, I thought.

I turned to the handmaiden who’d accompanied me here. “It seems we’ve intruded on something, Marisa. Shall we head back to my room?”

The raven-haired beauty offered only a befuddled “Huh?” as she stared back at me with bewildered eyes.

Had I suggested something strange? Surely the empress, engrossed as she was in her fantastical wardrobe, did not wish to be disturbed?

Snapping out of her confused stupor, Marisa shook her head. “How in the world are we to choose a dress if you’re absent?” she stammered out hastily.

“How are we to...? I’m not sure I follow,” I responded. “Her Majesty is

present, isn't she? What need does she have for me?"

"Y-You do not wish to pick out a gown?"

"Me choose a gown? For Her Majesty?"

We seemed to be at an impasse—Marisa, unexpectedly flustered; myself, perpetually perplexed. The conversation seemed to run aground as we exchanged looks of mute puzzlement. Was she trying to keep me from leaving? I couldn't fathom why. What possible reason could there be to prevent us from discussing the matter in full when we were back in the privacy of my room and out of the empress's business?

"Could we discuss this later?" I suggested. "For now, let's—"

"Ah, good. You're here."

*Drat.* Cutting off my request was the icy, monotonous voice I'd come to recognize all too well. I'd hoped for a quiet exit before she'd realized my presence, but fate, it seemed, had other plans.

I grasped the hem of my dress, spun around, and bobbed a modest curtsy. "Greetings, Your Majesty. My sincerest apologies for my lapse in not formally acknowledging you at once. I wished to not disturb you during your fitting session. Now, if you'll permit me, I shall make myself scarce."

"No need to apologize, Carolina. I am not so easily offended as all that," the empress replied. "But you wish to leave? How are we to proceed in fitting an appropriate trousseau in the absence of our subject? Or do you wish to entrust the selection of gowns entirely to me?"

"Your subject? I'm sorry, Your Majesty, I'm afraid I don't quite follow..."

Now the empress joined Marisa in the act of staring at me in confusion, which at two against one hardly seemed to be a fair fight. She studied me with her cool, expressionless gaze for a moment before a flicker of realization crossed her features. "Ah, I see," she murmured with a nod of her head. "Carolina, were you perhaps under the impression that this fitting was for me? That all of these gowns were intended for my own wardrobe?"

"Y-Yes, I had assumed as much," I admitted, my voice betraying a hint of

uncertainty.

I began to sweat—it almost sounded like she was suggesting I was wrong. But with the assuredly vast catalog of gowns in her possession, and her exclusive claim over the royal tailors, who else could be the intended recipient of such finery if not the empress herself?

A soft “ah” escaped Marisa as a similar understanding dawned on her face. “Your Ladyship,” she began with the barest hint of exasperation lacing her words, “these gowns are intended not for Her Majesty, but for you!”

A baffled “What?” was all I managed as I struggled to process her words.

“What Marisa is saying, Carolina,” the empress continued, “is that this entire fitting is arranged for your benefit, not mine.”

“M-Me?! All of these...” My eyes swept over the sea of sumptuous gowns. These were all meant for me? I’d had no idea—mostly because Marisa had failed to inform me about it!

I shot her a vicious glance.

“Her Majesty swore me to silence,” she explained in a *de sotto* voice.

I groaned internally. Yet again, I’d fallen victim to the empress’s surprisingly large appetite for impish surprises.

A soft chuckle emanated from the orchestrator of this entire charade. “I’m sorry, my dear,” the empress said, mirth dancing in her eyes. “The thought that you might mistake this fitting for my own never crossed my mind. Look at these gowns; do they look as if they are tailored for me? I assumed that would’ve clued you in to the truth straightaway.”

My groan escaped me for real this time. “Of course. I should’ve realized these garments were a size too small for a woman of Your Eminence’s stature. Please pardon my oversight.”

She laughed again in a girlish giggle that I would not have expected from so august a personage. “Well, I do see how my possession of the catalog could have led to your assumptions,” she acknowledged, passing me the list. “Here—the inventory of all *your* gowns and accessories.”

With a whispered word of gratitude (and a concealed sigh of exasperation), I accepted the schedule. *How utterly mortifying...* There was simply no escaping the glaring truth: I'd just committed a most spectacular—and rather foolish—blunder.

*Is this what it feels like to wish to crawl into a hole and die of shame?*

Wading past my self-reproach, I glanced over the catalog; my eyes nearly flew out of my skull. “Two hundred gowns?!” The volume of my voice soared well past the bounds of indoor decorum, and my eyes instinctively darted up from the list, scanning the room once more. Certainly the room was packed from wall to wall, but *two hundred*? My most generous estimate hadn't even approached a third of that!

“Your Majesty,” I ventured cautiously, “might I inquire about the...financial burden of this extensive collection?”

“My my, that's what you're concerned about?” she countered nonchalantly. “The priority, my dear Carolina, is to find the perfect fit. Let's begin, shall we?”

It seemed my question was not to be answered. With a simple snap of her fingers, the army of waiting maids sprang into action. It was settled then—for the foreseeable future, the changing room was to be my home.



Alas, my prediction proved accurate. The hours ticked away as I became Her Majesty's personal dressmaker's mannequin, trying on gown after gown to satisfy her heart's content. An exhausting five hours later, our sartorial marathon finally came to an end. It was well past noon when Owen accompanied me to the Pyreborn headquarters where Lord Theodore awaited; the relocation of my afternoon lectures, explained yesterday as a temporary measure, was now a permanent change—a modification that dragged heavily on my already overtaxed spirit.

I was spent.

Never once had I experienced a dress fitting that had gone on for so long. I had never been a devotee of fashion, always picking out the first thing that caught my eye. As long as it didn't make me look utterly shapeless, I was fine

with whatever.

Owen and I advanced down the same grand colonnade as the day before. Stifling a yawn, I lagged a step behind the young knight when he halted without warning.

Strange. We were in the middle of the path, nowhere near our destination. Why had we stopped here? “Owen, what—”

*Bang.* The sharp crack of a shot rang through the air. Barely a heartbeat later, a deafening thump echoed alarmingly close to my ear. A bone-shaking vibration; the disconcerting thunder of impact. Then, a soft clink by my feet. A whisper of terror snaked up my spine as my eyes followed the faint jangle that rang out against the floor. There, glinting against the polished cobblestones, lay the culprit: the shattered remnants of what appeared to have once been a bullet. A nearby scorch mark marred the stone.

A bullet—intended for me? Seemingly from a great distance, the logical part of my brain traced a chilling trajectory based upon the sound’s direction and the fallen bullet’s resting place. I could come to no other conclusion.

The fear struck all at once. “H-Help.” My voice escaped my lips in the faintest of whimpers. “Did...someone just try to...*kill*...”

Owen’s voice, unexpectedly steady, cut through my panic. “Calm down, princess. An attempt on your life, yes, but look. Do you see my barrier? You’re safe here; that bullet was never a threat.”

*Never a threat.* I reflexively latched on to his words, desperate for the safety they implied. I let my gaze drift over the half-transparent shield surrounding us. For some reason, my first reaction was to reach out and touch it. This was a barrier? Under my fingers, it felt completely indistinguishable from a tangible wall, fooling the senses completely. Even though I hadn’t the slightest inkling of its true strength or effect, something deep within me whispered assurances that I was safe here.

Owen’s voice cut through the numbed din in my mind. “If you’re done examining my barrier, Princess, we need to get inside *now*.”

“Inside?” I said. “But...what about the sniper?” My voice trembled, my mind

overwhelmed by the immediate threat. My prospective assailant remained at large within the castle's walls—how could we possibly disregard this danger? Was it not Owen's duty to apprehend the rogue assassin while he still could?

Yet, as my thoughts churned in a frenzy of panic, Owen's next words struck me with sobering force. "Princess, I think fear is getting in the way of your ability to think straight. You want me, your bodyguard, to leave his charge to pursue some unknown quarry when he has no idea how many are out there or what they're really after?" His voice was a mix of frustration and restraint. "Believe me, I want to hunt them down as much as you do, but my sole charge is your safety. I can't leave your side without being absolutely sure of your security." He deftly twisted his wrist in the empty air, and the magical barrier pulsed in response, expanding and contracting in tandem with the movements of his fingers. "Let's move," he commanded, striding forward. I followed in haste, my earlier panic giving way to embarrassment.

Chastising myself internally, I couldn't fathom why I had suggested such a reckless action. Of course it would have left me vulnerable. My terror had gotten the better of me. The thought suddenly struck that if my protector had been anyone but Owen, a man unquestioningly loyal to his charge, my life might have already quietly bled out on that stone floor. "Um, thank you, Owen," I muttered quietly to my savior. "And...I'm sorry."

"Thank me for what? Doing my job?" His reply was laced with sarcasm. "This might be cold comfort to you, princess, but what our sniper friend was likely after wasn't your death per se, but instead to implicate us for failing to protect you. What I'm trying to say is, how does it feel—to become collateral damage?"

"Collateral damage? In what way...?" I asked faintly, reeling in my disbelief.

As we traversed the colonnade at speed and crossed back into the relative safety of the palace walls, Owen cast me a sidelong glance tinged with deep annoyance. He seemed to be searching some invisible horizon for the right words before finally running a hand through his lime-green hair with a sigh. "We have a bit of a problem with factions here in Malcosias. Sorry, that's all I can tell you. Commander's orders."

"A problem with...factions?" I echoed, the words heavy on my tongue as I

pieced together the implications.

“Yeah, I know. The nobility, split into their own petty little cliques. Completely unheard of,” he shot back dryly. “And for your information, I’m also included in the category of potential collateral damage. Under ordinary circumstances, someone like me would’ve never been assigned to guard the commander’s wife—I mean, the Celestian envoy. So yeah, we’re both victims here, understand?”

Owen’s words had (perhaps unintentionally) unveiled a political landscape vast in its implications yet veiled in its detail. First, we were apparently entwined in the invisible webs of factional disputes. Second, his appointment as my protector seemed to stem not from merit but from circumstance. And third, the crux of these mysteries seemed inextricably linked to the underlying and unknown motivations of the factions in question.

Aristocratic factionalism was something I understood in only the vaguest of theoretical ways. In Celestian politics, the royal family and House Sanchez were the dominant forces, and their harmonious relations had skewed my expectations of the function of the nobility in royal governance. Perhaps it had been naivete on my part to superimpose that accustomed Celestian harmony onto the political landscape of Malcosias. Caught in this moment of self-reflection, I almost didn’t notice Owen striding onwards. “Ah!” The exclamation escaped me as I scrambled to catch up with him. “Wait, Owen! I have so many questions!”

“If they’re about the faction problem, you won’t be getting answers,” he replied without looking back. “You wanna hear more, you gotta take it up with the commanders.”

His dismissal stung, leaving me to wade through the fog of unaddressed confusion alone. Factionalism, the attempted ambush, Owen’s unlikely role as my guard—I couldn’t yet piece together this puzzle. Yet one truth had crystallized: Prince Edward had deliberately concealed from me the true extent of Malcosian discord. Why would he have done something like that?

“All that talk about no walls between us, and yet this is how I’m treated?” I muttered under my breath.

As a flicker of indignation smoldered in my chest, a bitter smile creased my

lips, a private mockery aimed at no one but the woman I saw when I looked in the mirror.



We reached Meeting Room One without further incident, albeit a bit past the scheduled beginning of my lesson. I stood at the door, my hand hovering a mere inch from the wood, unable to bring myself to allow my fingers to close the gap.

The incident still weighed heavily on my mind, casting a shadow of doubt over my ability to concentrate on the lesson ahead. But even that wasn't the true origin of my reluctance to cross the threshold. In truth, I didn't want to face Lord Theodore any more than I did Prince Edward. They were both complicit in keeping me in the dark, and I...didn't like that. Before I knew it, I'd turned away from the door's whitewashed surface, as if some part of me wanted nothing more than to run away from the source of all my troubles.

Owen's voice rang out beside me. "Princess, you better get inside. Remember what I said about the vice commander?"

"Right," I muttered. "You're right."

I had to set my feelings aside. I knew I couldn't falter at the door; to do so would be to stumble at every challenge that lay beyond it. Besides, it wouldn't be seemly to keep my instructor waiting. We were late, after all; he might even have been worried.

Swallowing my apprehension, I turned back, my eyes squeezed shut in determination, and lifted my hand once more to knock. But instead of the expected hollow thud against wood, my knuckles met the unexpected resistance of a firm, muscular torso. *Is this flesh or steel?*

"Carolina!"

The door had opened unexpectedly, leaving me face-to-face with an imposing figure. A familiar baritone, unfamiliarly tinged with a note of urgency—  
anxiousness, almost—reached my ears. My eyes trailed upward slowly, hesitantly, taking in the fiery cascade of red hair, the piercing gaze of golden zircon. The stern countenance that met mine was unmistakably his—Prince



Edward, standing right before me.

*Prince Edward?* Here yet again? Hadn't Lord Theodore mentioned his presence yesterday had been a one-off occurrence? Or had the exception now become the rule?

*Again with the silly questions!* I hastily wrangled my thoughts back to the current dilemma. My fist, which had sought the door, now found itself inappropriately resting against Prince Edward's chest. I felt the blood drain from my face; a cold sweat broke out across my back.

*Had my knock been mistaken for a blow?* The unintended impact was certainly more forceful than an accidental brush of contact—I had been midknock, after all!

"Y-Your Highness! Forgive me, I had no intention of striking you—I was merely attempting to knock, and the door swung open... It was sheer misfortune that I —"

"What?" His interruption was abrupt. "Forget that, I'm just relieved you're safe!"

Without warning, he yanked sharply on my arm. Unprepared, I yelped, my sense of balance failing me as I lurched forward and straight into Prince Edward's solid frame. His broad arms took this opportunity to drape themselves around me, pulling me into a near-asphyxiating embrace.

*Wh-Wh-What is happening?! Why am I being hugged by His Highness?!*

Ignorant to my bewilderment, Prince Edward let out a heavy sigh, his breath a warm whisper against my ear. "Thank the stars," he murmured. "You just never showed up. I began to think that something might've happened to you."

His voice carried a deep warmth and a note of sincere concern. Had he been worried about me? If so, then I feared I may have done something genuinely terrible by prolonging his anxiety and not knocking as soon as I'd arrived...

My resentment towards him evaporated in an instant, quickly overtaken by a wave of guilt for having doubted his motives. How could I question the intentions of a man who had shown me nothing but kindness? There had to be a valid reason for his choice to keep me uninformed about the intricacies of

Malcosian politics. With that realization, my resolve solidified—I would be content with or without the knowledge of his reasons. The choice was his to share or to withhold.

Gathering a semblance of composure, I addressed him, my voice now even and calm. “I must apologize for the concern I’ve caused you, Your Highness,” I began. “But, in truth, something did happen. A sniper intercepted Owen and myself en route, which delayed our arrival.”

His eyes flew open. “What?! You were attacked?” He whipped his head around, finding Lord Theodore as his voice thundered across the interior of the hall. “Teo! How has such a breach occurred under our watch?”

Alerted by their commander’s furious roar, knights burst forth from adjacent doors, hands already claiming the hilts of their swords, poised for action. Then, their eyes fell on me and the prince—and our unexpected and apparent intimacy. Confusion washed over their features as they retreated one by one, the doors closing softly behind them, leaving us alone once again.

The knights’ arrival followed by their immediate discreet departure, perhaps meant to preserve our dignity, only heightened my embarrassment. A flush crept up my cheeks, and within me grew a desperate wish to shout out the truth of this mortifyingly public misunderstanding—to dispel any misconceptions and proclaim our innocence to the now silent hallway. But before I could do that, Prince Edward’s commanding voice rang out once more, far too close to my ears for comfort. “Teo! She spoke of a sniper! We must secure the grounds, apprehend them immediately, and ensure they face the fullest measure of justice!”

“Yes, I heard you the first time, you bellowing oaf,” Lord Theodore replied, his voice an ocean of calm. “Screaming won’t solve anything. Let’s gather inside and straighten out our facts first, shall we?”

The contrast between the two was striking—the lord’s tranquility seemed to leech the furious fervor right out of the prince. As his intensity ebbed away, so too did his hold on me, his arms retreating with a deliberate gentleness. The withdrawal of his warmth ushered in a chill that seemed to fill the newfound emptiness, bringing with it a surprising pang of loss. I looked up at him, a

whimsical thought fluttering through my mind. *If I asked for his embrace once more, how would he respond?* The impropriety of such a request, even as a hypothetical, jolted me back to my senses, and I quickly dismissed it.

“Teo has a point, Carolina. Let’s continue this discussion inside,” Prince Edward suggested.

Nodding, I painted what I hoped read as a tranquil smile on my face and crossed the threshold into the room.



“I see. This occurred while you were en route here, through the colonnade...”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “If Owen hadn’t sensed their presence and shielded me, I fear I could have lost my life.”

Lord Theodore absorbed my account with a fiercely furrowed brow. His hand glided fluidly over paper, pen scratching in earnest as he transcribed the harrowing events into a report.

*Lost my life...* Hearing myself utter the phrase sent a shiver through me, a stark reminder of my horrifically recent brush with death. The existential dread cut ever deeper each time I replayed the event in my mind.

“The colonnades, with their sparse security and open architecture, present ample opportunities for a would-be assailant. And for a sniper, even more so,” Lord Theodore mused, almost to himself.

“Is there no way to bolster patrols around the area?” the prince asked, his voice etched with concern.

“Unlikely—given the amount of manpower we’ve committed to the Fete’s preparation,” his councillor replied, deep in thought. “Rather than stretching our already thin resources even thinner, it would be prudent to hold these lectures back in Her Ladyship’s chamber. The relative security of the castle walls should be able to keep those extremists—excuse me, *any prospective assassins* at bay.”

Extremists? My ears perked up at the word. Did this have anything to do with the factional conflict to which Owen had alluded? Though my curiosity burned

at me from within, I decided to swallow my questions for now.

“Enough deliberation,” came the voice of the prince. “The Pyreborn will investigate the identity of this assailant. In the meantime, we shall relocate the lectures to Carolina’s quarters. Though Owen has more than proven his mettle as a bodyguard, we shall not leave anything to chance.” His gaze then shifted to me, seeking affirmation. “Do you find that acceptable?”

“Of course!” I blurted out, a bit too quickly. “I have no objections. But, Lord Theodore...?” My eyes softened as they settled on the weary lord.

“You need not concern yourself with me, my lady,” he replied with grace, his beautiful features unwavering. “The request to change the location was mine. Thus, the blame for this regrettable incident falls squarely upon my shoulders.” He stood abruptly, the fluid motion belying his fatigue. “Lady Carolina, I have needlessly exposed you to danger, and for that, I must humbly seek your pardon.” He then bowed his head deeply, his luminous locks falling forward like a golden veil.

“No, please!” I hurried to assure him. “My lord, please, lift your head! With the weight of your duties, it was only natural for you to seek to consolidate your efforts! There is no need to apologize!”

“And yet there is,” he insisted, his head still hung low in penitence. “Had I not been so selfishly remiss, this peril would not have found you. That is the incontrovertible truth.”

“Lord Theodore...”

His unyielding posture was a silent demand for absolution. I shot a glance at Prince Edward, hoping for his intervention, but he offered only a slight, dismissive shake of his head. If my intuition proved correct, the only path towards freeing Lord Theodore from his penitence was to accept his apology and request a suitable atonement. He wasn’t the sort of person to display superficial remorse.

I hesitated, my mouth fluttering open and closed in the hope that he would yield, but despite my reticence, the standoff came to its inevitable conclusion: my forced acceptance of his offer of indemnification.

“Very well,” I conceded reluctantly. “I accept your apology. On the condition that you apprehend the culprits behind this attempt on my life. Let this be the atonement you seek.”

“As you command, my lady,” he replied, unfolding his frame to its full height. “I solemnly swear to pursue and bring to justice those behind this reprehensible attack.” Yet no sooner had he risen than he bowed again, a hand over his heart, an emblem of fealty.

His impeccable demeanor betrayed no signs of his interior thoughts. *Perhaps overly impeccable*, I reflected with a muted sigh. Then, Lord Teodore’s face shifted slightly, seeming to convey a hint of self reproach for having forgotten something. He began rummaging through the mountain of documents on the desk before him, eventually retrieving a single letter. “For you, my lady. From Duke Sanchez.”

“Duke *Sanchez*?” I replied, a mix of surprise and disbelief coloring my voice. The utter lack of appropriate segue into an entirely unrelated topic caught me completely off guard.

He slipped his lips easily into another one of his practiced smiles and nodded. “Yes. We just received this earlier today,” he said, handing me the letter.

I examined it before taking it from his hand. Hastily scribbled on the envelope was indeed my father’s name. It was sealed with the hyacinth—the seal he reserved only for private correspondence. The sight of it stirred a rush of joy within me. Finally accepting the letter from Lord Teodore, I traced the lines of my father’s familiar handwriting with my gaze, and a tinge of homesickness flitted across my heart.

“Now, I must admit that I’ve taken the liberty of personally screening your correspondence,” Lord Teodore continued, sounding only a little bit apologetic. “Should it have contained any reference to your impending nuptials, that would have been quite the concern. While the duke is not one to err in such matters, I took this measure as a precaution. I trust this was not an inconvenience to you.”

“Not in the slightest,” I assured him. “In fact, your vigilance in safeguarding the secrecy of our engagement is deeply appreciated.”

“Your generous words of gratitude are wasted on this humble soul,” he responded with one final bow of his head before finally easing himself back into his seat.

I felt a small wave of relief at seeing him finally settle down. Interacting with Lord Theodore took a great deal of effort. I moved to stow the letter away for later perusal when suddenly, he spoke again. “I must ask you to read the letter here, my lady. For security reasons, I must retain it afterwards for safekeeping. Rest assured it will be returned to you after the announcement of your engagement.”

I’d hoped to absorb my father’s words in solitude, but it seemed that this ever-vigilant lord had other plans. “But you just said that you...”

“What I said was that the letter contains no *explicit* mention of your impending nuptials. It does, however, employ certain expressions and odd equivocations that make its contents somewhat suspicious in the context of your official capacity as a Celestian envoy. To prevent any...untoward information from falling into the wrong hands, I will need to hold on to it until after the Fete.”

*Certain expressions and odd equivocations?* His words gave me pause. I hadn’t yet read the letter, but perhaps it was best that I trust his judgment in this case. It was unlikely he was doing this merely because he liked snooping into the affairs of others. (Most likely.)

But still, the idea of relinquishing a letter from my father to someone else was...uncomfortable. I didn’t like the idea.

I hesitated, my gaze wandering around the room in order to avoid Lord Theodore’s piercing regard. Prince Edward, who’d been silent throughout this entire exchange, abruptly spoke. “Teo, can we not trust Carolina with this? She’s no fool. Surely, she can keep hold of a letter.”

“Yes, perhaps she could. But still, my resolve stands firm. Lady Carolina is indeed wise, but this matter calls for a level of caution that I am better equipped to achieve.”

“Teo...”

“You are wasting your breath, Your Highness. The letter will remain in my custody,” said the councillor to his liege lord with decisive firmness, ending his feeble protests.

Lord Theodore was right after all. Despite my best intentions, I lacked the depth of experience necessary in order to successfully navigate matters of such sensitivity. Besides, it wasn’t as if he was permanently confiscating it. I’d only have to put up with its loss for a little while. Any further complaints I might voice would only be borne from my own selfish reluctance.

Having made up my mind, I turned to Prince Edward, who seemed poised to argue further, and I silenced him with a shake of my head. “It’s all right, Your Highness.” I then turned to Lord Theodore. “I will entrust the letter to your care, my lord. Guard it well.”

“Carolina...” Prince Edward’s voice trailed off, a hint of defiance still coloring his tone.

“Fear not, my lady. The letter shall be safe with me,” Lord Theodore promised me with another graceful dip of his head.

With that, the matter appeared to be resolved, but Prince Edward’s lingering gaze still held an unspoken question. *Are you certain?* his amber eyes seemed to ask. I answered him wordlessly with a small, reassuring nod.

The responsibility of keeping this letter secure was not a burden I was prepared to shoulder. Besides, as it’d just occurred to me, I should be thankful Lord Theodore would even be willing to consider safeguarding the letter rather than just destroying it outright.

With one last subtle smile to the concerned prince, I carefully withdrew the letter from its envelope. “Then, if you’ll both excuse me. I’ll take a moment to read this.”

To my dearest daughter, Carolina Sanchez,

I trust this letter finds you adapting well to life within the empire’s walls. How are you, my child? Both in spirit and in health? Since your departure, not a day goes by that I don’t find myself thinking of you. I often wonder: Is she eating

well? Is there anything that troubles her? Are the unfamiliar faces surrounding her unduly wearing on her happiness? When the demands of your new life permit, it would bring me great solace to receive word of your well-being.

While I'd like nothing more than to paint for you a picture of Celestian peace and tranquility in your absence, I must confess that we've encountered a great deal of trouble as of late. A part of me hesitated to include any mention of this in this missive, but in the end, I decided it was better you hear it directly from me rather than through whispers of rumor.

Our first challenge as of late has been a troubling decline in crop yields...



In the sun-kissed office of Celestia's royal castle, King Nathan Phillips and I were lost in deep deliberation. His office, a familiar haunt of mine, was gilded in the gentle glow of the afternoon sun. The walls around us, adorned with resplendent wallpaper of silver and gold, shimmered softly in the light. A fragrant spring breeze, carrying whispers of the blooming gardens below, found its way in through the open windows, its delicate touch adding a sense of serenity to the space. Yet amidst all this splendor, the chamber felt more like a gilt cage at that moment, the beauty of our surroundings serving merely as a distraction from the grave matters that preoccupied our minds.

The lord of the castle, his head in his hands, heaved a deep sigh. "Just what is happening to our crops?" he groaned, his voice tinged with worry and frustration. "How could the output of our fields be declining this drastically? And crops withering or outright dying to boot? Is that even possible? Hasn't the Saint-to-be blessed us with bountiful harvests until now?"

Lifting my gaze from the dire report sent by regional farmers, I cleared my throat. "Yes. *Until now*," I said, attempting to sound as professional as possible. "Crop growth *has* slowed, particularly in the case of varieties which are not native to our soil and climate. That is a fact, Your Majesty, and bemoaning it won't breathe life back into our land. As for the withering, it appears to affect more delicate sorts of produce, such as tomatoes and lettuce, plants which demand extra care."

At this, the king's posture sagged even further, his despair deepening at the



news.

The sudden and inexplicable decline in crop growth had all signs pointing to one unsettling possibility: a waning in my daughter Flora's powers as the Saint-to-be. This naturally raised a troubling question: *why*? The only notable change in our lives was Carolina's departure from our household, but it seemed far-fetched to attribute such a significant impact to this event. We had explained to Flora that Carolina was embarking on a graduation trip, one that included the meeting of potential suitors. Given Flora's maturity and predilections, it seemed improbable that her younger sister's absence would affect her so profoundly.

In which case, could the stress of her upcoming trials to become the Saint be the source of this disruption? She had always been a confident girl, claiming failure was a concept foreign to her. But could it be that beneath her bravado, she harbored the same anxieties as anyone else? She'd always been good at guarding her secrets, but perhaps it was time for a father's gentle intervention to uncover the truth.

My contemplations were abruptly interrupted by a distressed exclamation from His Majesty. "What?! *Ten* incidents involving mana-beasts in less than a week? Are we not shielded from such attacks by our Saint's protection?"

I shuffled the relevant report in front of me. "We've been seeing a marked rise in mana-beast attacks near our borderlands," I confirmed, scanning over the details. "The cause of these attacks is yet undetermined, but so far, the royal knights have been able to manage the situation. However, their continual deployment away from the castle is unsustainable. If the situation were to deteriorate further, forming a specific task force or response team to eliminate the threat might be necessary."

His Majesty let out another sigh of frustration, echoing my own feelings of discouragement. No sooner had we resolved the Malcosias affair than these new challenges arose. The crop issue was dire, but the threat of mana-beasts loomed even larger. Yield declines and the resulting trade disruptions were difficult, but they were at least manageable. An impending large-scale threat by mana-beasts, however, would require far more drastic measures. Task forces, fortifications, evacuations, maintenance and upkeep of arms and armor—these were all things that required considerable resources. Resources that this

kingdom did not have to spare. Considering my already overflowing plate, this sudden surge of critical issues was simply overwhelming. In truth, I should have been the one burying my face in my hands.

But even then, the litany of crises did not end.

“Please, no more, Raymond. I can’t,” King Phillips pleaded, as if about to be sick. “Whatever’s worse than crop failure and mana-beast attacks, I don’t want to hear it.”

“You mustn’t avert your eyes from the truth, Your Majesty,” I gently chided.

“No, I’m done. I quit. I no longer wish to be king.”

“Read on, Your Majesty. I implore you.”

“No... No!”

“*Your Majesty.*”

“Fine, fine! I’ll keep reading, okay? That’s all I have to do, right?! Just read?!” His tone bordered on hysteria.

After some coaxing, the king’s gaze finally returned to the documents before him, his whole body trembling. Whether it was genuine distress or another display of his usual dramatics, I couldn’t tell. Then, his expression hardened—and then contorted as if he were on the brink of tears.

“A plague, Raymond? *A plague?!*” he nearly shouted in disbelief and frustration. “Just how much must you torment me before you’re satisfied?! That’s it—I declare abdication!”

“And leave His Highness the crown prince with such burdens?” I admonished. “You’ll forgive my saying this, but the boy is more than a little wet behind the ears. The kingdom would collapse by the morrow.”

The young king groaned, a sound of profound anguish, and then he paused, seemingly grappling with his inescapable reality. Eventually, he slumped forward on his desk in a posture of defeat. “Tell me about this plague,” he muttered.

Heeding the command of my king, I dropped my gaze to my own copy of the report. “The news of the plague is a recent development, having just reached

our court, and as such, we are still investigating its origins and possible treatments. It manifested rapidly and without warning. And given the absence of similar outbreaks in neighboring countries, it is likely that Celestia itself is the epicenter of this mysterious disease. My instinct is to suspect a miasma, possibly in the air or water, as less affluent regions are disproportionately bearing the brunt of it.”

“Miasma, eh...?” King Phillips murmured thoughtfully, absentmindedly twirling a pen between his fingers. It was a habitual tic, a sign of his concentration. Normally, I would have cautioned against it to prevent the errant spraying of ink, but under the circumstances, I refrained. Predictably, as another silent moment dragged on, dark, inky blotches flew across the budget proposal laid out on his desk.

Really. Of all documents, why the budget proposal, one I needed his signature on urgently? Why couldn’t he have ruined one of the countless other reports scattered haphazardly across his desk?

Abruptly, his pen ceased its idle twirling. *Finally*, I thought, a silent wave of relief washing over me.

“Very well,” the young king declared, his tone shedding its earlier traces of petulance, replaced with a sober authority that truly befitted a ruler. “Dispatch a team to investigate the water sources in the plague-stricken regions. While we must continue to observe how the crop and mana-beast situations unfold, our immediate focus must be on containing this plague.”

A flicker of a smile threatened to rise to my lips in response to his sudden gravity, but I held it back, keeping up my usual facade. “Understood, my king. It shall be done,” I affirmed, bowing deeply.

That was precisely the moment I’d been waiting for—the young king’s latent decisiveness surfacing in the face of adversity. He was the kind of ruler who, in times of crises, always stood tall. A sovereign who was deserving of my complete loyalty and unwavering resolve.



...and these are all the challenges Celestia is facing as of late. Again, I felt it was important that you learn of these matters from my pen rather than through the

lens of rumor.

However, you needn't worry about me. Even now, I remain resilient and well. Well enough to find the time to write to you, which should be a comforting sign.

While a direct response to this letter isn't necessary, I am eager to hear about how you are faring, hopefully sooner rather than later. Take good care of yourself, Carolina.

Warmest regards,

Raymond Sanchez

P.S. His Majesty is set to attend the Malcosias Founder's Day Fete, and I will be accompanying him in my official capacity. I eagerly anticipate our reunion there.

As I reached the end of the letter, its tone struck me more as an official report than a personal missive from my father. It was just like him to meticulously detail the goings-on in Celestia but refrain from including even a single line of his personal feelings on these matters. Then again, given the kind of man my father was, perhaps I should have been grateful that he both began and ended the letter with inquiries about my well-being.

With a suppressed, wry smile acknowledging my father's antics (or lack thereof), I carefully refolded the letter and slid it back into its envelope.

Problems in Celestia. My father was likely drowning in paperwork even now as I pondered over his letter. I just hoped he was eating and sleeping properly. An image of him, worn and weary, skipped across my mind. The thought that by the next time we met, he'd be haggard and emaciated with care brought a twinge of sadness to my heart.

Setting aside my emotions, I extended the envelope back to Lord Theodore. "Thank you, my lord. The letter is yours to keep."

He politely took hold of it with both hands. "Rest assured, my lady. It will be well protected," he said. Then, unexpectedly, he raised his fist and knocked on the air with his knuckles. Even more unexpectedly, it made a distinct, solid sound—no less solid than every physical door I'd knocked on over the course of my life.

*An invisible wall?* I thought, half-joking. But why would there be a need to make a wall invisible? And why right there of all places?

Suddenly, the air around his fist shimmered and warped. "Wh-What is that?!" I gasped. A circle of distorted space seemed to form, but everything beyond its radius seemed utterly unruffled. *Wait, a localized distortion of space? Isn't that...* "An extradimensional storage pocket?!"

"Oh?" Lord Theodore asked, arching an impressed brow. "You recognize this?"

“So it is?” I responded, a little too eagerly. “It is, isn’t it? A form of storage magic only available to dimensionalists? Through their manipulation of the fabric of space, they can create an extradimensional pocket to store personal paraphernalia. It’s said to be accessible only to the mage who created it!”

My excitement bubbled over as I recalled the awe I’d felt upon first learning of such a wonderful technique at the Academy. To witness it firsthand was like watching a fantasy manifest into reality. There were only a handful of dimensionalists of any real skill in the entire realm, and knowing my letter would be safeguarded by such extraordinary means brought a sense of relief and thrill. It was, in every sense, a marvel to behold.

“It is exactly as you say,” Lord Teodore affirmed. “This is an extradimensional storage pocket. The amount of space available for storage depends greatly on the quantity and quality of one’s power. In my case, I can store about two warehouses’ worth of material—that is, the large ones you often see at port. And for your information, extradimensional space is inhospitable to life, so please refrain from sticking your face into it. You’d suffocate from the lack of air in mere moments.”

He looked almost gleeful as he casually recounted the alarmingly perilous nature of this world between worlds. I decided against asking why he seemed to find this so amusing—some secrets of the realm were better left unexplored.

The lord cleared his throat and adjusted his spectacles. “But yes, consider your letter safe. No harm will come to it there.”

With that, he deftly placed the letter into the shimmering portal. After confirming that the treacherous void had happily accepted his offering, he snapped his fingers. The portal shrunk to a point, then disappeared, leaving no trace that anything extraordinary had transpired at all.

“Now, with that sorted,” Lord Teodore said, turning his attention briefly to the clock, then to me. “Would you prefer to proceed with today’s lectures, or shall we adjourn for the day?”

His proposal was infused with a quiet concern, a gentle acknowledgment of the ordeal I’d just endured. And perhaps he was right to be cautious. Up until now, I’d managed to fend off my anxiety by concentrating on the urgent

matters at hand, but as my distractions dwindled, unease crept in to fill the void. I was not so strong as to confront a direct threat to my life and come out of it unscathed. The lingering shadow of that peril was a chilling presence at the fringes of my consciousness, and it was beginning to cause an involuntary tremor in my hands and a quiver in my breath, betraying the turmoil within.

Before I could voice a decision, Prince Edward interjected. "Let's call it a day," his baritone rumbled decisively. "It wouldn't be wise to ignore the impact of the day's events."

"I agree," affirmed Lord Theodore. "Imperial history and magical studies, while important, are not strictly necessary for the immediate events ahead of you. Missing one day won't jeopardize your readiness for the Fete or your wedding."

Their words made it clear that my shaken demeanor was perhaps far more apparent than I had realized. And as that truth settled, a wave of self-reproach washed over me. I'd thought myself ready to face the inherent risks of my position in the imperial family, but in the end, my resolve had been nothing but a gaudy illusion. Just one brush with danger had left me awash in dread. It was utterly unfair. My mind was crystal clear; I wanted to be strong and stand tall in the face of adversity. But my body... My body betrayed me magnificently as I trembled uncontrollably. I attempted to speak, to assert that I was fine, but the words refused to form.

"Carolina, it's okay to be afraid—to feel scared." Prince Edward gently reassured me. "You don't have to pretend otherwise."

*There it is again.* The prince's kindness, his empathy. To my surprise, his words were a balm to my rattled nerves, and I drank of them deeply, desperate for their comfort. "*I'm fine.*" *Say it. Say it!* I urged myself, but having been hit all at once with the fear that had been lurking just under the surface until now, a strangled whimper was all that escaped me.

"I will send you back to your room via teleportation magic," Lord Theodore announced briskly. "The memories of the incident in the colonnade are likely too fresh for comfort. Allow me a moment to calculate the coordinates."

Without waiting for my reply, he began scribbling away on a piece of scratch paper. The art of casting teleportation spells was an intricate one, demanding

precise calculations and the careful construction of a magic circle to channel the power. They were also extremely mana-intensive, and thus typically reserved for transporting sovereigns. The thought of such potent magic being expended on the likes of me stirred a mix of reluctance and guilt, but I couldn't deny it—the relief of avoiding that dreaded colonnade was immense.

*Thank you, Lord Teodore.*

I wrapped my arms around myself, seeking comfort in the rhythmic scratching of his pen across the paper, and tried to steady my wavering heart.



## Chapter Four

Time seemed to slip through my fingers like ephemeral grains of sand, transforming my perception of the passage of days and nights into a hazy blur. Before I knew it, an entire week had elapsed since the harrowing assassination attempt. Just as the raw edges of that trauma had begun to fade into a numb afterthought, the much-anticipated Founder's Day Fete arrived.

In the quiet sanctuary of my chambers, I slipped into the dress I'd selected with the empress, being mindful not to tear the ephemerally shimmering silk as I gingerly slid my arms through each light blue sleeve, guided by Marisa's careful hands. Next came the delicate shawl of lace draped over my shoulders, its lightness almost ethereal, before my handmaiden finally adorned me with the finishing touch: a moonstone necklace and earrings, their milky-blue hues subtly echoing the color of my gown. My hair was elegantly swept into an intricate updo, gracefully embellished with a hyacinth corsage to add a touch of natural beauty. The whole ensemble gave me an air of elegance and sophistication, and as I twisted around to glance at myself for one final appraisal, Marisa gently interjected, "Now, my lady, it's time for your makeup. Over here, if you would please."

With a soft acknowledgment, I moved to the vanity chair. Marisa, armed with her array of brushes and cosmetics, acknowledged my brief glance at her before I closed my eyes. Almost immediately, I felt the gentle touch of a sponge caress my cheek.

"Marisa, will you be attending today's event?" I asked after a few moments of silent work.

"Not as a guest," she replied. "But I'll be there to assist you as your handmaiden, working behind the scenes."

I couldn't hide a hint of disappointment in my voice. "That's a shame. I was looking forward to seeing you in a fancy dress."

A playful pout formed on my lips to signal my disappointment, and it was

promptly met by the cool glide of lipstick. Perhaps this was Marisa's subtle way of quieting my chatter. I remained silent, letting her work her magic. Before long, I felt her step back. "All finished, my lady. You may open your eyes now."

*That was unexpectedly fast.* Or perhaps it was just Marisa's exceptional skill at play? The entire makeup session had taken no more than ten minutes. I gently eased my eyes open, and the reflection in the mirror took my breath away. From within the glass, a stunning young woman of ash-gray hair and crimson eyes gazed back at me. Highlighted by the makeup, her eyes stood out in a particularly striking manner, and the contrast made them sparkle with red fire, just like the ruby so valued by the imperial family.

*This is...me?* I could hardly believe it. The makeup had elevated my unassuming features into something extravagant. Extravagant, but in a good way—the application was masterful, enhancing my natural looks without being overpowering, and it perfectly complemented my attire.

I found myself reaching out, my fingers almost touching the mirror in disbelief at the vision in the mirror. "Marisa, this is incredible," I said in an awed whisper. "I've always thought you were talented, but you've truly surpassed yourself this time. Now, His Highness and I might actually look like we belong together."

Marisa replied with her usual straightforwardness. "It helps when I have such fine features to work with, my lady. I didn't have to do much."

"Humble, aren't we?" I teased lightly. "Your hands have worked wonders today, Marisa."

"Thank you."

And just like that, she'd parried my words of gratitude with her professionalism once again, leaving me with a pang of guilt—I had inadvertently forced her to offer empty flattery for my own ego. A handmaiden, bound by her role, would never claim credit with a remark as self-aggrandizing as, *You look beautiful now, all thanks to me*. Only retroactively had I realized that my praise, however well-intentioned, had put her in an awkward position.

I flashed myself a wry smile as I watched Marisa tidy up her tools. An unexpected knock at the door interrupted the quiet of the room.

“Come in,” I called lightly.

“Excuse me,” came a deep voice.

“Pardon our intrusion,” added a higher-pitched one.

The voices beyond the door were unmistakably familiar ones, yet as it swung open I was met with a sight that made me question how well I truly knew these two young men. The figures who entered my chambers were much more than the earnest prince and the coolheaded advisor that I had come to know; they were embodiments of grandeur, exuding a regal presence that surpassed—no, far eclipsed—any prior example of majesty I’d ever known.

Lord Theodore was the very picture of nobility. His shoulder-length blond hair, usually flowing freely, was now elegantly braided on one side and gracefully tucked behind his ear. A peridot pin, matching the hue of his eyes, adorned the front of his jacket, adding a touch of sophistication. His clothes, though cut of a cloth in somewhat subdued brown, seemed deliberately chosen to complement rather than outshine his lord. All in all, it was a look that was quintessentially Lord Theodore.

Beside him, Prince Edward was a monument to stately opulence. He wore a formal ensemble of black, gold, and crimson, crowned with a magnificent mantle. His accessories were modest, limited to a pair of unassuming pyrope garnet earrings, which glinted softly under the light. Accustomed as I was to seeing him in his military fatigues or his armor, this departure from his usual style was all the more dramatic.

“She looks great,” rumbled a deep voice on the distant edge of my perception.

“What did I say? A true diamond in the rough, isn’t she?” added a higher-pitched one, which finally snapped my attention back to the present.

It seemed that while I’d been staring into the void, lost in my admiration, the void had been staring back. And Prince Edward’s admiration of me... It was so direct, I couldn’t help but blush. This was made all the worse by the fact that I knew he wasn’t one to flatter. Besides, to say that out of nowhere, in front of others and without warning...

“Th-Thank you. How kind of you—both of you,” I stammered, managing a smile. “And you both look so distinguished for the occasion—even more so than usual.”

“Yes, but I must say that you outshine the both of us, Carolina. I can hardly compare,” Prince Edward said, stepping closer to me. He took my hand and knelt at my feet, his gaze lifting to meet mine. His face was as unreadable as ever, but his eyes—those golden zircon eyes—were pregnant with an ardor that was...intoxicating.

My heart started to pound in my ears, its rhythm loud and insistent. *Unfair, Your Highness. How utterly unfair.* His stare, so intense and captivating, seemed to draw me in. Someone matched in marriage for mere political expediency shouldn't look into the eyes of their partner with a gaze so passionate. *You shouldn't do that, or I might just—*

“Ahem.” Lord Teodore's cough, pointed and purposeful, cut through the thickening atmosphere. “It's nearly time. Shall we make our way to the venue?”

I hastily whipped my hand away from Prince Edward's. “Right!” I hurriedly agreed. “Right. Let's go, shall we?” My heart continued in its rapid tempo. *My goodness, what was I doing getting carried away with Lord Teodore standing right there!* I scolded myself. *No, it isn't just that! Why has the mood turned so intense, so suddenly? Get it together, Carolina!*

My thoughts whirring, my cheeks ablaze, I barely registered Prince Edward rising to his feet and addressing Lord Teodore. His voice seemed distant, as if coming from afar. “Teo, I have a mind to keep Carolina all for myself. I don't want anyone else seeing her when she looks this lovely. Perhaps we could—”

“Don't even think about skipping the Fete! Enough dawdling. At this rate we are going to be late!”

The exchange between them was lost on me; my mind was elsewhere. I hardly noticed Lord Teodore stare daggers at the prince, nor did I register his emphatic gesture towards the door. Even Prince Edward's chagrined nod, acknowledging Lord Teodore's command, seemed dreamlike as my mind left me behind, consumed by the force of my heartbeat.

As we walked, the details of their conversation slipped through the sieve of

my consciousness until they dissolved to nothing, leaving no trace of memory behind.



By the time we reached the venue, I had managed to regain my composure. As I stood behind an ornate set of double doors with Prince Edward by my side, a nervous anticipation bubbled within me as I waited for the guard to signal our entrance.

Before long, our herald's booming voice pierced the air, sending a sharp jolt through me. "Presenting His Imperial Highness, the second prince of Malcosias, Edward Ruby Martinez. And accompanying him, the illustrious Lady Carolina Sanchez!"

The doors swung open on cue and beckoned us into the spotlight.

This was it—the moment of truth, the culmination of all my lessons with the empress, every bit of knowledge and practice distilled into the purpose of this singular occasion.

As the doors parted to reveal the grand hall, I caught sight of the sea of faces turning our way, a vast ocean of aristocracy drawn from the highest echelons of royalty and nobility from all across the realm. The sheer force of their scrutiny felt overwhelming, igniting a primal urge within me to flee. Instead, I summoned every ounce of my resolve and I stood firm.

*You mustn't let it get to you,* I told myself firmly.

I threw back my shoulders and stepped forward with Prince Edward.

*You've rehearsed this countless times with Her Majesty.*

*Marisa took great care in dressing you so beautifully.*

*There is nothing to fear.*

Embracing my stern conviction, I painted a smile onto my face. In high society, the innocuous smile was a tool used by all. To feign, to probe, to beguile. In this den of wolves, to reveal one's true emotions was to be devoured alive.

With this devious implement fixed upon my lips, Prince Edward and I began our procession down the center of the hall, our path lined by the watchful eyes

of the elite. As they parted to make way for our passage, their hushed whispers brushed past my ears.

“My! Is that Prince Edward—escorting a noble lady?”

“Isn’t Sanchez a Celestian house?”

“Sanchez? As in *Flora* Sanchez?”

“Carolina is...the younger sister, is she not? She’s quite lovely—has she always been?”

“She is quite exquisite, isn’t she? Like a single flower blooming in a frozen wilderness.”

“But—why are they walking in together? What could this mean?”

“Who knows?” The entire venue seemed to resound with the question.

Their collective murmuring swirled around us, an undercurrent of curiosity and speculation. Even for a court that was renowned for its penchant for gossip, the level of speculation seemed unusually intense. I couldn’t fault them for it. To the uninformed, Prince Edward and I as a pair must have presented a most enigmatic sight. I wouldn’t put it past some of the more astute members of other royal families to have already pieced together the nature of our arrangement just from observing our grand entrance. After all, keeping abreast of political developments, domestic or not, was part of their role.

“Sounds like a few sharp minds have already guessed the happy news,” Prince Edward said in hushed tones.

“Indeed,” I responded, my gaze fixed resolutely ahead.

The weight of the crowd’s attention followed us as we made our way to the dias, upon which stood two majestic thrones made out of solid gold. We performed a brief courtesy to the vacant chairs, as was mandated by protocol, and then we swiftly melded ourselves into the crush of guests.

So far, so good. All my time spent rehearsing had paid off. The first hurdle now cleared, I allowed myself a small, inward sigh of relief, savoring a moment of hard-earned tranquility—a calm which was not to last.

A trio of elegantly dressed women quickly converged on us.

“Greetings, Your Highness. And a pleasure, Lady Carolina. Iris Simmons—delighted to meet you.”

“Luna Braun, a pleasure”

“Emma Butler.”

Their introductions were flawlessly polite, couched in tones that echoed the epitome of high society decorum, but I could sense it nonetheless—the sheer force of razor-sharp curiosity that dripped from their persons. I’d never met them once in my life, yet I somehow knew exactly what they were like. The court gossips. Their type was predictable. On this particular occasion, they had likely cornered us with a purpose: to glean the answers to one simple question, and if they couldn’t obtain the answers they sought, they wouldn’t hesitate to concoct and disseminate their own version of the story.

Well, it wasn’t as if that mattered today. Our relationship was soon to be public knowledge; the damage they could do was minimal. For this reason, I tightened my smile and returned their greetings with equal decorum. “Lady Iris, Lady Luna, and Lady Emma, a pleasure. Carolina Sanchez. I look forward to our acquaintance.”

Their replies came in a cascade of feigned sweetness.

“Absolutely, Lady Carolina!”

“The pleasure is entirely ours, I assure you!”

“To be friends with Miss Carolina, what a privilege!”

A thick veneer of innocence was painted on their faces, but no amount of dissembling could quench the fire of inquisitiveness in their eyes. The unspoken question hung thick in the air: *What is your relationship to the prince?*

It was such a shame that their question was destined to remain unanswered—by my lips, at least.

Another thing bothered me as well: the fact that while they greeted Prince Edward politely enough, they promptly turned away from him without a single attempt to turn the conversation his way. To relegate a member of the royal family to the background seemed almost disrespectful. What kind of attitude

was this?

The three ladies weren't done with me yet; they launched into a bombardment of effusive praise.

"Lady Carolina, you are so splendidly radiant! Just what *is* your skincare routine?"

"That gown is simply stunning!"

"And is that moonstone? How exquisite! Which jeweler do you patronize, if you don't mind my asking?"

Was this truly their intended strategy? To fluster me with compliments so I'd more readily answer their questions about my relationship with Prince Edward? Their approach was almost refreshing in its brazenness.

I responded with a light, noncommittal laugh. "You're all very kind. To be praised by three little finches as charming as yourselves is truly a privilege."

Their reactions were immediate and effusive, a mix of amusement and surprise.

"My! Three little finches, she says!"

"You have quite a way with words, don't you, Lady Carolina!"

"And so you must be the most lovely finch of all!"

Their laughter, haughty and refined, filled the air. To any onlooker, our exchange would seem nothing short of harmonious perfection.

If only my actual aim was to find favor with them, because then I'd consider the exchange a remarkable success.

"Oh my, me?" I simpered, a slight edge creeping into my voice. "I'm but a humble sparrow compared to the three of you. I could only hope to be as lively and *chirpy* as you ladies one day."

"Ch-Chirpy?!" the three of them exclaimed in chorus.

My veiled jibe seemed to have hit its mark. The implication that they were as noisy and undesirable as discordant songbirds appeared to provoke a reaction. A blush rose to their cheeks—a mixture of indignation and embarrassment, I



was sure.

A hushed snicker echoed somewhere near us, rapidly burgeoning into expanding ripples of amusement that spread through the crowd. It seemed our little exchange had become somewhat of a spectacle, witnessed by a substantial portion of the guests, much to the chagrin of the three finches in question.

They cast nervous glances around the room, visibly shaken by the reaction of their audience. Their eyes swerved back to me, their expressions decidedly less friendly than before.

“I-If you’ll excuse me, I forgot I had someplace to be!”

“Y-Yes, thank you for your time, my lady! I must be off now!”

“Good day!”

With a twittering cacophony of abrupt farewells, they beat a hasty retreat, disappearing into the sea of guests. Their parting glares suggested a desire to find a suitable retort, but they’d (correctly) determined that the crowd was not in their corner.

Watching their retreat, I let out a soft sigh of relief. It was somewhat comforting to know that such behavior wasn’t exclusive to Celestian social events.

“I...didn’t know you had that in you,” Prince Edward remarked, finally breaking his silence.

“Neither did I,” I responded, taking his words as a compliment. A hint of a blush warmed my cheeks at his unexpected acknowledgment.



After our initial encounter with the “finches,” we mingled with the other guests in a series of brief interactions. Each person offered nothing more than a short introduction and some harmless small talk before politely disengaging. It seemed that no one was eager to follow in the wake of the earlier spectacle. This allowed Prince Edward and myself to complete our round of obligatory social preliminaries relatively unscathed, securing a much-needed respite

before the official commencement of the festivities.

However, the reprieve felt tenuous. The looming focus of the room's attention still rested heavily on us. I found myself anxiously awaiting the arrival of the emperor and empress so that they might divert the spotlight. Even the first prince had yet to make an appearance, and the scheduled ceremonies were mere minutes away.

*Did something happen to delay the rest of the royal family?* Just as a flicker of concern crossed my mind, the guard's booming voice filled the hall again. "Presenting His Imperial Highness, the First Prince of Malcosias, Gilbert Ruby Martinez!"

The collective focus of the guests pivoted all at once, turning from the now relatively familiar sight of the pair of us and towards the grand doors instead.

Gilbert Ruby Martinez, the empire's esteemed first prince and Prince Edward's elder brother, was an enigmatic figure. Known for his reclusive nature due to his frail health, rumors of his striking appearance abounded, with most of them likening him to a fairy-tale prince. The air was thick with anticipation as every set of eyes, including mine, fixed on the doors with bated breath. They opened at last, in a manner that seemed strangely hesitant, and a strikingly handsome figure entered the hall.

His long pastel-blue hair, loosely gathered into a high ponytail, provided a stark contrast to his luminous golden eyes, which sparkled with a luster that was almost divine. His skin, pale and pristine, evoked the image of an untouched snowdrift. His exquisite features might have been chiseled from the finest block of marble, and they exuded an otherworldly aura. Into the hall strode a man who seemed to be (in every sense of the phrase) a work of art.

Just as the rumors had suggested, his soft demeanor perfectly embodied a fairy-tale prince brought to life. "My word," I found myself whispering in awe. "That's...Prince Gilbert?"

"He takes after our mother," Prince Edward replied. "At least on the outside. Inside, he's just like our father."

"I see," I murmured softly. "He must be quite popular then."

Surely with his combination of the empress's looks and the emperor's personality, it was impossible that the ladies of the court ever gave him a single moment of respite. Proving my point at once, I noticed that several of the ladies around us were staring fixedly at Prince Gilbert, their eyes filled with an unmistakable, fiery longing. There was no doubt in my mind that it was going to be a bloodbath.

As I was lost in thought, Prince Edward suddenly voiced a question that seemed to come out of nowhere. "Do you see something in him, Carolina?"

"Do I... What?" I stammered, my mind momentarily stalling. "See something?" As in...romantically? He was asking me this? Here and now? Confused, I turned to him only to be met with his somber, almost forlorn gaze.

When he spoke next, his voice was calm, yet I could sense the faintest trace of desolation. "The ladies of our court all seem to favor my brother for his grace and charm," he explained, a little bleakly. "He's like a fairy-tale prince come to life, as they say. I, on the other hand, am seen as boorish and unsociable. So I wondered if perhaps you felt similarly." His eyes briefly fell away before locking with mine again. "Am I...not to your liking, Carolina?"

His expression remained flat, but his underlying pain and resentment shone through so clearly. It seemed strange; why could I sense it so plainly? Then it occurred to me—perhaps his experiences mirrored my own. Prince Edward with his brother; I, with my sister. Had he been living in the shadow of his elder sibling too? Of course... This was exactly why I was so readily able to recognize his pain.

But even then, our parallels had their limits. While I had been somewhat freed from my chains by leaving my home and Celestia behind, Prince Edward still remained ensnared, possibly for the rest of his days. And as my mind drifted towards that awful conclusion, a deluge of sorrow flooded my heart, which quickly transformed into a fervent sense of empathy and even a bit of indignation on his behalf.

"If I may be so frank, Your Highness," I began, my voice carrying a newfound conviction, "I must confess to being uncertain about my preferences in a partner. I've never experienced love—nor have I sought it. But one thing is clear

to me: whatever love is, it wasn't what I felt upon seeing Prince Gilbert just now."

Beside me, I felt Prince Edward react. I chose to press on rather than pause to see what that reaction might have been. "Certainly, he is a figure of allure, but not one that captivates my heart. And if you'll permit me to be so bold, I find your steadfast, kindhearted nature to be far more appealing."

Once the words were out, I lifted my gaze to meet Prince Edward's and offered him a smile. This time, it was not an implement of deception or an obscuring mask; instead it was a sincere expression of my thoughts.

After all, what need was there for platitudes and falsehoods to provide comfort when the simple truth would do just that?

He only stared back at me, and a contemplative silence stretched between us. Then the corner of his lips quirked upwards ever so slightly. "You are a strange one, Carolina Sanchez."

There it was again. That fleeting, clumsy, almost boyish smile that transformed his usually stoic face into something youthful and unguarded. It'd been so long since I'd last been privy to it—I found his smile more precious than any gemstone.

Also, *a strange one*? Really? That was the best compliment he could offer? If I'd been any other lady, that one utterance would've earned him the cold shoulder for life. Lucky for him, I appreciated his candid words. A flicker of mischief sparked in my mind, and I couldn't resist indulging it with a light giggle. "So what if I am? Are strange women not to your liking, Your Highness?"

Exactly as I'd expected, my playful jab was met only with the furrowed brow of a man undergoing serious mental deliberation. "No, I wouldn't say that, in fact—"

But before he could finish his sentence, the guard's booming voice, louder and more commanding than it had been yet tonight, reverberated across the great hall. (Such perfect timing!) "Attention, one and all! Presenting His Imperial Majesty, Eric Ruby Martinez! And accompanying him, Her Imperial Majesty, Vanessa Ruby Martinez!"

The entire assembly, nobility and royalty alike, instantly bowed their heads in deep reverence. I, too, gripped my skirts and lowered my gaze as the vibrant chatter of the grand hall dissolved into an awed hush. A regal trumpet fanfare sounded out over the throng, and as the last note faded into silence, the doors opened.

“Glory to the Empire!” the congregation around us thundered in unison.

The fiery-haired emperor and the empress of ice made their majestic entrance. They moved with regal poise down the center of the hall, ascended the dais with stately grace, and turned to face their subjects and guests as they seated themselves upon their opulent golden thrones.

The emperor’s voice, a deep and resonant baritone, shattered the reverent hush. “Lift your gazes, my esteemed guests. Revel in the splendors of our day of celebration.” His words, steeped in the solemnity of tradition, carried a weight that seemed to echo through the very foundations of the hall.

*So this is the public face of the emperor.* Until now, I had known him only in familial settings, in which his voice had invariably been soft and affable. But here in his imperial guise, he exuded an imposing presence that was both awe-inspiring and slightly unnerving. It was often said that the greater the nation, the greater the leader, and hearing him now, I could not help but feel the truth in those words. His charisma was not just striking; it was *commanding*, resonant with the gravity of his station.

As I finally straightened from my curtsy, I met the emperor’s gaze, and a renewed sense of awe washed over me. His eyes, golden and piercing, radiated a sense of unwavering gallantry and the gravitas of ceremony.

“Your presence here on this auspicious day honors us greatly,” he continued, his voice imbuing every word with significance. “I invite each of you to partake wholeheartedly in the festivities. To relish the joy of our great empire to your heart’s content. But before we commence our celebrations, I must share a matter of great import with you all.”

*Here it comes.*

“Prince Edward. Lady Carolina. Step forward.”

Our response was a unified and resonant, “Yes, Your Majesty,” a reply which echoed through the hall’s anticipatory stillness as we made our measured approach to the dais. The carefully choreographed performance unfolded seamlessly. A palpable sense of expectation enveloped us; the room’s collective gaze, heavy with intrigue, followed our every move. Even the few among the assembly who had guessed some aspect of our scheme appeared visibly startled by the swiftness of this revelation. It seemed that while they had understood the intent, they’d misread the timing. An understandable lapse of judgment, but in this instance, a critical one.

Their wide-eyed expressions of astonishment mirrored my own disbelief from just two weeks prior. I quelled the urge to allow a sly smile to grace my lips. We halted before the grand dais, and under the watchful eyes of the emperor, the empress, and their assembly of aides and attendants, we offered a deep, respectful bow.

Prince Edward was to introduce himself first. “Glory to the Empire. I, Edward Ruby Martinez, second imperial prince, heed your summons.”

Next was my turn. “Carolina Sanchez, of the esteemed ducal House Sanchez of the Kingdom of Celestia, humbly at your command. May the glory of Malcosias reign eternal.”

“Admirably spoken,” the emperor acknowledged. “Rise and turn.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” we replied in unison, our voices resonant with the ceremony’s formality.

We lifted our heads and pivoted to address the assembly. Under normal circumstances, the act of turning our backs to Malcosias’s sovereigns would be a grave breach of protocol, but in this case it was a necessary component of the grand reveal. We stood as the focal point of the emperor’s impending proclamation.

The emperor’s voice resounded once more, authoritative and clear. “As some astute minds have no doubt deduced, the announcement on this illustrious day concerns these two bright young souls before us.” He paused, allowing the murmurs of the crowd to swell and ebb. A hushed expectancy filled the air, punctuated by an audible intake of breath from behind me. “I, Eric Ruby

Martinez, hereby proclaim the forthcoming union between my son, Prince Edward Ruby Martinez—and Lady Carolina Sanchez!”

The emperor’s declaration, laden with the weight of tradition and expectation, rang through the hall. Though his face wasn’t visible to me, I imagined that it was suffused with a father’s pride. After all, what greater honor was there than for a father to personally announce the union of his beloved son? A new wave of murmurs cascaded through the crowd, but this time, they were too vibrant to be suppressed.

“My! Prince Edward and Lady Carolina?”

“A union—and he said forthcoming too! The wedding must be near at hand!”

“Prince Edward is finally settling down, is he? Well, I would’ve liked it to be Prince Gilbert, but I suppose that’d be difficult, considering the circumstances.”

“A Celestian girl, eh? A political gesture, no doubt, considering recent tensions.”

“Well, if it’s the most expedient way to mend ties, then so be it. Their people deserve peace.”

“Regardless, Prince Edward’s marriage is a momentous occasion! Bring on the drinks and hor d’oeuvres!”

Surprise animated the hall, yet I could not detect a hint of dissent. Words of congratulations swelled like a tide, inundating us in a sea of goodwill. I had braced for some resentment—outrage at a Malcosian prince wedding a noblewoman from inconsequential Celestia—but I heard nothing but bland felicitations.

Could this somewhat indifferent acceptance be tied to Prince Edward’s reputation as “the Bloodthirsty Prince”? If so, it left me with mixed emotions. To think that his own people might undervalue someone so kind and steadfast was disheartening. I chastised myself—this was neither the time nor place for such reflections, not amid the warm embrace of the crowd’s joyous reaction to our union.

The emperor cleared his throat, and this sound instantly reclaimed the attention of the room. “Details of the nuptials will be forthcoming. I thank you

all. Now, let us revel in the joy of our empire.”

At his signal, a sea of glasses was raised high. Servants discreetly passed glasses of red wine to Prince Edward and me, the rich, crimson color sparkling brilliantly under the lights of the hall.

“A toast! To the enduring prosperity of our empire, and to the bright young souls that will lead us into that illustrious future!” the emperor proclaimed. “Cheers!”

“Cheers!” The response from the crowd was a thunderous cascade, the sound of hundreds of glasses chiming in unison reverberating through the grand hall.

With that, the curtains fell on the pivotal announcement of our engagement, and the next vibrant chapter of the celebration unfurled before us. Everything had proceeded so flawlessly that a part of me was left almost a little disappointed that nothing of any real note had occurred; our performance had barely felt different from the rehearsals leading up to it.

“Carolina.”

Prince Edward’s voice pulled me back from my wandering thoughts with its calm yet resonant timbre. He faced me, a glass of wine in his hand. *Ah, yes, we must join in on the toast*, I reminded myself. I gracefully lifted my own glass, mirroring his gesture.

“To us, Carolina.”

“To us,” I agreed. “And to all the years that lie ahead.”

Our eyes locked, conveying a warmth that words could scarcely capture. With a soft clink, our glasses met and sealed our shared sentiment, our private moment in the midst of the grandeur surrounding us.



The Founder’s Day Fete was, in every sense of the word, a spectacle. Laughter and voices reverberated through the hall, some raised in amusement and others lowered into whispers of intrigue, each syllable carrying the weight of the destinies of entire nations. At the hall’s epicenter, a scene of serene elegance unfolded as ladies and gentlemen danced, each step a study in grace



and poise.

This was it. *The Fete*. *The* proverbial battlefield of high society. An ostentatious display of refinement and luxury, brimming with gaiety and splendor...and somehow I couldn't bring myself to enjoy any of it.

Enjoy it? Impossible. Not if *this* was what I was expected to endure until the end of it.

"Congratulations, Your Highness, Lady Carolina! Should you require anything for the wedding—and I mean anything at all—our doors are always open!"

"We are overjoyed for you! A match made in heaven!"

"Our boutique specializes in bridal gowns. You should know, we just received a shipment of the finest fabrics!"

"And should you still be in search of the perfect ring, our family's jewelers offer unparalleled craftsmanship!"

"No, no, come to us for your rings! Our designs are unmatched!"

One by one, noble after noble came crawling out of the woodwork, each more eager than the last to offer their services for our ceremony. I understood wanting to involve themselves—providing for a royal wedding was a once-in-a-lifetime honor—but this was a little *too* shameless. A procession of barely veiled self-interest masquerading as friendly well-wishes. They were acting less like dignified aristocrats and more akin to a ravenous pack of hyenas, each vying for a piece of the proverbial carcass.

To where, I wondered, did the "nobleness" of the nobility vanish in these moments?

With a feigned blush and an exaggerated lean into Prince Edward, I clasped his arm, my voice laced with faux innocence. "Why thank you, everyone, for your recommendations. I'm deeply touched, truly. But regarding the wedding, I must consult with His Highness—in *private*, of course—before coming to any decisions about any aspect of it. You will all understand that, I hope?"

My ploy seemed to hit its mark. The nobles' expressions shifted, a dawning realization of their overeagerness eclipsing their fervor. They exchanged

sheepish glances, their discomfort palpable.

“Oh, Lady Carolina, my sincerest apologies. How thoughtless of me...”

“Indeed, matters such as these warrant private discussions between the betrothed.”

“I beg your pardon for getting carried away.”

“Oho ho ho! Then, we shall leave you to it, dear couple! Oho ho ho!”

“Y-Yes, let’s afford the charming pair some privacy, shall we?”

“Pardon us, Lady Carolina, Prince Edward. Do enjoy the festivities! Oho ho ho ho!”

Either they’d all sprouted a sense of propriety at exactly the same moment, or the shame of their actions had hit them all at once. In any case, they backed away with a haste that bordered on comical.

*So ineffective at peddling their wares, but so quick to pedal their feet...*

Well, that was that. I’d had to play up the role of smitten fiancée, but it had served its purpose. Watching them dissolve back into the crowd, I gently disentangled myself from Prince Edward. “My apologies, Your Highness. I’d hoped not to impose myself on you so, but it seemed the only way to disperse them,” I said, offering only a simple verbal apology since we were in such a public place.

Prince Edward’s response came in a soft, almost melancholic whisper. “You’d hoped not to, huh?”

“Um?” I sputtered, perplexed at his sudden disheartened tone.



Something in his expression reminded me of a wounded animal, a lone wolf limping along sadly without his pack. Annoyance or even anger at my presumption—I had been prepared for that. But this? He looked almost on the verge of tears.

I opened my mouth, intending to ask how I'd offended him, but before I could utter a syllable, a new voice smoothly inserted itself into our conversation. "Hello, you two."

We turned to see a young man with light blue hair and striking golden eyes approaching—Prince Gilbert. His presence radiated a warmth that reminded me of the sun's gentle rays. He halted before us with a friendly wave and gentle smile. "Edward! It's been too long. And this must be the illustrious Lady Carolina? A distinct pleasure indeed. I am Gilbert Ruby Martinez, first prince of Malcosias, at your service. Allow me to thank you for taking our dear baby brother off our hands—he's quite the handful, as you've surely discovered."

I immediately bobbed a modest curtsy. "It is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Imperial Highness. I am most humbled that you remember my name."

"Hello brother," Prince Edward responded, a note of concern in his voice. "Are you sure you're well enough for such festivities?"

Prince Gilbert's reply was light, tinged with an easy charm. "Well enough, I'd say. Not cured by any means, but the blessing of His Holiness affords me a small reprieve from my symptoms."

Cured? Symptoms? If he was afflicted by a grievous ailment, that would certainly explain his poor health and time away from the spotlight; it was just strange that this was the first time I was hearing of it. Observing him more closely, his pale complexion and frail build became more apparent, but it was hardly enough to make him seem like someone suffering from a grave illness.

Their conversation drifted on, Prince Edward's tone tinged with worry. "I see. And what does His Holiness say?"

"He warns that my condition worsens," Prince Gilbert admitted. "Without his intervention, I'd likely collapse the second I stepped foot out of the Diamond

Palace.”

“That...doesn’t sound promising.”

“Indeed, it does not. At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before— Ah, but let’s not cast a shadow over today’s joy. We are here to celebrate, aren’t we?” With a swift change in demeanor, Prince Gilbert’s smile reemerged, bright as ever, a deliberate beacon against the creeping gloom of their prior subject of conversation.

This was only our first meeting, so the layers of meaning beneath Prince Gilbert’s smile remained enigmatic to me. Yet his struggles with his undisclosed illness were evident. The severity of his condition was enough to keep him largely confined, even if the specifics of it were cloaked in mystery.

“Well, our time together has been regrettably brief but most enlightening,” Prince Gilbert said, his tone laced with genuine warmth. “I must take my leave, but not before extending my heartfelt congratulations on your union. Congratulations, you two, sincerely.” He pivoted gracefully, leaving us before we could respond. As he moved away, a gaggle of unmarried noblewomen swiftly surrounded him, drawn to his charisma like moths to a flame.

He...was popular all right. At this point, I felt a twinge of sympathy not only for him, but for all the other unmarried noblemen at this party who’d come to find a match. “Well, I certainly hope His Highness feels better soon,” I remarked, more out of courtesy than anything.

“Yes, indeed,” Prince Edward echoed, but his tone carried the weight of resignation.

All around us, the Founder’s Day Fete buzzed with energy, our single conversation losing itself among the threads of the vibrant tapestry of laughter, music, and lively chatter.



After our encounter with Prince Gilbert, Prince Edward and I retired to a secluded royal sitting room for a brief respite. The moment I sank into the plush embrace of the room’s luxurious sofa, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. It was as if all the fatigue that had accumulated throughout the day chose that

very moment to make its presence overwhelmingly felt.

I was utterly spent. The mere thought of standing up again seemed like an insurmountable challenge. It only occurred to me then that the seemingly effortless socializing and the continuous engagement with a myriad of guests had actually been somewhat of a taxing ordeal, a trial I had naively underestimated. The plight of the popular; it truly did exist.

Yet duty called, and after about ten minutes of indulging in this peaceful reprieve, I mustered the energy to turn towards Prince Edward. "Should we make our way back, Your Highness? We've lingered here for quite some time."

But before he could respond, a soft yet assertive knock punctured the room's tranquil silence. *A visitor?* Confusion flickered through my mind. The corridor leading to our little sanctuary was diligently guarded by members of the Pyreborn; only someone of significance, someone previously approved, could have made it this far. Could it be a familiar face awaiting us on the other side?

"Enter," Prince Edward commanded. The door swung open, revealing a familiar figure with striking blond hair.

The Pyreborn's vice commander sauntered in, his lustrous blond locks catching the light as he gave them a nonchalant flick over his shoulder. A rueful smile played on his lips. "Forgive me for disturbing your rest, Your Highness. But if this is what I have to resort to in order to secure a moment with you today, then so be it."

The prince looked decidedly less than enthused at this surprise appearance. "Yeugh," he groaned. "It's you, Teo?"

"'Yeugh,' Your Highness? Really? I have graciously come to personally update you on the security situation at this event, and 'Yeugh' is my welcome?" Lord Theodore's tone was half-mocking, half-serious. "Oh, and by the way, I have one Duke Sanchez with me here as well."

As he stepped aside, a second figure emerged, his deep voice resonating through the room. "Greetings, Your Imperial Highness. It's been some time. And you too, Carolina."

Hearing that voice, my eyes widened in shock. In the whirlwind of the day's

events, I had completely forgotten the promise of my father's presence. As I observed him, a twinge of concern gripped me. He appeared more worn, more gaunt than I remembered. "Father! It's been too long. I'm so glad to see you."

"Good to see you again, Duke," Prince Edward replied in turn. "It has indeed been some time since our last encounter, hasn't it? And...I wish I could say you look well, but I must be honest—you don't. Please, take care of yourself."

"Of course. Thank you for your concern, Your Highness," my father responded with a polite nod.

Suddenly, Prince Edward rose from the sofa with a decisive air. "I'm sure father and daughter have a lot to catch up on. We'll give you some privacy." He looked at Lord Theodore as he nodded towards the door. "Teo, I'll hear your report elsewhere."

With a brief acknowledgment to my father and myself, Lord Theodore followed Prince Edward. Together, they briskly exited the room, the door closing behind them with a definitive click.

*Um...* This was the royal sitting room, was it not? Wanting to grant us privacy was one thing, but to cede the entire royal sitting room to nonroyals was quite another.

My father, perceptive as ever, seemed to catch on to my unspoken thoughts. "I'm certain Lord Theodore has everything under control. No need to fret over that," he assured me, stepping closer. "May I sit?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" I stammered back, hurriedly scooting over on the sofa to make room.

As my father settled onto the plush cushions beside me, an unfamiliar nervousness took hold. We had seldom sat this close to one another back in Celestia. I fumbled for words, but before I could gather my thoughts, he broke the silence. "His Highness seems quite the gentleman, doesn't he? I've only met him at formal functions. His gesture just now was very thoughtful. It does make one question the rumors about him, doesn't it?"

"Indeed," I found myself responding. "Prince Edward has treated me with nothing less than his utmost kindness and consideration. He possesses a certain

calm. And though he can be...hard to read sometimes, I truly believe he's someone I can trust, someone I could stand beside for the rest of my days."

I realized belatedly that I might have divulged more than I'd intended as the conversation veered towards Prince Edward. But my father's expression was one of tranquil contentment. "If that is what you see in him, then I trust your judgment." He cast his eyes upward, and I could see relief washing over his features. "That is truly heartening to hear, Carolina. I must confess, the whole matter has weighed heavily on my mind ever since your departure, but your words bring me great comfort."

He reached out, his hand gently brushing my hair. As I looked up into his eyes, I caught a hint of loneliness shimmering in their placid, emerald depths.

A light giggle escaped me. It tickled me to think that my father... No, the esteemed prime minister of Celestia, Raymond Sanchez, was at his core just as human as anyone else. I'd just missed it for all this time.

"You know," I said, my tone light and playful. "I've thought it for a while, but it's clear now more than ever—you really do worry too much, don't you?"

My father's response was flat, absent of any hint of humor. "You think so? Any parent would feel the same, especially when they can't physically be near their child. If I gave in to my worries, I'd visit you once every month just to assure myself that you're well."

"Once every month!" I laughed. "That would be quite the overprotective streak. Checking up on me every month... What would that make you, my doting doctor?"

He pondered the idea with a straight face. "Your doting doctor, eh? Perhaps that would not be such a bad role to assume once Celestia's future is secured and I've stepped down from office."

I blinked at him. "Y-You're joking, right?"

His deadpan delivery left me uncertain whether he was serious or in jest. The thought of my father, the venerable former prime minister of Celestia and head of House Sanchez, trading politics for a physician's coat was far too absurd—not to mention without precedent. And what of House Sanchez's legacy? With



Flora's impending ascension as Saint, there seemed to be no immediate successor to the dukedom itself in sight.

Oh right, Flora!

"Ah, that reminds me!" I blurted out. "How has my sister been doing? Your letter mentioned that Celestia's current affairs might be linked to her condition..."

The truth was that I struggled to feel any real concern for Flora. I hadn't felt any when I'd read the letter, and I didn't feel any now. But it struck me that she was, on an institutional level, crucial to Celestia's stability. Regardless of our personal relationship, my concern for my homeland necessitated a concern for her too.

My father looked as if he would start to speak about Flora, but a sudden change overtook his expression. His half-formed words faded into a troubled silence. Puzzled, I was about to ask what the matter was when I heard it too—the rapid, heavy pounding of footsteps approaching our door.

The tranquility of our conversation was instantly shattered as the door burst open with alarming force, a lone knight storming into the room. It was Owen, his face etched with distress and urgency. He dragged an unknown man behind him, one who was limp and visibly battered, and Owen himself panted heavily from exertion. "Princess, get away from that man!" he yelled, his voice hoarse and ragged.

The calm we had enjoyed mere seconds ago was replaced by chaos. The knights who had been standing guard outside rushed into the room behind Owen. Their voices overlapped in confusion and alarm. "Owen, stop!" and "Inform the commanders immediately!" they shouted, trying to regain control of the situation.

But Owen's focus was singular—his eyes locked onto my father with an intense, almost venomous glare. Confusion swirled within me. Owen was supposed to be guarding my chambers, wasn't he? Why was he here? And who was the disheveled-looking man he held by the scruff of the neck, one who was dressed in a hooded robe that screamed "suspicious"? Clearly not a guest.

Owen approached closer and yelled again, repeating what he'd said earlier,

but this time pointing an accusing finger at my father. “Princess! Get away from him—now! He orchestrated an attempt on your life!” He shook the bloodied man in his grasp. “This man confessed everything!”

My mind reeled, hitting a brick wall. An assassin—in my room? Orchestrated by my own father? It was absurd, unbelievable. “Wait, Owen. Calm down, I think there’s been a—”

“There’s no time! Quickly, come! You’re not safe there!” Owen’s voice was frantic; his demeanor bordered on hysteria.

It was clear that any semblance of rationality and logic had left him. But the more Owen dug in his heels, the less sense it made. My father stood to gain nothing from my demise. And even supposing that the unconscious man *was* an assassin (a fact yet to be substantiated), it was inconceivable that my father was involved.

Emotions surged within me, morphing from shock to indignation. Stepping in decisively in front of my father, I heard my heels click sharply on the marble floor. “My own father, sending an assassin after me? Are you out of your mind, Owen?” I challenged, my voice trembling with barely contained rage. “Have you verified this accusation with any kind of proof, or are you just blindly accepting the word of this poor man you’ve bludgeoned half to death? Where’s the evidence? The motive? Or are you content to take the claim of a stranger at face value?”

Owen’s expression transformed from one of desperation to disbelief. “P-Princess? What are you getting mad at me for? I only acted to protect you...”

“Enough excuses!” I snapped. “Answer me. Do you have proof? Any at all?”

“Princess, I...”

“*Do* you?”

My words were forceful and unrelenting. Owen flinched, his usually steadfast demeanor crumbling under the intensity of my anger. His eyes widened, luminous as polished sunstones, conveying the depth of his shock. It was almost as if he hadn’t even considered the possibility that I might be upset at such reckless accusations against my father—a man who had just shown me nothing

but his deepest concern and love. I couldn't let such groundless allegations slide—not even from a personal guard who had already demonstrated his loyalty.

With my emotions surging, I locked eyes with Owen, challenging him to justify his actions.

He nervously worked his jaw. “I intercepted this man trying to sneak poison into your room. When I caught him, he claimed he was hired by Raymond Sanchez, so I rushed over as fast as I could,” he explained, loosening his grip slightly on the would-be assassin. “But it's as you say. I don't have any proof beyond his word.”

His voice dwindled to a sullen murmur, his eyes darting away from mine like a child caught red-handed in the middle of a distasteful prank. Finally, he let go of his prisoner completely, and the unconscious man collapsed to the floor headfirst, his hood falling away to reveal his face.

*Hm? Is that man from across the eastern sea?*

His complexion was notably darker than that of the citizens of Celestia and Malcosias, and the color was consistent across every inch of his exposed skin—not just the areas typically touched by the sun. His ears and upper chest were both of an identical hue, suggesting a natural pigmentation rather than a tan. This was a trait often associated with the peoples from across the eastern sea...or so I'd heard.

A sense of calm accompanied this observation, easing some of my earlier turmoil. “My father isn't the culprit,” I declared, my voice now steady and composed.

Owen, however, was still not convinced. “How can you be so sure? I might not have any physical proof, but his words should still count for something!”

“Under different circumstances, perhaps,” I countered evenly. “But not here. It's implausible that my father is involved. Celestia has yet to forge any ties with the eastern peoples.”

Celestia had not engaged in any trade, nor had it even entertained a single envoy from across the sea. The sheer geographical distance made any such interactions practically unfeasible. Even Malcosias, far more progressive and

blessed with far more resources than Celestia, had only recently initiated diplomatic relations. For these reasons, the likelihood of anyone from Celestia hiring an assassin from such a remote region was infinitesimally small.

And this was all before even considering the clear lack of motive. My untimely demise would have such negative repercussions on Celestia that it was inconceivable that my father would orchestrate such a deed.

“Th-Then how do you explain the fact he specifically named your father?!” Owen blurted out. “Is that not in itself the least bit sus—”

His words were abruptly interrupted by a smooth, authoritative tenor. “Indeed, it is a matter of concern, one that demands thorough investigation. But such questions are for another time—not now, not here.”

My fiery-haired prince and his councillor swiftly entered the room, flanked by two familiar knights. A heavy silence fell, punctuated by their synchronized bows.

“Duke Sanchez, my sincerest apologies,” Prince Edward said as he straightened from his posture of respect. “This unfortunate incident reflects upon my leadership. As commander, I assume full responsibility.” He hung his head low in a gesture of deep remorse. For a member of a royal family to lower himself before a mere noble in such a way was a significant faux-pas, yet it seemed the only hope of rescuing Owen from his even more significant breach in etiquette. Even for the son of a baron, the false accusation of an aristocrat of another nation was a serious offense—assuming that the accused were to pursue action against them.

It seemed, however, that my father had no interest in censuring Owen. “Please raise your head, Your Highness. Know that I have no intention of taking this matter any further. Perhaps this young man jumped to a rash conclusion, but he did so out of consideration for the safety of my daughter. As her father, I cannot fault him for that.”

Relief washed over Prince Edward’s face as he straightened once again. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Lord Theodore’s expression, on the other hand, remained unchanging; he’d been cool and collected throughout the entire exchange. “We are grateful for

your graciousness, Duke Sanchez. To ensure your comfort after this most distressing ordeal, we've arranged a separate chamber for you." He nodded at one of the knights. "Ron, please escort the duke."

"Yes, sir," one of the two familiar faces responded. "Your Grace, if you would please follow me."

Ron was visibly tense, yet he perfectly maintained his professional demeanor as he led my father from the chamber. As I watched them leave, I was struck with a sudden pang of loneliness. When the door clicked shut, I returned my attention to the others in the room—and I found Lord Teodore's razor-sharp glare boring into Owen, his attitude a mix of disappointment and silent reproach. "Despite my *explicit* instructions to avoid causing a scene during the Fete..." His voice trailed off, laden with barely contained anger. "No matter. What's done is done." He gestured to the other knight that had followed them in. "Collett, take both Owen and our friend from the east to the Pyreborn headquarters. Consign our would-be assassin to the guardhouse and Owen to the interrogation room."

"Yes, sir," Collett affirmed with a brisk salute. Striding over to the limp man on the floor, he effortlessly hoisted him up and tucked him under one arm. With his free hand, he grasped Owen firmly by the wrist, guiding him out without a word.

Owen, who had remained sullenly quiet since Lord Teodore's arrival, shuffled along obediently, his usual boldness replaced by a subdued and uncharacteristically diminished presence.

Breaking the heavy silence, Lord Teodore announced decisively, "It's time we too vacated this space. This room has lost the tranquility necessary for serious discussion."

"Carolina," Prince Edward said, his eyes seeking mine with a sincere intensity. "I promise, all will be made clear. Now please, come with us so we can speak more freely." He extended his hand towards me, an invitation to trust and to follow.

I hesitated, his outstretched hand symbolizing more than just a gesture of support. There were so many questions swirling in my mind, secrets to unveil,

not least of which was the rationale behind Owen's assignment as my personal guard, a fact that had suddenly assumed a greater significance.

However, Prince Edward was correct: this was neither the time nor the place for my queries. With a sense of resolve, I suppressed the tide of emotions within me and placed my hand in his. If this was the path to the truths I sought, then I was prepared to walk it.



We adjourned to an empty room in the royal castle. Unlike the lavish sitting room from earlier, this space was comparatively desolate, its furnishings limited to a plain table surrounded by a few sofas. Due to the scope of this evening's event, most guest rooms had been transformed into areas for rest and socialization, leaving this bare chamber as our only refuge for private conversation.

I sat across from the two men, engaged in a wordless exchange of gazes. An unspoken but palpable tension hung heavily in the air.

Lord Theodore spoke first. "Now that we're all settled, let's address the matter at hand. As our first topic of discussion, we should—or... No, perhaps we should start with your questions. What would *you* like to know, my lady?"

His inquiry felt almost rhetorical; surely he knew the one question burning away in the back of my mind, but he asked that I voice it anyway. That was just the kind of cunning, devious character he was. Firmly meeting his bespectacled, peridot gaze, I responded, "Please tell me why Owen was appointed to be my personal guard. That is all I wish to know."

At this, Lord Theodore flashed me a resigned smile, as if to say, *Right, of course*. Prince Edward, on the other hand, looked away awkwardly.

They'd clearly kept this information from me intentionally; I had expected their reluctance to answer, but this evening's events had stripped me of any remaining patience. I deserved answers, and if they failed to provide them in a satisfactory manner, I was prepared to demand Owen's dismissal from my service—even if it meant facing down their most vehement objections.

Perhaps Lord Theodore had anticipated all of this, as I noticed the slightest

flicker of agitation cross his features before being swiftly masked by his usual practiced smile. “So, you wish to know about our reasons for appointing Owen as your guard?” he repeated, as if he were stalling for time. “Well, we did promise you that all would be made clear. Very well then—”

His clear intent to disclose the information that I sought was abruptly interrupted by Prince Edward, whose fiery locks swayed with the intensity of his sudden interjection. “Teo, wait! You can’t possibly...” The reluctance in his voice was palpable, his whole demeanor radiating a desperate wish to shield me from whatever truth lay hidden in whatever answer Lord Theodore intended to provide.

“Your Highness, rest assured that I understand the source of your reluctance,” Lord Theodore explained calmly. “You do not wish to give her cause to fear—neither do I—but at this point, we can no longer obscure the truth even if we wanted to. Unless it was your wish to persist in feigned ignorance indefinitely?”

“No, of course not!” Prince Edward bellowed. “It’s...not about hiding the truth. It’s just...is there really a point in burdening her with knowledge of matters beyond her control?”

“Yes, I’m sure we’d *all* be happier wallowing in our own ignorance, but in Lady Carolina’s case, it is exactly this ‘ignorance’ that is fueling her anxiety. She is astute, inquisitive—her desire to understand the situation around her burns far too brightly to justify keeping her in the dark. This is not something you can hide from her forever. She is to be your wife. It’s not a matter of *if* this conversation will ever happen, it’s a matter of *when*.”

Resigned, Prince Edward conceded defeat. “I just... Fine. Tell her everything. Sorry for interrupting.”

In this verbal skirmish, Lord Theodore had emerged the definitive victor. The fiery-haired prince fell into silence, his face twisted into a grimace. It was a rare display of visible distress from a man whose expression usually gave away nothing. Did he truly dread the idea of me finding out...whatever it was *that* much? Then...perhaps it really was better that I...

*No, no, no! You made up your mind, Carolina! You resolved to confront this—the truth upon which your future in Malcosias hinges.*

With a firm shake of my head, I dismissed the tendrils of sympathy attempting to sway me towards Prince Edward. Refocusing, I prepared myself to hear whatever difficult knowledge had been so fervently kept from me. “My apologies. Please continue,” I said, my voice steady.

Prince Edward acknowledged my words with a slight nod, while Lord Theodore, ever the orator, prepared to unveil the mystery. “Very well, I shall divulge the rationale behind Owen’s appointment as your guard. But before we delve into that,” he paused, drawing out the suspense with a practiced precision, “we must first address a significant issue prevalent in the upper echelons of Malcosian society. It is, in fact, intrinsically linked to Owen’s appointment.”

There it was. The factional problem to which Owen had alluded. It appeared that whatever his role was in all this, it was indeed entwined with these political undercurrents. My fingers twisted in the fabric of my skirts as I braced myself for the revelations to come.

“The Empire of Malcosias presently finds itself split into three factions,” Lord Theodore began, his tone exuding a professorial air. “There are those aligned with the first prince, those who incline towards the second, and a third, ostensibly neutral group. Might I inquire, Lady Carolina, what implications you can surmise from this division?”

*Factions backing the first and second princes?* His question seemed almost unnecessary, given that the implications appeared fairly obvious. Meeting his peridot gaze, I played along, offering the answer he angled for. “It suggests that the question of succession is a matter of significant concern among the populace.”

“Precisely,” he affirmed. “As you very well know, Malcosias has two princes—Prince Edward, the second prince who you see right before you, and his elder brother, Prince Gilbert. Both have reached adulthood, a fortunate circumstance. Yet this fortune breeds its own quandary. For you see, while we have two eligible princes, neither has been declared the crown prince. The decision of who will ascend as the next emperor remains, shall we say, up in the air.”

My eyes widened as the full weight of Lord Theodore’s explanation crashed



over me. The factional strife was a battle for succession, fueled by the astonishing fact that the next crown prince had yet to be determined, something that was both unprecedented and alarming. The nobility was right to be concerned. “Might I inquire why the crown prince has not been chosen yet?”

Lord Theodore’s response to my probing question was hesitant, a slight unease creeping into his demeanor. “That...has everything to do with Prince Gilbert’s health, and Prince Edward’s... Well...”

The fiery-haired prince interjected with a frankness that caught me off guard. “I have no ambition to wear the crown. Administrative rule doesn’t suit me, and my reputation is poor. My brother is clearly the better choice.”

“And there you have it, straight from the horse’s mouth,” Lord Theodore nodded. “Not only is Prince Edward unsuitable for the throne, he is unwilling to sit in it.”

The heart of the matter, then, was the lack of a clear, viable candidate for the throne. Prince Edward’s disinterest was understandable, but what about Prince Gilbert? What possible condition could so significantly impede his eligibility?

Treading carefully, I ventured another question. “In that case, might I also inquire as to the exact nature of Prince Gilbert’s ailment? When we met at the party, there were mentions of ‘symptoms’ and ‘cures’...”

I was aware that this was a rather pointed intrusion into personal affairs, but the knowledge seemed crucial to my understanding of the matters at hand. Lord Theodore’s gaze hardened ever so slightly as he divulged, “What ails Prince Gilbert is more akin to a disability than a disease—Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

I was rendered speechless. Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome? I’d certainly heard of it, but how was that even possible? As I understood it, that was a condition that only affected children. As the name suggested, it was characterized by a heightened sensitivity to ambient mana. It typically manifested in recurrent bouts of mana-sickness in young children, often leaving them bedridden. Though the definition of the disease sounded rather objective, its symptoms varied widely, and they were often described by those who suffered them as vague, pervasive, overwhelming sensations.

Conventionally, symptoms peaked in childhood, reduced throughout adolescence, and resolved by adulthood. It was therefore commonly perceived not as a grave ailment but as a transient childhood condition—or at least, that was what I had been taught. I had never even heard of someone continuing to suffer the effects into adulthood, let alone met someone who lived with the condition. Everyone diagnosed with it always outgrew the disease—always. I couldn't help but view this revelation with a heavy dose of skepticism. The existence of an adult living with Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome just seemed too far-fetched—impossible, even. I'd sooner believe a misdiagnosis made by the royal physician, and the notion of Lord Teodore fabricating a tale in this situation seemed equally improbable.

Prince Edward, his voice taking on a somber note, began to unravel the history of Prince Gilbert's affliction. "My brother was first diagnosed with it when he was four. It is a common enough condition, so back then, nobody thought anything of it, but..."

Lord Teodore picked up the thread of the story. "Prince Gilbert's case defied the usual pattern. Instead of diminishing, his symptoms intensified with age. Initially, he experienced typical bouts of mana-sickness, but now, his condition has escalated dramatically. Without a blessing from His Holiness to temper the effects, he is unable to even walk around freely outside. His Highness testifies that he is able to see the invisible threads of mana in the air, as well as the arcane energy within others. As you can imagine, that is a lot of information for a human mind to process, and the sensory overload often leads to loss of consciousness."

*Able to see the flow of mana and the arcane power of others...?* I could scarcely believe my ears. To think that Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome could manifest in such an extreme way flew in the face of convention.

Prince Edward added, "Because of this, my brother is confined to the Diamond Palace, which is shielded by a specialized barrier."

"To mitigate his exposure, all palace staff are nonmagical," Lord Teodore explained. "Even with all these precautions, his struggle remains debilitating, with no prospect of recovery in sight."

Their clenched fists and the underlying frustration in their voices spoke volumes to their feelings of helplessness. Lord Teodore's features were etched with a pained grimace, and although Prince Edward masked his emotions more adeptly, I could sense the depth of his grief.

The reality was stark and disheartening. Prince Gilbert's unique plight, his life derailed by an exceptionally rare and untreatable condition, seemed to leave little room for optimism. If a cure hadn't yet been found, then perhaps it would be unwise to assume one would ever materialize. In which case, the only option left to him was to live insulated from mana as much as possible, and that...would be a less than inspiring way to live, to say the least.

"Prince Gilbert's wise and affable personality initially garnered him immense support as the future crown prince," Lord Teodore continued. "However, as his condition deteriorated, so too did the public's confidence in his potential for leadership. His prolonged reclusion has, unfortunately, bred a sense of unease and distrust. The question looms: how can the reins of an entire empire be entrusted to one who must constantly grapple with their own well-being? The leader of Malcosias—indeed, the leader of any nation—must be robust, healthy, and reliable. There is simply no way to dispute this. The ramifications of being ruled by a sovereign who could at any moment become utterly incapacitated by illness would ripple disastrously throughout the nation."

"My brother's public appearances are limited to a handful of occasions each year," Prince Edward added. "He cannot be expected to keep up with the rigorous demands and constant visibility required of an emperor. There's a growing fear that he wouldn't be capable of shouldering the full responsibilities inherent to the throne."

*Responsibilities inherent to the throne...* I could see one way to make this work: if His Holiness were to abdicate all of his other responsibilities in order to act as Prince Gilbert's personal physician, but that...wasn't feasible. The conundrum Malcosias faced was thorny indeed.

Having thoroughly dissected Prince Gilbert's situation, Lord Teodore subtly adjusted his black-rimmed glasses, a gesture that seemed to say, *Now this is where things get interesting*. "As uncertainty about Prince Gilbert's health mounted, Prince Edward simultaneously began to emerge as a formidable

figure in his own right, demonstrated with a series of impressive military victories.”

*Of course...* With so much uneasiness swirling about the status of the first prince, the spotlight would naturally shift towards Prince Edward. This was fertile soil for the seed of an idea to germinate within the public’s mind: the possibility of Prince Edward’s ascension to the throne. And if such a notion had gained sufficient traction, it would provide an influential catalyst for the factional strife currently engulfing Malcosias.

A rueful smirk appeared on Lord Teodore’s face. “Enter our robust second prince. Not a wise prince, nor a graceful prince, but certainly a hale and hearty one.”

“I can tell when you’re insulting me, Teo,” Prince Edward muttered.

Lord Teodore continued, unfazed. “To oversimplify, we have, on the one hand, a sagacious, affable, but sickly first prince; and on the other, a slow, simple, but otherwise physically robust second prince.”

“Don’t ignore me,” the second prince in question snapped. “And must you call me slow to my face?”

Despite his impassive expression, it seemed that Prince Edward was not entirely immune to Lord Teodore’s jabs. Next to him, Lord Teodore heaved an overly dramatic sigh, his theatrics reaching a climax. After a prolonged pause, he feigned a gasp of realization, bringing his fingers to his lips in a gesture of mock-horror. “Oh, dear. How rude of me. My sincerest apologies.”

“Teo, you know it doesn’t sound very genuine when you wait so long to say it, right?”

“Oh, it doesn’t?” replied Lord Teodore, his voice dripping with feigned surprise. “I’ll be sure to keep that in mind for next time.”

*I suppose sarcasm is lost on the prince?*

As the verbal sparring match between Prince Edward and Lord Teodore unfolded before me, the power dynamics seemed momentarily reversed. To an onlooker unaware of their actual stations, Lord Teodore might easily be mistaken for the prince, such was his command over the course of the

conversation.

Pushing that amusing thought aside, I refocused on the larger picture. The factional divide in Malcosias, stemming from Prince Gilbert's ailment, had clearly created deep rifts, not only among the nobility but also within the populace, each faction rallying behind their preferred prince. Yet one question lingered in my mind: why had Prince Edward not shared this information with me before? This wasn't the kind of topic that would come up in casual conversation, but neither would I have expected him to be so reluctant to raise such a relevant subject with me.

I decided to ask him this directly. "Your Highness, why withhold this information from me? The situation seems hardly contentious enough to warrant such secrecy."

The lively banter that had served as a tension-breaking interlude evaporated instantly, leaving a palpable silence in its wake. Prince Edward, his discomfort evident, shifted his gaze away from mine.

Instead, his councillor jumped in to elaborate in his stead. Lord Teodore's usual glib smile was nowhere to be found, his voice taking on a grave tone. "My lady, you will need to fortify yourself against the difficult truths that lie ahead, as they might hit a little too close for comfort. Knowing that, do you still wish to proceed?"

His final disclaimer invited a tense seriousness into the room. It hung heavily in the air, transforming the atmosphere into one that was colder and more somber.

However, such warnings did not frighten me; of course I wished to hear more. I was no wilting flower. I had made the choice to join this discussion knowing full well what it might entail. "Yes, I'm prepared to hear it," I stated firmly. "Please, spare me no detail."

"Very well," he said after a beat. He then paused again briefly, his peridot eyes locking with mine in a moment of mutual evaluation—one that affirmed his resolve to disclose and mine to receive. He allowed the silence to stretch, taut with anticipation, before he finally spoke again. "The masterminds behind the assassination attempt the week prior, as well as today's stymied poisoning

incident, are likely...extremists from the first prince's faction."

*Extremists.* There was that word again. I couldn't hide my shock at hearing it in this context. But before my mind could whirl into an attempt to guess at its implications, Lord Theodore moved to fill in the blanks for me. "Among the parties that back Prince Gilbert's claim to the throne, there are those who harbor a...particular distaste for Prince Edward. They are individuals willing to employ *any method available to them* to prevent Prince Edward from becoming emperor, and they are the group we label as 'extremists.'"

His words sent a shiver down my spine, triggering unwelcome memories of the attack in the colonnade. My hands clenched involuntarily, a reflexive response to the lingering trauma.

Lord Theodore dropped his gaze to the floor, as if to spare himself the sight of my discomfort. "Their aim in targeting you, the envoy from Celestia, was to implicate Prince Edward in failing to protect you. This has been their strategy twice now: first in the colonnade, and now with the attempt to deploy poison. As for their additional endeavor to frame Duke Sanchez for this latest attack, that reasoning remains elusive to me. Though if I had to hazard a guess, I'd say that either the poisoner named your father in an act of impulsive desperation, or he was instructed by his employers to name the duke in response to the announcement of your engagement. After all, while your death would be an exceedingly effective way to annul your marriage, implicating your father in a failed assassination attempt would do the trick as well."

"Marriage is a form of status," Prince Edward explained. "These extremists must be desperate to deny the additional leverage that a wife may grant to me."

It was exactly as Owen had said. I had unwittingly become collateral damage in this elaborate game of political chess, solely because I'd been linked to Prince Edward. A sobering realization dawned on me. *Will I be in constant mortal danger until this succession crisis is resolved?* In that case, perhaps Prince Edward had been justified in his hesitancy to share the truth of the situation. He had wanted to spare me the constant fear and the bitter acknowledgment that my peril was a direct consequence of my association with him. It seemed that my well-being was the chink in the armor of his stoicism, that I was someone he

sought at all costs to shield from the harsh realities of his world.

My voice barely above a whisper, I said, “So, the stories about Prince Edward, his infamy as the Bloodthirsty Prince, that’s all...”

“Carefully crafted by the extremists,” Lord Teodore confirmed. “Their campaign of defamation was designed to erode Prince Edward’s standing. A decorated military champion of the empire, now recontextualized as a merciless villain, feared by those he strives to protect.”

“A fabrication,” I muttered, a mix of relief and indignation in my tone. “I knew those rumors couldn’t be true.”

“I would rather venture to say that they are rumors *based* on truth, but with crucial details selectively omitted,” Lord Teodore clarified. “Take, for instance, the tale of His Highness slaughtering a defenseless woman and her child. It is not entirely factitious. In reality, he acted to prevent a tragedy: the pair were in fact enemy combatants, and they were about to magically detonate themselves amid a shelter full of innocent civilians. The prince made the grim and difficult choice to cut off their arms before they could trigger the explosive hex, knowing that most spells cannot be triggered without the use of one’s hands, you see.”

The twisting of facts, the deliberate exclusion of vital context—it was all chillingly cunning. Perhaps the royal family felt their hands were tied, unable to refute what was technically not entirely a lie. “It always seemed so strange to me, the rumors surrounding someone as noble and kind as Prince Edward,” I said, filled with a kind of satisfaction at my newfound understanding. “So this was the scheme at play...”

“Yes, it is a travesty of the highest degree,” Lord Teodore responded, his voice now laced with a rare, raw edge of anger. “It’s outrageous—unforgivable! His Highness risks his own life on the battlefield for his people, is forced to make unimaginable choices, and in return, he’s slandered and maligned?”

At this, Prince Edward placed a reassuring hand on Lord Teodore’s shoulder. “Easy, Teo. It’s not worth getting worked up over. My choice to lead in battle, to be on the front lines...it’s a path I’ve chosen for myself. I don’t seek gratitude or recognition, or to be labeled as some kind of ‘protector.’”

Witnessing Prince Edward’s impulse to comfort his visibly agitated councillor,

I was overwhelmed with a sense of admiration for his inherent goodness. In the face of such injustice, it would be so easy to give in to anger, to join Lord Theodore in his outrage and give voice to his own frustration. Nobody would blame him for doing so, yet he remained composed, with no apparent intention to assign blame or stoke the fires of resentment.

Lord Theodore's frustration bubbled over into a passionate tirade. "Your Highness, this is an affront! They dare to besmirch your good name, to tarnish your reputation! Your legacy is at stake here, do you not see that? How can you remain so unperturbed?"

"Teo..."

"In fact, this is as much *your* fault as it is theirs! If you would only make the effort to stand up for yourself, we wouldn't be in this mess! And allow me to observe: this isn't just about you! Do you understand how much your laissez-faire attitude has increased my own workload? Do you, Your Highness?!"

"I... Yes, Teo, you're right. I ought to be more...proactive."

That...had taken a drastic turn. What had begun as a subordinate's fierce defense of his superior had unexpectedly morphed into an airing of his personal grievances. Theodore Garcia, always the apotheosis of efficiency, had managed to transition seamlessly from impassioned advocate to disgruntled employee in the space of five minutes. And it seemed he wasn't yet finished.

Catching his breath, he continued, his irritation unabated. "And while we're on the subject of work, where are those overdue reports, Your Highness? Spending your days poring over wedding ring designs—and for what?! By the end of it, you'll probably end up declaring, 'I'll design the ring myself,' or some other equally fanciful notion! Look, design your own ring if you must—that is your prerogative—but at least complete your official duties first!"

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, Teo," Prince Edward interjected, his voice laden with abashed bewilderment. "We can sort this out later, all right? For now, can we *please* get back on topic?"

Caught off guard by his own outburst, Lord Theodore blinked in surprise, as if abruptly returning to his senses. "Huh? Yes, of course. My apologies. That was... How unseemly of me." He attempted to regain his composure, but a telltale



flush of red on the tips of his ears betrayed his embarrassment.

What a pleasant surprise. I'd always regarded Lord Theodore as the pinnacle of professionalism, utterly immune to errors or lapses in judgment (reminding me uncomfortably of Flora in some ways). Tonight, however, he had displayed a very human side, relatable in a way that I hadn't anticipated. I allowed myself to revel—just a little—in the sight of his discomposure, for who could say when next I'd be presented with the opportunity to do so?

Lord Theodore, unperturbed by my penetrating gaze, adjusted his glasses with a deliberate motion, signaling a shift in and a reclamation of the direction of the conversation. "That concludes our discussion on Malcosias's factional strife. Now we must address the rationale behind selecting your personal guard."

Owen. The crux of this entire meeting. What compelling reasons could they possibly offer for choosing someone like him to protect me? And even if their rationale was sound, would it be enough to dissuade me from dismissing him in light of his behavior this evening?

*All right, gentlemen, let's hear it.*

I leaned forward slightly, my attention sharpening in anticipation of their explanation. They returned my gaze with equal intensity as they prepared to meet my scrutiny head-on.

Invisible sparks seemed to fly, and Lord Theodore was the first to make a move in this tense standoff. "In the matter of choosing your personal guard, we had but four criteria," he began matter-of-factly. "First, heritage: the guard had to be of noble birth to appropriately match a woman of your status; second, competency: they had to possess the skills necessary to ensure your safety. Already this eliminates the majority of lowborn members of our order from consideration."

So far, so good. His initial criteria seemed reasonable, the bare minimum qualifications for a knight assigned to safeguard one of noble birth. A lowborn guard would've been seen as an affront to my dignity, and sufficient competence, of course, was nonnegotiable.

Lord Theodore continued on. "The third criterion was that they must not have even the merest association with the faction behind the first prince."

Prince Edward interjected, further clarifying, “While we trust our men, there was a risk that their relations might attempt to exploit familial connections to gain access to you. So we erred on the side of caution.”

Lord Theodore nodded. “In this game of shadows, it is crucial we minimize uncertainties. Thus the selection process was considerably more stringent than it might have otherwise been.”

Of course. The enemy was bold enough to send snipers and even assassins within the castle walls. The stakes were high, and the requirement for unimpeachable loyalty in my protection was paramount.

“And the definitive consideration,” Lord Theodore said with an air of finality, “was an unwavering dedication to duty above all else.”

“Above all else?” I echoed, trying to grasp the implications.

“Yes,” affirmed the golden-haired lord. “The guard we ultimately chose had to be without ties or attachments—free of anything the extremists might leverage against them. They had to be able to devote themselves fully to your protection, unencumbered by distractions or other obligations. Though it must be admitted that in Owen’s case, it is perhaps less about his devotion to you and more the fact that he, quite frankly, has nothing to lose.”

“He owes no allegiance to his family, their wealth, their status...or even to his own life, for that matter,” the prince clarified. “In this regard, Owen emerged as the standout candidate.”

*He owes no allegiance to his own life?* It almost sounded like Prince Edward was saying Owen was utterly indifferent to his own existence. But how could that be? I recognized that there were risks inherent to the position, that any guard was prepared to lose limb or life in the line of duty, but this ought not to negate their fear of death or their instinct for self-preservation. *The drive to survive is deeply ingrained in all of us...isn't it?*

My bewilderment gave way to a burgeoning curiosity. A burning desire to understand Owen Klein and to comprehend why the prince described him in such stark terms.

“Lady Carolina,” Lord Theodore said, “in the end, Owen was the only knight in

our ranks to fulfill all four criteria.”

“What?” I whispered in disbelief. “Only Owen...?”

“I’m afraid so. As I alluded to earlier, the Pyreborn has but few noble members within its ranks. Truthfully, we should be thanking our lucky stars we had any suitable candidates at all.”

Perhaps he was right. Finding one person who truly met all four criteria, especially the last, was undoubtedly no mean feat. The concept of total devotion to duty to the exclusion of all else was almost unthinkable. Whether noble or commoner, how many could sincerely boast of such dedication? If I were asked to forsake my own father for my duties, could I honestly say that I would? No, of course I could not.

Lord Theodore had yet more to say. “We chose Owen despite his idiosyncrasies, fully understanding the potential risks and the trouble he might cause. However, we knew that he would neither forsake nor betray you, and that alone was worth the compromise.”

Prince Edward interjected, his voice laden with regret. “The incident today was a regrettable consequence of our decision.” Suddenly, the prince bowed his head. “I’m truly sorry, Carolina. It was an oversight we should have foreseen and prevented.”

As I gazed at his tousled red hair, slightly drooping forward as he assumed his contrite posture, I attempted to reconcile the storm of conflicting emotions raging within my mind. I could rationalize their decision; the meticulous care and thought that had gone into selecting Owen as my guard was truly impressive. He truly seemed to have been the only viable option, and their choice had been made with the best of intentions. Owen himself had meant well in the actions he had chosen to take. I understood all of that, and yet I still couldn’t find it in myself to forgive him. The image of him bursting in, brazenly accusing my father without even a shred of proof, still boiled my blood even now.

My dilemma was a difficult one: to assure my safety, I needed Owen by my side. To dismiss him now would be an act of sheer recklessness, an inadvisable risk for the sake of placating my own ego, but the very thought of maintaining

any connection with him ignited a fierce resistance in my heart.

I cast my gaze downward as I wrestled with my inner turmoil, but not before I caught Lord Theodore narrowing his eyes at me. “Lady Carolina,” he began with a calculated calmness. “What I am about to do next you may find manipulative and underhanded. You might even harbor resentment towards me afterwards—I do not care.”

I remained silent, raising my eyes to lock onto his, and he leaned forward with his hands clasped before him, an enigmatic glint in his eye.

“I am going to tell you the story of the man named Owen Klein—how he grew up, how he lived,” he announced. “And in doing so, I will be deliberately appealing to your empathetic nature, fully aware that it will sway you towards the outcome I desire.”

Prince Edward’s head shot up in protest. “Teo, that’s a deeply private matter. Should you really—”

Lord Theodore cut him off, his tone resolute. “Your Highness, I am going to make one thing abundantly clear. If Lady Carolina cannot be convinced to retain Owen as her guard—I will be forced to leave him to his fate.”

“What?!” the prince exclaimed.

“I have no intention of championing someone who cannot demonstrate their value,” the lord continued, unfazed. “But because I would prefer to avoid that very outcome, I will reveal Owen’s past to Lady Carolina.”

With calculated precision, Lord Theodore had methodically backed me into a corner. His approach was devoid of emotion, cold and unapologetic. I sat up straighter, feeling the immense weight of responsibility he had unceremoniously placed upon me. His threat to withdraw support from Owen was tantamount to condemning him to whatever unfavorable future his past actions might reveal themselves to deserve. Deprived of the aid of his right-hand man, Prince Edward would struggle to uncover the true conspirators, leaving Owen to face the dire repercussions of his accusations against my father. In the grimmest scenario, the possibility of execution loomed threateningly.

*Lord Theodore, you are a truly despicable man to use Owen's fate as a bargaining chip, thrusting the burden of decision onto me. And to so shamelessly announce your intentions to exploit me—you're behaving no better than a common swindler.*

"Now that you are fully aware of the depths to which I will stoop, let us talk about the man named Owen Klein," Lord Theodore continued remorselessly, his eyes narrowing with the precision of a hawk locked onto its quarry, "the bastard child born between Baron Klein—and his maid."

His opening words tore through my defenses in an instant with the force of their scandal. I braced myself accordingly to hear the rest of his story.



I followed Collett to the interrogation room in silence. As the door closed with a final click, I slumped into a chair, left alone with my self-loathing. The only witnesses to my disgrace were the stark furnishings of this desolate room.

*Jump the gun any harder, why dontcha...*

I thought I was better than this. I *knew* I was better than this.

*Why the hell did I ever think rushing to the Princess without a shred of proof was a good idea?*

Was I really that reckless, that stupid? Was I incapable of recognizing that my actions might have consequences?

And all this even *after* the vice commander had pulled me aside earlier today to sternly remind me to keep a lid on my impulses...

A raw, frustrated roar escaped my lips.

"What the hell am I doing...?" I groaned.

My bitter self-reproach echoed into nothingness, unheard by my comrades and unheeded by the empty walls.

*Idiot, idiot, idiot! It's like the second you heard the assassin utter the name "Raymond Sanchez," something in your mind snapped—as if a switch flipped, erasing all semblance of reason and leaving you consumed by a single, overwhelming thought: "Finally, someone like me."*

*That's right, you utter bastard.*

*You were happy.*

*You were ecstatic at the idea. At the prospect of Princess's father trying to kill her. Wasn't that something? If it were true, you'd be able to induct a new member into your exclusive club of shared suffering after all this time. Finally, you'd no longer be alone. You were thrilled to think you were about to witness someone else walk the same harrowing path you had to travel all those years ago, and that made you giddy beyond belief.*

*You're despicable.*

With a deep sigh, I closed my eyes, trying to calm the furious tempest of thoughts swirling in my miserable mind. But it was a mistake to think I could ever escape myself; projected onto the darkness behind my eyelids, my darkest memories played out vividly, as visceral and haunting as the day the events had first unfolded.



I, Owen Klein, was the bastard child born of an illicit affair between Baron Klein and one of his maids.

I didn't even know what my mother looked like; she'd died soon after giving birth to me, leaving behind only tales of her striking beauty spoken by the other servants. An orphan herself, she'd had no family to claim me, so I'd been raised in the house of Baron Klein.

We'd been a happy family of four: my father, Baron Dominic Klein; his wife, Baroness Natascha Klein; their eldest and only legitimate son, Drake Klein; and me. Setting aside the fact that I was a bastard, our family seemed otherwise as normal as any could be.

Normal—to everyone else. To me, it'd been akin to a living nightmare, one I couldn't escape.

The sound of shattering porcelain filled my ears, immediately followed by the shrill screams of my stepmother Baroness Klein. "Who said you could show yourself here? Retire to your room at once! You are to be unheard and unseen.

Get out of my sight!”

Glancing down, I saw the remnants of a recently purchased vase, now in scattered pieces on the floor. How long had this one managed to survive my stepmother’s rage? Barely a week at most?

I stared blankly at the ruined vase in silence, which served only to aggravate her more. “What’s with that insolent look? Do you have something to say to me, you ungrateful little brat? Lowborn filth, you should count yourself fortunate to be allowed under this roof!”

Hysteria consumed her, transforming itself to violence. She lifted her skirts and aimed a swift, brutal kick squarely at my torso. I was a weak, malnourished boy, not yet ten years old. I let out a sharp yelp, and my thin body was sent flying across the hall.

I landed with a harsh thud on the unforgivingly hard floor. Slowly lifting my head, I met her gaze and felt the force of her malevolence and cold indifference.

One might conclude that she didn’t much like me.

I was a living, breathing memento of her beloved husband’s betrayal, a constant reminder of a woman who’d been much younger and much prettier than her.

Taking this into account, perhaps her vehement rejection of me was inevitable, an unavoidable fate into which I’d been born by virtue of my unfortunate parentage. It seemed only natural for her to spiral into instability, succumbing to frequent hysterics. It seemed only natural that she would subject me to daily violence. And of course it seemed only natural for the household staff to turn a blind eye to my suffering.

As a young, powerless child, this had been the only way to make sense of my pitiful existence—by simply resigning myself to the belief that it all seemed...only...natural.

She stalked towards me.

“You dare to act like you belong here, you filthy! Lowborn! Wretch!” she screamed, each word punctuated by a vicious stomp to my crumpled form.

*Ah, she's wearing heels.*

“Stay in your room! Return to your books and study in silence! You are merely a spare in case something were to happen to Drake, and nothing more!”

It hurt—of course it did. But there was nothing to do but silently endure the abuse, biting my lip to suppress the whimpers of pain that might otherwise escape me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Drake, my half brother, passing through the corridor. He spared me a brief, indifferent sidelong glance before continuing on his way as if he had witnessed nothing out of the ordinary. He was much older than me, and to him, I was invisible. Something that didn't exist, something unworthy of his time or attention.

After my stepmother had exhausted her fury and left me to lick my wounds, I hauled my battered, aching body back to my so-called room. Nestled in the highest reaches of the estate, it was the tiniest attic, far more confined and squalid than even the modest quarters of the lowliest servants. In reality, it wasn't a room at all but a forgotten crawl space used for storage, a cramped cell cluttered with musty tomes, mold-infested bedding, and garments shrouded in dust and threadbare neglect.

I extended a trembling hand towards a haphazard pile of books, singling out a particular volume. *Imperial History VI*, the cover declared in faded lettering—a hand-me-down from Drake. Miraculously, I was allowed to partake in some semblance of an education, and to even ask questions of Drake's tutors when they weren't occupied with his teaching. As undignified as it seemed to snap up the leftover scraps of wisdom from my brother's table of knowledge, I nevertheless seized this method of learning with desperate fervor.

I immersed myself in study whenever and wherever I could. Why? Because I had a debt to pay. Not to the baroness who heaped abuse on me, nor to the household servants or Drake, who all pretended that I didn't exist, but to my father, Baron Klein—the man who'd taken me in, the sole beacon of hope in my life, someone for whom my gratitude knew no bounds.

His duties as a diplomat often kept him away from home for long stretches of time, and even when he did return, it would only be for a scant day or two



before departing again. I had never really had a conversation with him, yet he was the one who had saved me from a life on the streets (or worse). That alone was enough for me to hold him in high regard.

And that's why I studied my ass off. So that I could repay even a fraction of the debt I felt I owed to him. This singular purpose had become my reason to live, a solitary light warding off the ever-encroaching darkness of my unfortunate circumstances. I dreamed of the day when I could finally sit down with Baron Klein—no, with my *father*—and show him all that I had learned, to prove my worth at last.

With that resolve in mind, I opened the hefty textbook and returned to my studies with renewed fervor.

It was five years later. Drake was preparing to succeed our father, and my long-awaited moment approached. My impending reunion with the baron was no happy accident, but was instead the culmination of extensive and meticulous planning my part. Whenever the baroness's watchful eye was present, it was impossible for me to have any contact with my father. She'd always scream and shout and chase me away, so I'd had to choose my moment carefully. On that particular day, she was to attend a tea party at the salon of the Countess Herbert. The countess was a woman with wide-ranging connections, and the possibility of there being high-ranking nobility in attendance was high. The baroness, ever eager to ingratiate herself with those of higher status, would surely be occupied until late in the afternoon. This was my chance.

I sneaked out of my room. Evading the eyes of the servants, I somehow managed to reach my father's office without being noticed. As I stood before the door, its towering presence seemed to dwarf my very being, filling me with an overwhelming sense of intimidation. Had the door always been this imposing, or was it just the weight of the moment?

*He's there. My father. Just beyond this barrier!* The thought echoed in my mind, filling me with a mix of awe and trepidation.

With my heart thundering in my chest, I mustered the courage to tap gently on the wood. "F-Father! It's me—Owen!" I stammered, as loud as I could.

A deep, muffled voice responded from the other side, “Owen?” His voice, unmistakable and forever etched in my memory, sent the pounding in my ears to a fever pitch. I flung the door open, and there he was—my father, just as I’d remembered him from the few distant glimpses of him that I’d managed to hoard in my mind’s eye. A surge of elation, relief, and excitement washed over me. This was the moment I’d dreamed of. My father was right there, before my very eyes. All my years of hard work, all the pain and hardship I’d endured—it had all paid off!

Ha, as if. As I stood there, basking in my naive dreams, my father’s next words sliced through my illusions without mercy. “Owen?” He looked blankly at me as if struggling to recall who I was. “Ah, the maid’s child? You yet live? That is unexpected. And...troubling. Most troubling indeed.”

His words left me reeling, a confused noise escaping my lips. He hadn’t expected me to still be alive? What?

My mind ground to a halt, petrifying my thoughts, as my expression morphed into one of bewildered shock—a sight that seemed to amuse my father. “The spare I took in, in case anything happened to Drake, still alive, after all these years. How interesting. I was certain you would have perished at my wife’s hands long before now.”

His tone was sharp, laced with cruelty and mockery. “In any case, Drake has matured into a fine successor. You, on the other hand, have outlived your purpose. I shall personally see to your demise.”

His cold, unfeeling words ruthlessly shattered the delicate dream I’d treasured, thrusting me into the icy embrace of a harsh truth: in his eyes, I was nothing but a tool, one to be discarded the moment my usefulness faded.

That was the day I discovered that the father I’d looked up to for all this time was just another self-serving piece of human garbage. I saw the spark of contempt flicker in his eyes, all too familiar, so reminiscent of the disdainful looks I’d endured for my entire life. He didn’t even stand as he began to conjure fire magic.

*I see, so he, like everyone else, thinks of me as nothing more than a wretched bastard, born of lowly blood.* To him, I was a mere object worthy of his ridicule

and contempt. At that moment, something inside me snapped, like a piece of steel quenched one too many times, the metal strained past its limit. A half-transparent dome of energy materialized around me. My father, his expression detached, unleashed his fiery onslaught, but it was in vain. The flames fizzled out upon contact with my barrier—it seemed that a latent ability to create magical barriers had chosen this dire moment to reveal itself. My mind, however, was numb, barely able to register this newfound power.

*Thanks, I guess?* I sent this bleak prayer to whatever god had seen fit to bless me at this miserable moment. *What good is this power now, when I've just lost my only reason to live?*

But even as I grappled with this feeling of despair and helplessness, a faint whisper began to echo in the recesses of my mind, growing steadily into a commanding voice. “A reason to live?” I muttered through clenched teeth. “Who gives a shit about any of that right now? Just...just—!”

*Just run, Owen.* My words failed me, but the thought surged like a riptide, becoming a deafening roar in my mind. *Run, and never look back.* Seizing that urgent impulse, I bolted from the room, fleeing not just the place that had never truly been my home, but also the name and the life that came with it.

My father's echoing commands to stop rang in my ears unheeded, and his voice faded into insignificance behind me. Rage filled me, a boiling torrent of fury.

*Screw it. This living hell of a family, the snobbish nobility who look down on me for my bastard birth, this whole oppressive aristocratic system—screw all of it!*

*You wanna reject me? Screw me out of everything I deserve? Then I'll burn you to the ground—I'll burn all of it to the ground! If the law won't punish these nobles for their cruelty, then I'll enact justice with my own two hands. I won't rest until all the rules that exist just to benefit the elite are nothing but ash in the wind!*

A storm of raw, unbridled emotion raged within me. Bursting through the front door, I unleashed a primal scream of defiance, a sound so fierce and raw that it seemed to challenge the very sun in the sky.



After that fateful day, by a stroke of sheer luck I'd run into the commander, and he'd invited me to enlist with the Pyreborn. His offer to join their ranks had been nothing short of a lifeline, a chance to carve out a new identity and leave my tormented past behind. Now the only tie that bound me to the Kleins was my name, a mere formality on paper. There was nothing else, no intangible thread, linking me to those contemptible people. Each year, I received two letters—one from my half brother and one from my father. I never opened them; I either tore them to pieces or threw them into the nearest fireplace.

Now, as I sat in the dimly lit interrogation room, my eyes finally opened, drawn to the small window framing the moon. Its gentle glow bathed the land beyond in a serene light.

*It's beautiful.*

Since the day I'd left my father's house, I'd deliberately worked to shed the mannerisms of the aristocracy, their polished speech, their rigid etiquette. To continue to mimic their ways felt like conceding victory to them. My private rebellion might have been subtle, perhaps almost trivial, but it was my form of resistance, the only weapon I had.

I let out a deep sigh. "I'm sorry, Princess."

*You're nothing like me. You were born into a proper family, with parents who loved and nurtured you. I didn't mean to project my experiences onto you, to find some trace of myself in you, to cause such an inexplicable and distressing scene...*

*You might not care about my history, nor am I saying it excuses my actions. But Princess, I just hope you understand that my resolve has always been and will always remain...*

"To protect you."

Lost in my thoughts, I couldn't help but give voice to my resolve before letting the quiet solitude of the room envelop me once more.



The next day, in the aftermath of the Fete, I found solace in the simple rhythms of my needlework. Seated by the window in my sun-drenched room, I let the warm noon rays spill onto my lap, illuminating the delicate handkerchief I was embroidering as part of my training as a future homemaker.

It was deafeningly quiet, a stark contrast to the chaos that swirled within me. Last night, I'd agreed to retain Owen as my personal guard, a choice that now weighed heavily on my mind. It wasn't his continued appointment that troubled me; rather, it was the impulsive reasoning behind my decision. Had I been too easily swayed by the sorrowful tale of his past, letting empathy override my rational judgment?

*Some noble you are, Carolina...* I chided myself silently. To be so readily influenced by my emotions was unbecoming of my status. Yet, as I pondered more, I realized perhaps there was room for subjectivity in such decisions. Owen was my *personal* guard, after all.

Either way, what was done and done. In the clarity of a new day, I could see that my choice, though perhaps rash, was irreversible. I had made a determination, and although I hadn't arrived at the conclusion with a cool head, Owen was to remain my guard. This was a lapse in prudence that I could only acknowledge after a night's reflection.

"You still have a long way to go, Carolina..." I muttered to myself. As a noble, as a lady, and even as a person, I had much, much more to learn.

I paused in my needlework, my gaze drifting downwards as I absently studied the intricate patterns on the floor, deep in my thoughts. A coldness lingered within me despite the sun's warm caress on my skin. Suddenly, the tranquility was broken by a familiar, boyish voice from behind me. "Really, milady? Not *that* long of a way to go. That handkerchief looks pretty good to me."

It was Collett, his body clad in heavy plates of armor and a sword casually resting at his hip. He'd stepped in as my guard in the interim. Ideally, a guard of noble birth would have been preferable, but current circumstances had somewhat adjusted our priorities. For the moment, Collett, a commoner disconnected from the tangles of factional disputes, would have to do.

With practiced ease, I summoned a gentle smile. "Thank you, Collett. It's been

quite some time since I last took up embroidery. I was uncertain of how it would turn out.”

Those words were a facade, a conversational veil to conceal the turmoil of my thoughts. I had no intention of revealing my inner disarray to the pure and innocent Collett.

“Then you can rest easy, milady, because it turned out great!” Collett’s voice was buoyant, his words light. “I’m sure the commander would be overjoyed to receive anything that lovely from you!”

“Yes, I’m sure His Highness would be— Wait. Why are we speaking of His Highness?” I interjected, slightly taken aback.

“Oh, um, because, isn’t that handkerchief a gift for him?” he asked, his tone a mix of genuine curiosity and uncertainty.

In Celestia, it was customary for women to gift embroidered handkerchiefs to men, though typically these were finished, polished pieces. What I held in my hands was merely a practice item from my homemaking lessons. Certainly some women might present these practice pieces to family members, but the idea of giving such an item to my fiancé felt peculiar. Was there a unique tradition in Malcosias that had escaped my notice?

Had I made a mistake in the choice of my practice piece? Seeking clarity, I asked this of Collett. “Collett, just so I’m certain, is it customary in Malcosias to gift men the handkerchiefs that are embroidered as practice?”

If so, then I had to remake this lilac-embroidered piece straightaway. In the language of flowers, the lilac symbolized “friendship,” and “memories.” While one could make a case for the latter, *friendship* was a decidedly inappropriate sentiment to convey to a fiancé. It would be equivalent to declaring, *I think of you as nothing more than a friend*, and that would be rude, even to an arranged spouse.

Collett pondered before responding. “It’s not exactly a custom, but it is a common practice for girls to gift the handkerchiefs they make during their studies to a member of their family or to their partners. Ever since the public found out that the empress gave one to the emperor during *her* training as a homemaker, it’s become very in vogue to give them as gifts to partners.”

“I see,” I responded. “Then I shall remake this.”

“Huh? But it looks perfectly fine to me?” Collett tilted his head in confusion.

“The craftsmanship isn’t the issue here...” I replied with a wry smile, realizing that the language of flowers perhaps wasn’t something that a knight would have a particular interest in. But now that I understood that this was a trend inspired by the empress herself, it seemed imprudent to disregard it. Although it felt somewhat wasteful to discard my current work, I knew I had to start anew and create something more fitting.

I set aside the unfinished lilac piece and took up another unadorned white handkerchief. I pondered over a reworked design, my eyes wandering among the colorful spools of thread.

Collett’s voice, however, gently pulled me out of my thoughts. “Milady,” he called.

Curious as to his purpose in continuing the conversation, I responded softly, “What is it?” Did he have another insight into the Malcosian customs surrounding embroidery to share, customs which seemed to be richer in tradition than I’d initially thought? I turned towards him, expecting another simple exchange, but instead I found him kneeling, his head bowed in a gesture of deep respect.

*What...is this?*

After a moment of silence, Collett spoke, his tone unusually earnest. “Milady, if I may be so bold, might I suggest that you give that half-finished embroidery to Sir Owen?”

“To Owen?” I echoed, my confusion evident.

“Yes,” he affirmed with conviction. “For a knight serving as a personal guard, it is an immense honor to receive a gift from their charge. And to receive a handkerchief from a lady, even more so. A finished handkerchief says, ‘You have fulfilled your duty flawlessly.’ An unfinished one means, ‘Your efforts, though still budding, are commendable.’ A knight who is given a finished handkerchief pledges wavering loyalty and service, whereas one who receives an unfinished handkerchief vows to strive even harder, to redouble their

dedication.” He paused, then clarified, “That’s the kind you should give to Sir Owen.”

*How interesting.* I found myself silently nodding, taking in Collett’s impassioned advocacy for his superior officer and his explanation of this particular imperial tradition. I’d had no idea that the humble handkerchief carried so many layers of significance in this realm. In Celestia, we gave them to knights before they went off on great hunts as mere tokens of good fortune, but here, as Collett had so thoroughly elucidated, the gesture bore a much deeper, symbolic weight...

...a weight that pressed down on me all at once. *What gives me the right to bestow upon Owen such a meaningful gift?* The significance of the gesture was not lost on me, and it stirred another tumult of thoughts within me.

Owen’s immaturity was undeniable. His impulsive nature often led him into trouble, affecting not just himself but those around him. What was yesterday’s incident if not a prime reflection of his nature? Yet, if I were asked if he’d accomplished his primary duty, the guarantee of my safety, I would have no choice but to admit he had. Granted, his methods had been far from ideal. He could’ve sought the advice of his fellow knights, for instance; there were undoubtedly a myriad of more suitable, less confrontational ways he could have handled the situation. But the end result was indisputable: my safety had been secured. His actions, though not exemplary, were not entirely reproachable either.

He, however, was only one part of the equation. What about my own conduct? Had I managed to offer a rational, composed response to yesterday’s events? Or had I, too, succumbed to the whirlwind of my emotions, hastily casting blame on Owen without seeking to understand the entire situation? If Prince Edward and Lord Theodore hadn’t intervened, would I have been able to steer the situation towards a resolution on my own? As Prince Edward’s betrothed, had I acted in a way that was in his best interests?

I shook my head. “I have no right to present Owen with something so significant. How can I, when I have behaved with no less immaturity than he has done?”



Yet the young man next to me, impassioned and resolute, refused to back down. “This isn’t about who’s more immature, or who’s worse than whom! We are each on our own journey, and it’s unfair to draw comparisons, to rank ourselves against each other!”

“But...”

“Please, hear me out, milady!” Collett’s voice grew more fervent. “This could be Owen’s opportunity to turn the tide, to chart a new course for the future! For so long, he’s been adrift, without any real motivation to better himself. But he has the potential, I know it! And right now, with the defenses around his heart at an all-time low, this gesture could be the one to breach those walls!”

*Motivation? Is that what he needs?* I mused. Owen had yet to escape his past. That much I could discern after having listened to Lord Theodore’s story yesterday. The young knight had never even tried to move forward, and I could hardly imagine he’d even want to, given what I’d learned. If I were him, I thought I might find it easier to cling to my resentments forever, to live always in the shadows of my hatred, but...

No, the choice of *his* path wasn’t mine to dictate. That was something Owen had to decide for himself, for no one truly knew him except for himself. If there was even a flicker of a desire within him to change, shouldn’t I, as his charge, extend a hand in support?

With renewed resolve, I set aside the untouched white handkerchief and picked up the lilac one again. “Very well,” I declared, a newfound confidence in my voice. “I will give this to him. What he chooses to do with it, however, is out of my hands.”

Rising swiftly from the sofa, I threw back my shoulders and gazed down at my kneeling guard, grateful that his passion and his kindness had shown me the way forward.



As the adage goes, “time waits for no one.” And so, immediately after our conversation, I found myself striding alongside Collett on our way to the Pyreborn headquarters—specifically towards their interrogation room. Before long, we stood before a nondescript door, its only distinguishing feature a

placard that read “Occupied.” Hesitantly, my hand reached for the doorknob, but my grip faltered as memories of yesterday’s encounter with Owen flooded my thoughts, each word and every sharp exchange making the door feel like a barrier to a daunting ordeal.

Crossing this threshold seemed a monumental task. How could I face Owen after everything that had transpired? A moment’s respite, a brief pause to gather my thoughts and brace myself, was all I desired. But Collett, brimming with a youthful vigor and urgency that I couldn’t match, nudged me forward. “Milady, why the hesitation? We mustn’t dally. If we delay further, the sun will set before we even step inside.”

“Oh, um, no, I just need a moment,” I stammered, my voice trailing off into uncertainty.

He gave me a lighthearted chuckle. “Oh, there’s no need for that! Did you forget who you came to see? Owen won’t mind in the least if you’re a little awkward. Now, hurry up and get inside. I’ll keep watch out here and make sure no one can intrude.”

Before I could even process what was happening, his hand shot past mine, seizing the doorknob with an unspoken urgency. “Wait—” I began in protest, but it was too late. The door swung forward in one fluid motion.

With a gentle yet firm nudge, Collett propelled me into the room, my entrance more abrupt than graceful. As the door slammed shut behind me, sealing me inside, his muffled voice floated through, “Now, take your time, milady; you’ve got this!”

*I’ve got it?! What, exactly, have I “got”?! I screamed in the quiet of my mind. I’m not ready for such an emotional moment—not ready in the slightest! And how dare you shove a lady into a room! (Never mind the fact that your shove was perfectly gentle and seemingly practiced!) Just how many ladies have you shoved into rooms?!*

As I glowered at the door, silently berating the impudent youth on the other side, a familiar voice pierced the tense silence behind me. “Princess?”

Only one person called me by that title. There was no escaping now. It was time to face the music. With a steadying breath, I spun around, readying myself

for whatever came next.

There he was. The same scruffy young man with lime-green hair, looking no different than he had yesterday, cocking an eyebrow at me in surprise. “Jeez, it really is you,” he remarked, a hint of disbelief in his tone. “Whatcha doing here? Can’t imagine you came here willingly, since you hate me and all.”

Owen—still brash and unyielding, even now. “And what if I did come willingly?” I retorted, matching his confrontational stance.

“Say what?” he shot back, unimpressed.

“I said, so what if I did?” My indignation flared anew at the sight of him, fuming at the way he hid his expression behind a mask of indifference. For the briefest of moments, I considered turning away and leaving. But then the image of his dejected figure from yesterday floated through my mind. Would a man who truly believed himself blameless walk away in shame like that? Deep down, he must be harboring remorse; he was merely concealing it.

Perhaps I was being too harsh on him? But before that shred of sympathy could blossom into something more, Owen leaned back casually in his chair. “Yeah? So, why are you here, really? Is this about yesterday? I’ll apologize if you want me too, but don’t expect me to—”

“No, I didn’t come to hear your apologies,” I interjected, shaking my head firmly to cut him off. “It’s true—I have *much* to say about your behavior last night.” I paused, forcing down the lump in my throat. “But what I must also say is that you acted in the best interest of my safety. Considering your role as my personal guard, it is difficult for me to argue that you did anything wrong.”

His expression morphed from a brooding scowl to one of surprise, clearly confused by my sudden concession. It was important that I didn’t get sidetracked; I needed to steer this conversation quickly to the heart of the matter.

*But how to broach the subject?*

The idea of simply throwing the handkerchief at him and fleeing felt wrong. The cynic in him would no doubt misinterpret that gesture. Conversely, if I started with a soft, ambiguous lead-in about whether he was ready to move

forward, he might guess that I knew about his troubled past. It was tantamount to spitting in his face and taunting him—*I know everything about you there is to know, including your awful, awful past.* That...was a conversation no one wanted to have.

No, that kind of confrontation was to be avoided at all costs. It was in that moment that I suddenly realized that I'd come here without much of a plan at all. *At any rate, it's imperative he doesn't find out I know about his past, and...*

*No, wait, that... That sounded wrong. Is it just me, or does it almost seem like I'm scheming to lie and slink my way into the deepest, darkest corners of his heart?*

*Despicable. Awful. Awful! How truly awful of you, Carolina Sanchez!* the inner critic in me raged. To seek someone's truth through deception was reprehensible. Genuine understanding required honesty, sincerity, and resolve, qualities that lies and subterfuge could never foster.

But the truth... The truth is messy. The words that mirror one's deepest thoughts can wound, and even alienate completely. The prospect of voicing those stark and unsettling realities loomed over me. Could I bear the burden of the pain such words might inadvertently unleash upon Owen?

Frankly, the very idea was daunting. But if the succeeding conversation held even the slightest chance of Owen confronting his demons, or of emerging reborn from his haunted past, then I was ready to tread that perilous and convoluted path. Gripping tightly to my resolve, I looked him in the eyes. "Owen," I began, my voice a blend of sternness and concern. "Lord Theodore told me everything—about your past."

The impact of my words struck him with an intensity I hadn't fully anticipated. His sunstone eyes, usually shimmering with a carefree light, widened in a raw display of shock, anger, and an avalanche of other emotions I couldn't name.

I couldn't blame him. The very thought of Lord Theodore, a paragon of duty and professional confidentiality, exposing all of Owen's deepest, darkest secrets must not have occurred to him as a possibility. *But Owen, I hope you can fortify your heart, for what I'm about to say next will cut deeper yet.*

"After hearing your story, I felt profound sympathy for you. *Pity for you,*" I

continued, my voice softer, yet still firm. ““So this is what it takes to drive a man like you to his current state,’ I thought. His own father, trying to kill him.”

Owen’s reaction was immediate. He lunged forward, his chair screeching against the floor. “Shut up!” he barked, his voice raw with anger. “Don’t you dare say another word. Your pity is the last thing I need! I’m not some...pathetic child who needs your sympathy!” His fist thundered on the table, a violent manifestation of his seething rage. His eyes, ablaze with a furious light, locked onto mine. “Who the hell do you think you are to pity me? You don’t have that right! No one does!”

“Then why do you choose to wallow in it?” I shot back, stepping closer, my heart pounding with each word.

He faltered for a moment, his anger mingling with confusion. “W-Wallow? What?”

“You heard me,” I retorted, my voice building in intensity. “Why do you choose to wallow in your own pity and refuse to seek even a shred of happiness?” In a swift, deliberate motion, I slammed my hands on the table, just to show him the depth of my fervor. “Why do you let your past shackle you, making no attempt to break free, yet lash out at those who attempt to show you compassion?”



The force of my action sent a jarring pain through my arms, a stark reminder of my breach of decorum. But undeterred, I pressed on. “You claim you’re no pathetic child, yet you often act the part.”

Owen’s eyes flickered away, his facade crumbling under the weight of my words.

“If you truly wish to not be pitied...” I shook my head, finding a firmer but more empathetic wording. “If you truly detest the sympathetic stares that follow you around wherever you go, then live your life, Owen. Live a life so full of joy that your tormented past becomes nothing but a faint shadow in the brilliant story of your existence!”

*That’s it, Owen.*

*Live happily. That is all you must do.*

*Do that, and those who know of your past will never gaze upon you in pity ever again.*

*Smile and laugh brightly, with genuine mirth, and no one will ever call you “pathetic” ever again.*

*Become a champion of your own destiny. A person who is not defined by their past, but by their triumph over it. Rise above your history to become someone remarkable, someone unbound and free from the chains of yesterday.*

*It all sounds so simple, I’m sure, but as of right now, you are so very far from that zenith. You act so carefree, like nothing bothers you, but the second that facade cracks and a piece of the real you is exposed, I’m overwhelmed with nothing but sympathy.*

*After learning the reason why you refuse to speak with the grace and decorum expected of you, I cannot help but see you as a “pathetic child.”*

*You look miserable—much like how I once did.*

I quieted my thoughts. “Owen,” I began anew, my voice now firm but gentle, a stark contrast to the intensity from moments ago. “When we first crossed paths, you struck me as a free spirit, a nobleman unbound by the rigid conventions of his class. You didn’t care what others thought about you, you

acted how you wanted to act, and for that, I envied you.”

Pausing, I slowly circled around the end of the table, drawing closer to him. My gaze locked onto his sunstone eyes, seething with turmoil. With a tender, almost hesitant gesture, I reached out and rested my hand lightly against his cheek.

“But now, I see the truth in stark clarity. The irony of it all—the one imprisoned most by the expectations of the aristocracy...was you.”

His reaction was subtle, yet somehow poignant. He winced, his gaze drifting downwards, evading the intensity of our connection.

“You’re like an infant, lashing out against the world. You throw your tantrums, but all they do is cast a shadow on your own dignity.” My eyes softened as I regarded him, the harshness in my words belied by the compassion in my voice. “You must know this, don’t you? This rebellion of yours, it in no way helps you escape your past—it only serves to ensnare you further.”

He clenched his fists tightly, his knuckles white against the palms of his hands. “Stop...talking,” he murmured, his voice barely above a sullen, powerless whisper.

Owen surely sensed the futility of his actions. Deep down, he must’ve known the time had come to abandon this charade. The only piece he’d been missing was for someone to give him that final push.

Was I that someone he had been waiting for? Perhaps, but I would never make that claim. After all, this was Owen. It would easily be in character for him to yell, “Who are you to tell me anything?!” and reject me, right here, right now. Yet if there ever was an opportune moment to reach him, to penetrate his lowered defenses, it was this one. I had to speak the necessary truth.

“Owen,” I declared, imbuing my voice with finality. “It’s time to give it up. Your little acts of defiance, your past, all of it.”

Gently, I slid my present across to him. The half-finished lilac-embroidered handkerchief, a mirror of his own journey—a work in progress, incomplete yet brimming with potential.

“Owen, this is for you. When—and only when—you rise to become the knight



you are destined to be, shall I complete this embroidery.” But as the words left me, a wave of self-consciousness washed over me. “Though, that might be a tad presumptuous coming from me when I’m on that very journey myself...” I added, scratching at my cheek in a sheepish gesture.

Owen remained silent, his gaze fixed on the ground, his face half-hidden in shadow. His expression, and by extension his thoughts, remained enigmatic. But he didn’t immediately brush off my gesture, and that I took as a hopeful sign. Hope alone, however, wouldn’t bridge the chasm between us. If this still wasn’t enough to get through to him, then I was prepared to accept defeat.

The silence stretched, heavy and unyielding, until Owen unexpectedly broke it. “Hey, Princess.”

“What is it?” I asked, my tone carefully neutral, bracing myself for his response.

“You really think of me as a pathetic child?” His voice carried a mix of curiosity and vulnerability as he echoed the words I had used earlier.

I hesitated, weighing my words—only for a moment—before choosing honesty over comfort. “I do. A pathetic, pitiable child,” I admitted, striving to keep my voice steady and devoid of judgment.

Another silence enveloped us, thicker than before. Then, he exhaled a deep, resigned sigh. “Well, isn’t that something. You know, that pisses me off. It really does. But you know what? I can’t have you looking down on me forever. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna prove myself. And I’m going to become the finest guard anyone has ever seen, and I’m going to protect you better than anyone ever could. Just watch me.”

As he lifted his head, his face was alight with a smile—pure, unburdened, and brighter than any I’d seen before. He snatched the handkerchief from my hand, stood up, and knelt before me. Yes, Owen Klein, the indomitable spirit—the man who lowered himself before no one—on his knee before me. He hadn’t made any sweeping declarations about confronting his past or overcoming it, but his silent gesture, in some ways, spoke louder than mere words ever could.

He gently took my hand, placing the handkerchief upon it with a ceremonial air. “Lady Carolina Sanchez. I, Owen Klein, solemnly pledge my undying loyalty

and my sword to you. I vow to shield your life with every fiber of my being, until my bones grind to dust, until my soul fades into the eternal void, until I can fight no more. I offer you my whole self in devoted service.”

With those words, heavy with the gravity of a knightly oath, Owen delicately bowed his head, pressing a gentle kiss to the back of my hand—or rather, to the handkerchief resting upon it.

And that...was no throwaway speech, no casual promise. It was one of the most sacred vows a knight could offer, a pledge of allegiance to a chosen duty deemed worthy of their utmost devotion. Had Owen made such a profound commitment before this moment, I would’ve chided him to reconsider, that such weighty gestures were not to be performed with half-hearted and incomplete sentiments.

After all, he was Owen Klein, a knight without a master, a wanderer without a cause.

Or at least, he had been until this moment.

Something in his demeanor and in the sincerity that echoed in his voice conveyed an undeniable authenticity. The significance of the kiss upon the handkerchief was a mystery to me, but the earnestness of his vow was unmistakable.

I met his earnest gaze with a deep sense of gratitude and recognition. “Thank you, Owen. Your dedication means more than you know.”

This pledge marked a monumental step for Owen, the beginning of a journey towards a storied, illustrious future—a future I believed in with all my heart.

## Final Chapter

Several days had slipped by since Owen's solemn pledge of loyalty. In that quiet interim, life at the castle had settled into a subdued rhythm. Collett continued to serve as my temporary personal guard, while I devoted myself to training the skills I would require as a future homemaker and imperial wife.

My "busy schedule" had been somewhat upended by the Fete, as the royal court grappled with the fallout of the attempt on my life and tried to solve the enigma of the assassin's origins. It seemed that my wedding preparations were but a whisper in the grand arc of palace life, overshadowed by more pressing matters.

And while the term "devoted" might paint a picture of rigorous study and tireless dedication to the homemaking arts, the reality was somewhat less demanding. Traditional tutelage for the nobility demanded a comprehensive education in literature, arts, music, history, and etiquette. While on the surface this seemed like a lot, these were subjects in which most young ladies of status, brought up with the best education money could buy, were well-versed in by the time marriage became a prospect. For someone like me, betrothed to a foreign prince, there were cultural nuances to learn, certainly, but nothing so challenging that it required all of my attention.

All of this was to say that I was *bored*. Pulling my needle through yet another handkerchief, I heaved a deep sigh. "Time really does crawl when there's nothing demanding any real concentration, doesn't it?" I half-mused to myself and half-addressed to my temporary guard.

Collett, ever the conversationalist, chimed in with a light chuckle. "It does, doesn't it, milady? I never realized guarding came with such...leisure. It's almost a struggle just to stay vigilant."

I nodded, threading another stitch through the fine linen. "Well, if you think about it, a guard's duty is essentially to be on standby in case something happens, isn't it? Especially if their charge isn't too adventurous."

“Oh, but I wouldn’t mind if you were just a *little* more adventurous—I wouldn’t mind that at all, milady! I prefer being on the move. It keeps me sharp, it does!”

Such exchanges had flowed naturally between Collett and myself over the past few days. He was talkative and close to my age, which made for easy conversation. “You enjoy being busy, Collett? You’ve got your own quirks, don’t you? Well, I must agree. Too much idleness isn’t enjoyable either. Balance in all things, I suppose.”

With a final delicate motion, I completed my embroidery, cutting the thread cleanly and holding up the handkerchief for inspection.

*Looks good. No noticeable mistakes to speak of.* Given the quality of materials used, it almost looked like something you might find for sale in a boutique.

A sense of accomplishment accompanied my smile as I stood up from the sofa. “Well, we do have time on our hands. Shall we go present this to His Highness? Though...I’m not sure how he’ll take it.”

Collett’s face lit up. “Oh, he’ll be thrilled, milady! The commander would treasure anything from you—I bet even a stick you picked up off the ground would bring him joy if you gave it to him.”

His comment caught me off guard. “A stick?” I echoed, bemused. Surely, even the kindhearted prince wouldn’t find delight in such a ridiculous gift. Not that there would be any chance I’d ever test that hypothesis anyway.

But strangely, the unmistakable earnestness in Collett’s words bolstered my confidence.

“Well then. Let’s make our way over to the headquarters, why don’t we?” I held the handkerchief to my heart as we left the room.



Collett and I made our way to the Pyreborn headquarters, through the front entrance, up to the second floor, and down the hall to the corner office. This door was gilded, the most overt nod to grandeur that I’d yet seen in this building (albeit one that was subtle enough to still seem decidedly modest).

“The commander is dealing with paperwork right now,” Collett assured me. “No meetings lined up—you should be good to walk straight in, milady.”

“Oh, excellent,” I murmured, my enthusiasm somewhat tempered by my nervousness. “Will you be waiting outside?”

“Of course! I’ll make sure no one disturbs your quality time with the commander!”

“No, that’s quite all right!” I insisted, a little flustered. “I just came here to give him this, after all.” I held up the handkerchief. I wouldn’t be in there for long. All I wanted to ask of Collett was that he wait patiently for me for just a few moments, but it almost seemed like he had other ideas about how this might go...

“Rest easy, milady! No one will make it past me!” Collett replied enthusiastically. “Now hurry on inside; the commander’s waiting!”

*Again with that eager sense of expectation...* Heaving a muted sigh, I rapped lightly on the door.

“Enter,” a deep, gruff voice immediately acknowledged. It had been nearly three days since I’d last seen the prince. My heart was a little bit—really only just a *little* bit—loud in my ears.

“Excuse me...” I ventured timidly, pushing open the golden portal and revealing the way to Prince Edward—who seemed to be doggedly working his way out from under a remarkable volume of paperwork. He almost appeared to be entombed in a veritable labyrinth of parchment, with mountains of documents rising like ancient ruins all around him, covering not only his desk, but burying even the tables and sofas in the sitting area under an avalanche of paper and ink.

Hesitantly, I inched forward. “Your Highness, I hope I’m not intruding. I didn’t expect to find you to be quite this...overwhelmed.”

He didn’t look up, his only response being a morose gesture in the vague direction of the nearest parchment-laden surface. “Just drop it off. I’ll get to it...eventually.”

I blinked in confusion. “Drop...*what* off, Your Highness?”

His focus remained glued to the document before him. “The paperwork. You’re here with more of it, aren’t you? Just find a spot for it. Sorry, I’m in a bad mood. Too much paperwork. Not enough Carolina.”

My ears perked up at that last word. “Carolina, as in...me, Your Highness? I humbly beg your pardon, but perhaps I’ve come at a bad time?”

That seemed to do the trick. He snapped to attention, giving his scruffy red hair a vigorous shake as he looked up. He scrutinized me intently, as though he thought he might be seeing an apparition. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, a detail I wish I hadn’t had occasion to notice. I knew very well that he disliked paperwork, but what in the world had he meant by “not enough Carolina”? Did it have something to do with our recent lack of contact, or was he grumbling about me too? Had I somehow been remiss in not trying to visit him earlier? He had used the phrasing “not enough,” after all...

Without warning, he stood up from his desk and strode briskly over to me. He circled around me, examining me from every possible angle and direction.

“Y-Your Highness?” I couldn’t help but murmur, even more flustered than before.

Was my dress unsuitable for the occasion? I hadn’t put any particular thought into my outfit since I’d assumed that we’d only be face-to-face for a brief moment, but perhaps he thought me lazy for not taking more care with my appearance?

*Oh, Carolina, you’ve done it again... Of course any man would always want to see his fiancée presenting herself in a way that makes her appear as beautiful as she can be.* Once I’d arrived at this mortifying conclusion, I hurriedly began to form an apology. “I’m terribly sorry for the lack of appropriate formality in my appearance, Your Highness. I’d mistakenly assumed this would be adequate for the brief task of handing over a handkerchief. I promise to be more mindful of my attire in the future.”

He seemed perplexed by my apology. “Hm? Your attire? Why would I have anything to say about that? You should always dress exactly as you please. No, I merely wanted to assure myself that you were the real Carolina.”

“Th-The real Carolina?” I stammered back. “I assure you, Your Highness, that I

am indeed Carolina Sanchez, your fiancée...”

Finally halting his inspection, he stood directly before me and leaned in, his gaze seeking out mine for confirmation. After a moment, he gave a decisive nod. “And so you are. Now tell me: what brings you here? If you have a moment, perhaps I could walk for tea then ring you back to your room—I mean, no, the opposite...”

“You really are quite tired, aren’t you, Your Highness?” I remarked with a wry smile. His mistaken confusion of words and jumbled thoughts were clear signs of fatigue. Noticing a slight unsteadiness in his stance, I instinctively reached out, guiding his arm over my shoulder and placing my other hand supportively against his back.

*He’s so heavy...*

Surveying the room briefly, my eyes settled on a second door on the other end of the room. It likely led to an adjoining chamber, the kind typically reserved for rest or a brief respite, a common feature in the offices of high-ranking individuals. If nothing else, there was probably a sofa there for him to lie down on.

Turning to him, I suggested, “Why don’t we step into the adjourning room for a little while? It’s clear you’re not in the best state to continue working right now. A short break could do wonders.”

I tugged gently at him, urging him to move, but he remained motionless. Confused, I gently spoke his name again.

“I can’t rest,” he muttered. “Not when they’re working to apprehend the suspect as we speak. So much work has been done in such little time. I must see this through to the end.”

*They are apprehending the suspect as we speak?*

I could hardly believe it. *Identifying* the suspect in three days would have been an astounding feat. To be already well on their way to an arrest was nothing short of mind-boggling. If I were Prince Edward, I’d want to stand in solidarity with the superhuman efforts of my men and see this through to the end as well, but...surely there was a middle ground to be achieved in this case,

one that balanced incredible accomplishment with much-needed rest?

His voice broke through the din of my concerned thoughts. “So what brings you here? You mentioned something about a handkerchief?”

My mind blanked for a moment. “Huh? Oh, um, yes, I made a handkerchief as part of my efforts to hone my homemaking skills, and I wanted to present it to you, but it hardly seems the appropriate moment to do so...” Guilt started to seep into my voice, tapering it off into a whisper as I timorously held out the handkerchief.

His golden zircon eyes dropped down to his gift; he studied it for a moment, his expression unreadable. On this particular piece, I’d embroidered not a flower or a coat of arms as was typical, but the majestic symbol of the Pyreborn—the phoenix.

Threaded in bold shades of crimson and gold, this design was surely not one to win the hearts of my fellow ladies. But when I’d thought about the man named Edward Ruby Martinez, the image that had vividly come to mind was the phoenix, resplendent in its everburning glory. In the royal castle, one could never find themselves more than five feet away from an imperial coat of arms; the language of flowers was only significant if one understood it—and thus the phoenix had seemed the best way for me to convey my message.

He took the handkerchief from my hands, unfolding it ever so gently, as if it were the most precious treasure of his world. His eyes lit up. “A phoenix? The symbol of our order...” he muttered, tracing over the design with a keen gaze. “This is...well done... Almost too well done to use...”

“Your words honor me, Your Highness.”

He glanced up at me. “Is this all you’ve been working on these past few days?”

“Yes. I haven’t had much else to do besides homemaking practice, so yes.”

His gaze dropped away. “Homemaking practice?” he said quietly after a beat. “I see...”

That was not the reaction I’d expected. Had I said something that had upset him? I’d simply answered truthfully the question that’d been asked of me. But



before I could make any further conjecture on the source of the prince's mysterious discomfort, he revealed it to me. "Carolina," he muttered quietly, "are you truly unafraid at the thought of marrying me?"

*Ah, is that what's bothering you, Your Highness? Did you not know that there are some questions better left unanswered? Sentiments better left unvoiced?*

A small, wry smile might have found its way onto my lips had the situation not been so earnest.

*You do know why we spare ourselves the grief of asking such questions, don't you, you foolish, foolish man? Because otherwise what awaits us at the end is nothing but pain—and all of us who live in this world would rather spare ourselves that hurt.*

*All of us, I suppose, except you—that's just the kind of honest, upstanding man you are. Straightforward to a fault.*

I lowered my gaze, directing it towards the floor. With a gentle motion, I eased his arm off my shoulders, deliberately creating a bit of space between us. Slowly, I pivoted to face him directly. Lifting my eyes once again, I met his gaze; his golden pupils were flickering ever so slightly, wavering in fear of the weight of the truth he didn't want to bear.

Yet he'd asked me nonetheless. There was only one possible response to a man of such integrity, such sincerity, and that was to respond with equal truthfulness.

"If you'll allow me to be so honest, Your Highness, the thought of becoming your wife...it terrifies me. It terrifies me to my very core."

The ghost of a grimace flashed across his face.

"I'm haunted, *haunted* by the shadow of danger that could befall me any moment, anywhere. Until I found myself engaged to you, Your Highness, I had never known any real danger. My existence was peaceful, calm—as safe as could be. I knew nothing of snipers who might threaten my life, nor of assassins who might seek to poison me in the comfort of my own room. This world of peril is alien to me, and my fear—it clutches at my heart, even now."

Prince Edward's jaw clenched, his hands curling into fists.

I waited for him to speak.

“Th-Then—!” I saw in his golden eyes what he was about to say.

“But,” I swiftly interjected, slicing through his words with a firm resolve.

*I’m sorry, Your Highness, but I cannot allow you to finish that sentence.*

*You are kind. You are someone who would cast themselves aside all too easily for the sake of others. You would no doubt try to annul this engagement for my sake, and I also have no doubt, given all that has transpired, that you could even make it happen.*

*But I will not stand for it.*

“Do not ask me to back out from this marriage, Your Highness. Because I won’t do it.”

His eyes flew open.

“Yes, I am frightened that my life is in constant jeopardy. But to hide that from you would be to betray you with a lie. Despite that... Despite my fears, I choose to stand beside you!”

As he widened his golden eyes, I caught a glimmer of something warm—something calm. There were, admittedly, other reasons that I wasn’t eager to return to Celestia. Because Flora was there. Because I couldn’t bear the shame of crawling back after coming this far. Yet these self-serving motivations paled in comparison to my unwavering desire to stand by his side.

*I wish to stay by your side—feel the warmth of your kindness; I wish to support you in ways only a wife could.*

*Ours is not a bond borne from love; it is instead anchored in a deep, unshakable trust.*

*Until the day you choose to cast me aside, I vow to devote myself to you.*

“Did I hear that right?” came the voice of my fiery-headed prince. “You’re willing to stay with me?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “Until the day you decide to effect our disunion, until the day you no longer need me, I will remain by your side. That

is, if you'll allow it, Your Highness."

"Effect our disunion?" he echoed in disbelief. "I would never! And of course I'll allow it—if that's what you truly want."

A bashful giggle escaped me. "Yes, it is. Then, Your Highness, I shall take my place by your side."

He gripped my shoulders, nodding his head vigorously like an overeager puppy. "Yes—of course!"

I couldn't help but grin at the sight. The previously gloomy, languid atmosphere had brightened in an instant. Prince Edward gazed at me adoringly, puppylike; I could almost see his tail wagging in joy behind him.

Was I also losing my mind from fatigue?

The now-buoyant prince strode over to the sitting area, and with a dramatic sweep of his arm, he cleared the sofa of its attendant mountain of paperwork. "Please, sit! Tell me how you've been!" He sat down, motioning for me to join him by patting the seat next to him. His tone, his expression, all of it had become bright and animated, a far cry from the stone-faced Edward I'd come to know.

"Of course," I agreed readily before adding, "but when Lord Theodore scolds you afterwards, don't say I didn't warn you."

He let out a hearty chuckle. "It's fine. All my work is done for the day. Teo won't mind—that much."

*I was referring more to the pile of documents that you so carelessly scattered all across the floor to make room for me, but it's at least good to hear that you'll be taking a break from your work...*

With that mental note, I settled down next to him. As I did so, I caught a subtle note of citrus, sending an unexpected flutter through my heart.



As Carolina reveled in the joys of her life, Flora meanwhile...sulked in the solitude of her own room.

*This is preposterous!* I seethed inwardly.

*Utterly preposterous!*

*How could my magic be weakening? And what did they say? "It must be because of your sister. Her sudden departure must weigh heavily on your spirit"?*

*Impossible. Carolina cannot be the cause of this. I refuse to believe it. I couldn't have been happier to learn that the little leech was finally gone from my life. I practically jumped for joy.*

I had, as a pointed fact, literally jumped for joy. But of all the families Carolina could have been sent to marry into...

"Royalty. Why did it have to be royalty?!" I groaned aloud.

*Marrying the second prince of Malcosias would make her...Her Imperial Highness?*

*Princess Carolina?!*

*She becomes royalty, while I'm stuck being the daughter of a duke?! Power and ability aside, that would put her firmly above me in status and authority, and that...*

*No... No! I won't stand for that!*

"I'm the one who's accomplished," I muttered. "I'm the one who does everything asked of her without fail!" *So would it kill the gods to bless me with even a shred of news that isn't horrible?!*

I raised my hand to my face, instinctively seeking a nail to gnaw, but found only ragged remnants. My once-immaculate manicure lay in ruins, each nail bitten down to frayed edges. "If I hear yet another person tell me, 'Get better soon,' or, 'It must hurt to part so suddenly with your dear sister,' I will *lose it!* Yes, I may have cultivated the image of a doting older sister, but I did not ask for this!"

*If I'd known this was going to happen, I would have never even bothered! All that time and effort to keep Carolina around me and it all came to nothing!*

*Well, I suppose I shouldn't say "nothing."*

“At least my pretended affection for Carolina has prevented anyone from prying any further into my recent condition...” I sighed.

I didn’t know the real reason behind the recent waning of my power, only that it definitely had nothing to do with my mental state. I’d been *surprised* to hear that Carolina had gotten engaged while on a “graduation trip.” I’d been *overjoyed* to hear that the parasite would finally be gone from my life. I’d been *vexed* to realize I wouldn’t be able to get in the way of my little sister’s happiness anymore. But I’d *not* been sad.

*No, I most definitely haven’t been sad. So to blame my current predicament on the departure of my “dear sister” is undoubtedly a wrong assumption. But it has been a very convenient guise for me to don in order to avoid stirring up rumor and suspicion while I investigate the real reason for my power’s decline.*

However, I had to get started fast. “I could either prepare another excuse or start exploring explanations...” I muttered to myself.

*The longer this affair drags on, the more I stand to lose. If I continue to simply rest on my laurels, I could even be branded as a wicked witch who’s intentionally withholding her powers to cause the downfall of Celestia!*

*I cannot let that happen! Let my years and years of hard work in cultivating my perfect image go to waste? This is not going to be my end!*

“To that end, I *must* find a way to pass my trials this month!”

That was a surefire way to stave off any rumors for a good, long while. But in order to do that, I needed to be in the full strength of my power, and in order to get my power back, I needed to reverse whatever it was that was causing its decline.

A scream of frustration escaped me. “After all that, I’m right back where I started!”

Tearing my hand away from my face, I slammed my fists down on the desk in front of me. The impact sent a sharp thud echoing throughout the room before fading into silence. “The cause,” I murmured. “I need to find the cause. I stand no chance in the trials ahead if I’m like this...”



*Who has ever heard of a Saint who can barely mend scrapes and bruises?*

A languid sigh escaped me as I let my still-throbbing hand fall onto my lap. Each tick of the nearby clock resounded with startling clarity in my ears.

“My powers began to wane at around the same time Carolina left the country. But I thought nothing of her departure, so it couldn’t be my mental state—of that much, I’m sure... In which case, the real reason lies somewhere there, in the days leading up to and shortly after her departure.”

*Did she curse me right before she left as a parting act of revenge? Enter into a deal with some demonic entity to ensure my downfall?*

*No, that thoroughly nonmagical brat knows nothing of curses and incantations, nor could she make contracts with demons and their ilk. Even if she had the knowledge, she neither had the courage nor the time. According to Father, her engagement to Prince Edward was quite the rushed affair.*

*Could the cause then lie elsewhere and the timing of Carolina’s departure be nothing but coincidence?*

But who would carry out such a perilous plot? To threaten the stability of my powers was to threaten the stability of Celestia itself. If someone was truly out to get me, their actions would be akin to cutting off their nose to spite their face.

An actor working on behalf of a foreign nation, who wished to precipitate the downfall of Celestia was a possibility, but I could hardly think of anyone foolhardy enough to challenge the sanctity of our holy realm in such a manner...

“The more I think about it, the less sense it all makes,” I whispered.

I held my face in my hands, my thoughts a tangled mess of doubt and conjecture. I was supposedly a prodigy, but in the grip of this enigmatic crisis, my vaunted intellect teetered on the brink.

*Perhaps the annals of history hold the key. I can find out if this has happened before and how it was dealt with back then.*

Arriving at that conclusion, I rose from my chair and strode to the library, determined to solve this mystery once and for all.

## Side Story: A Night Shared between Two—Edward's Memories

I remembered something that had happened before I'd arrived in Malcosias with Carolina.

It was another night that was to be spent sleeping in the wilderness. After setting up my tent, I set out on a casual patrol, a leisurely stroll around the premises of our camp. The stars cast a dim glow on the path before me as I paced slowly, lost deeply in thought.

*Carolina's waist was so...small.*

One wrong move, a tiny bit too much force, and I'd felt like I might inadvertently snap her in half.

*Are women all such fragile beings?*

I stared down at the palms of my rugged, calloused hands, where the memory of her body in my embrace yet lingered. *Was that the first time I ever held a woman in such a manner?*

"If I asked her if I could embrace her once more, I wonder how she'd respond," I wondered aloud.

Would she blush and turn away? Or would she say, "Oh, stop it, you," and brush it off as a joke? As I imagined all the different ways she might possibly react, I felt the corners of my mouth curl up into a smile.

It was a wry smile aimed at no one but myself. It was ironic to think that I, the man who usually occupied himself with nothing other than his responsibilities towards his men, would find myself daydreaming about a girl.

Carolina was changing me. That was a truth I had no choice but to accept. The more I got to know her, the more she captivated my heart. I felt drawn to her as a bee was to nectar—she seemed sweeter than the sweetest honey I'd ever tasted.



The moon chose that moment to peek out from behind the clouds, casting a gentle, silvery glow upon the earth, invading my thoughts. It was then that I saw her—Carolina, standing out in the open. She wore a simple white dress. Bathed in lunar radiance, her ashen hair danced lazily in the nighttime breeze, her striking crimson eyes transfixed on the starry tapestry above. In that moment, her beauty was almost ethereal, as if she were a fairy come to grace this world with her presence.

*Why is she here?* I wondered, but the answer soon presented itself: I'd somehow arrived in front of Carolina's tent without even realizing it.

"Y-Your Highness?" Her soft voice interrupted my thoughts. She must've noticed my gaze; she turned my way, her eyes flying open in surprise, but only for an instant before she recomposed herself and curtsied in my direction. "Your Imperial Highness, please forgive my earlier inattention. I, Carolina Sanchez, am deeply honored by your esteemed—"

"Enough with the formality, please," I said, cutting her off. "I'm sorry for disturbing you so suddenly, I was just taking a casual stroll—I mean, on patrol, as part of my duty. I didn't realize I'd come all this way already."

"No, Your Highness, please..." I thought I heard her mumble, but her voice was almost too quiet to hear.

We'd gotten to know each other fairly well over the past few days, but she still treated me as if I were my title and nothing more. I did wish that, since she was soon to be my fiancée, she would soften her attitude at least just a little.

"Why are you still out here, Carolina?" I asked. "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

She fidgeted slightly, her eyes falling away from me. "I, um, couldn't sleep," she admitted, somewhat curtly. "I thought I'd step outside, get some fresh air."

I nodded along blankly, muttering an, "Oh, I see." Even a man as simple as I could sense the meaning hidden in that simple statement. She was sleeping in a knight's camp, outdoors in the rough, surrounded by a horde of men. There was no doubt that to a lady like her, this was too much to stomach.

I'd tried my best to accommodate her, but I could only do so much. "I'm truly sorry about the state of your accommodations. Sleeping in the wilderness must

be taking a toll on you. But if you need anything, just say it and I'll see if I can—"

"No, no, no, that's not what I meant at all, Your Highness!" she interrupted, waving her hand dismissively in front of her. Her gaze fell away from mine again, wandering from left to right, then back to left, then back to right, her mouth opening and closing like a floundering fish.

I...wasn't quite sure what to make of this reaction, but I tried to hide my confusion as best as I could. What was the cause of this hesitation? Carolina continued this for a moment longer before she finally snapped her focus back to me, a determined cast to her features. "The truth is that...one of your knights told me that this place is haunted by a young man's restless spirit, and after hearing that I...couldn't sleep! I apologize! Such a reaction is entirely beneath me!"

As she continued to speak, her form appeared to diminish, almost wilting before my very eyes. Her eyes shimmered with moisture, overwhelming me with an urge to protect her—and another feeling, a feeling I didn't know how to process.

Whatever it was, it gripped my chest tightly, like a poison coursing its way through my veins. But it wasn't at all uncomfortable. In fact, it was surprisingly agreeable.

*Just what is this feeling?*

I allowed my gaze to drift over my fiancée once more; my chest gripped even tighter. No doubt about it: this feeling was in reaction to her presence.

*Did she...do something to me?*

No, unlikely. She neither had the motive nor means to harm me—not this pure, genuine soul before me.

*I'll ask Teo about this strange feeling later.*

With that settled, I pushed aside these perplexing thoughts. Turning my attention back to her, I inquired gently, "Are you afraid of ghosts?"

"I-I'm ashamed to admit it, but yes, I am..."

"Nothing shameful about it," I quickly reassured her. "We all have our own

fears and weaknesses to face. No need to berate yourself over that.” As I spoke, my hand instinctively found its way to her hair, stroking its lustrous softness as gently as I could; her silvery, ashen strands were soft and silky to the touch, an almost therapeutic feeling.

An idea struck me then. “If it’ll ease your mind, I’ll stand watch over your tent tonight. No ghost or apparition would dare appear before me.” Arguably, it was a task beneath my station as commander of the Pyreborn, but it felt right as her future husband, if it meant granting her a peaceful night’s sleep.

Carolina’s response, however, was tinged with alarm. “I-I couldn’t possibly ask that of you, Your Highness!” she protested. “Please, you should return to your tent and rest!”

“I can spare a single night’s rest,” I stated flatly.

“That isn’t the problem!”

“Then what is?”

I sought to genuinely understand her position, but she looked at me with an expression that I could only describe as a cross of exasperation and disbelief. It put me in mind of a similar look that Teo gave me from time to time when he was upset with me.

Her eyes crinkled in concern, and she brought up a hand to her chin in a thinking pose. “Um, Your Highness, you are the commander of the Pyreborn, and the second prince of the Empire of Malcosias. I deeply appreciate the thought, but please understand that I cannot impose on someone of your stature in such a way.”

“But I’m also your fiancé, aren’t I?” I pointed out. “There should be no talk of imposition between us.”

“Y-Yes, but...”

“Unless you mean to disregard my kind gesture?”

The color drained from her face as she vigorously shook her head in denial. “N-No! Not at all, Your Highness!”

I hoped I hadn’t gone too far, but I felt like Carolina wouldn’t yield to my

arguments unless I turned her commitment to propriety against her. If only she'd understand that she could let her guard down around me. I hoped she'd realize it sooner rather than later.

I decided to give her one more gentle push. "Carolina, I just want to be able to do something for you. So please, you needn't feel so burdensome."

She fell into thought again, her eyes fluttering gently closed, her hand still poised on her chin. A moment passed before her eyes snapped open, locking onto mine with newfound resolve. Her mouth worked hesitantly, finally managing to form words. "Understood, Your Highness. I still balk at the idea of depriving you of your rest, but thank you." Her eyes softened in concern. "Just please promise you'll allow yourself to rest if needed."

"Of course, I promise."

Her worry was endearing, albeit slightly amusing. Did she truly think that someone with my level of stamina would falter after a single sleepless night? That would make her quite the worrywart, but still—such earnest concern from her was unexpectedly comforting.

*Well, I realized, I see that being the subject of someone's worry from time to time isn't all bad...*

Giving her a final comforting pat on her head, I gestured towards her tent. "All right, in you go. You must be freezing in that dress. Get inside and warm yourself up."

Her tent was the second largest tent we'd brought, and she had it all to herself. I'd wanted to give her our largest one, but Teo had shot down that idea, saying, *Yes, by all means, let's invite as much gossip as possible by putting nobility in a larger tent than royalty!*

"I will. And thank you once again, Your Highness," she responded softly.

"It's nothing. Have a restful night, Carolina."

"I will, thanks to you. Good night."

"Good night," I wished her once again.

With a final, graceful bow, she retreated into her tent, the nighttime breeze

tenderly playing with strands of her hair. I lingered a moment, and when her figure finally disappeared behind the tent flaps, I promptly sat myself down on the bare ground. I hadn't brought anything to assist me in my vigil, but I resolved to make do with what I had. It wasn't raining, at least, and I could always stave off the cold with my fire magic. The only thing missing perhaps was something to help pass the time, but the majesty of the star-filled sky above served well enough for a moment of quiet contemplation every now and then.

An odd sense of satisfaction washed over me, born from the simple act of providing comfort to Carolina. My eyes lifted to the heavens, where the stars hung in their soft, otherworldly splendor, their timeless beauty a silent witness to the thoughts and feelings those of us who inhabited the world below, our worries, our fears—and that other feeling, the one that I still couldn't quite name...

## Afterword

To all my new friends: it's a pleasure to meet you. To all my old friends who've followed me since the web novel days: hello again. It is I, the author who tries to get in at least eight hours of sleep every night, Almond.

First, I'd like to thank you for choosing to pick up *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 at your disposal. This is my first time penning an afterword, so I thought I'd go the safe route and share a few glimpses into my writing process.

My impetus for writing this book was...well, it was simply because I wanted to write an actual story about marriage. Before this, I'd only written stories that began with broken engagements, so it's always been a real goal of mine to delve into a different theme, something like the subject of this book (which is marriage), with a few popular tropes (like Saints and sisters) sprinkled in.

It sounds cliché, I'm sure, but much like how one would buy something on impulse, I wrote this on a similar impulse, so it really did take me some effort to nail down the outline and the characters. Flora especially. She's a prodigy—a genius. I had to write her as such, and that...was far more difficult than I'd imagined. *What even is a smart villainess?! How do I make her look like she's actually brilliant?!* These are two questions I yelled out more times than I'd like to admit. All the villainesses I'd written so far hadn't had much going on between the ears, so to speak, which made this new kind of character all the harder.

Aside from that, the thing I really struggled with was how our two leads would end up getting married in the first place. Maybe I could go with the classic love-at-first-sight kind of story? Edward would run into Carolina at some soiree and, bam, he was done for? Or maybe I could play with the suspension bridge effect and have Edward save Carolina from some dangerous situation, ensuring that she would fall for him? These were all great options, but they all felt a little too

played out and just not quite what I was looking for. In the end, as you all know after reading about it, I decided to go with a political marriage. Nobility and political marriages—name a more iconic duo.

And that's how the story settled into its final form as a sweet, slow burn of a romance fantasy. And by the way, just between us, my count for scrapped scenes so far is about ten (and possibly rising in the future!) Somehow that feels like the biggest reveal I've made so far.

I have a lot more behind-the-scenes stories to share, but this feels like a good place to stop for now. Hopefully, I've made your day just a little bit better.

And now, acknowledgments.

Dad, thanks for the lightning-fast "OK" reply to the news of my publication—your text abbreviations always mean a lot. My dearest older brother, you act all cool, but I know you're a big softie at heart. And a heartfelt thanks to all my writing buddies who never fail to cheer me up.

A special nod to the extremely talented illustrator of the series, Yoshiro Ambe; my editor, whose clear and precise feedback has been indispensable; and everyone else involved in the production of this book—thank you.

Lastly, to you, the reader, who picked up this book and ventured into my world, I will say this again because it bears repeating: thank you so very much.

*The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power*

Thank you so much for your purchase of this book. As my initial venture into illustrating a light novel featuring a female protagonist, this project has been an immensely enjoyable and rewarding experience for me.

I sincerely hope my illustrations have managed to capture and enhance the charm of the characters and the story, even if only a little.

Yoshiro Ambe





# Bonus Short Story

## The Prince Who Hated Studying

I remembered a story from my youth.

It was just after my seventh birthday. I'd been running around the castle grounds with my new shortsword, which had been a gift from my father. Pursuing me was the son of a viscount, a precocious child around my age who'd been appointed as both my tutor and my "friend."

Teodore Garcia (whose intellect even at that tender age rivaled that of established scholars) was chasing me with all his might.

Why? Because I had skipped out on yet another lecture.

"Stop! I said stop, you truant fiend!" Teodore yelled, his voice echoing behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder and called back, "Hey, you can't talk to royalty like that." I maintained my swift pace.

Huffing, Teodore retorted between ragged breaths, "I may talk to someone who chooses to skip classes in whatever manner I wish! If it's respect you want from me, then you have to earn it!"

"Respect? Who cares about respect? Certainly not me. If you're okay with the adults getting mad at you for your insolence, then so am I."

Behind me, Teodore clicked his tongue. I looked back briefly to see him trying to push himself even harder. He still had no hope of matching my speed, but even so, he didn't give up.

*Who could have guessed those spindly arms and legs harbored such tenacity?*

But if he actually wanted to catch me, he'd have to be more than tenacious. Classes were a bore. I wanted no part of them unless they were practical. Like

swordplay.

“Stop running!” Teodore yelled again.

“Let me skip today’s lecture and I’ll stop running,” I called back.

“Like I would ever!”

“Then you’ll just have to catch me.”

Banter flying back and forth, we arrived in front of the hedge maze in the rear garden. I impulsively dashed into it, which triggered another disapproving click of Teodore’s tongue behind me. I knew the maze well—or at least, I hoped I did. The gardeners changed the layout every now and then, and I could only hope that it was still as I remembered. But if it would help me ditch Teodore and give me more time to mess around with my new weapon, it was a risk I was willing to take.

Glancing down at the sword at my hip, I advanced through the maze, my feet automatically tracing the path. Teodore’s footsteps quieted quickly behind me, and soon, I could hear no further evidence of his pursuit. Gradually, I let my pace slow to a halt. “If I’d known it would be this easy to lose him here, I would’ve come to the maze right away,” I muttered to myself.

Having finally shaken my tail, I let down my guard—and it was at that very second that the unthinkable happened.

“Prince Edward Ruby Martinez, prepare to die!” an unfamiliar voice cried out. A hooded man in a black robe leaped out from around the nearest corner and rushed towards me, brandishing daggers in each hand. It didn’t take a child prodigy to figure out who this mysterious figure was.

*An assassin? On the castle grounds?!* The thought flashed across my mind, but my awareness quickly recentered itself upon the crisis at hand. No one was here to protect me. I was alone, and if I failed to protect myself, I would die.

I drew my brand-new shortsword from its scabbard and brought it up in front of me.

*Clang!* The deafening crash of steel on steel reverberated in my ears.

“Oh?” the hooded man murmured. “You really are the Lightning Emperor’s

son, ain'tcha, boy? A mere child, however, is no match for me!"

I clenched my jaw, acknowledging the bitter reality in his words. Though I'd managed to fend off his initial strike, he was much larger and heavier than me—not to mention an assassin by trade. His ability to approach me undetected was already an indication that he was in a league well beyond my own.

*But if I can't beat him head-on...* "Then I'll just have to use magic!"

I disengaged our blades, retreating a few steps out of his range. Dropping my sword, I raised my hands in front of me, palms out, and I called upon the power slumbering within me. *I'm sorry, father. I know I'm not allowed to use magic on the castle grounds without permission, but you'll forgive me this time, right?*

"Burn to ash!" I chanted, forming a ball of crimson flame in front of me. The fireball soared through the air towards the assassin, blazing with enough heat to turn him into cinders—but it fizzled out upon contact with his hooded form.

"Wh-What?!" I yelled out. *That fireball should have consumed him into ash, but he shrugged it off like it was nothing!*

Not a trace of burnt clothing or a whiff of singed hair. My fireball had absolutely no effect. *Did he counter my spell? No, there would at least be some trace of the magic if he'd done that. If not that, then...* "A barrier?" I muttered.

"Very good, second prince," the assassin mocked. Flashing me a cruel sneer, he snapped his fingers, revealing the semitransparent, soap bubble-like barrier that encapsulated his form.

An assassin who could use barrier magic was a formidable foe. I couldn't harm him unless I destroyed his barrier, and the only way to do that was to overwhelm it with an attack that far exceeded its defensive power, and that...was easier said than done—almost impossible, unless the attacker possessed a significant advantage in raw ability. That was a level of strength I was sure even my most powerful spell didn't reach.

I cursed myself for having foolishly discarded my only weapon, when suddenly, a gentle breeze brushed past my cheek. A familiar voice wafted down from above. "I waited for you at the exit, but you were nowhere to be found," Theodore said, hovering above us on a current of wind magic. "What is

happening here? Who is this? Not a friend, by the look of things,” he observed, his perplexed glance flitting between me and my assassin.

“Teodore! Get out of here!” I yelled, ignoring his *what-are-these-two-buffoons-doing* expression. “This man’s a barrier-wielding assassin!”

“A barrier-wielding assassin?” Teodore repeated with a curious tilt of his head. “Now that’s intriguing.”

“Intriguing?” I shouted back. “Are you even listening to me?”

The word “assassin” didn’t even seem to register as a threat. A sinister smirk transformed his fair features into something dark, revealing a malevolence well beyond his years. “Well, isn’t this just perfect,” he purred, a chilling chuckle escaping his throat. “I’m quite upset right now, you see. A certain *someone* has tested my patience today, and I’ve been looking for a way to vent all of this stress.” His eyes locked onto the assassin. “You, sir, are just what the doctor ordered.”

Without pause, Teodore extended an index finger and traced a circle in the air. A violent tornado instantly enveloped the assassin. Its ferocity was such that the tendrils of wind at its edges clawed at me, making me squint my eyes and grit my teeth. Teodore made it look easy, but to so effortlessly conjure a whirlwind of that magnitude was an impossible feat for all except the strongest of imperial court mages. To be able to do so at age seven was nothing short of astonishing. “They don’t call you a prodigy for nothing, do they?” I murmured, stumbling back a few steps, trying to shield myself from the tearing winds.

In my mind, Teodore’s attack had settled the matter; the assassin obviously had to be torn and ripped to shreds at this point. Content to watch Teodore’s display of power, I was caught off guard when instead he snapped at me. “What are you doing, you oaf? Hurry and cast your fire magic. This tornado isn’t enough to break through his barrier. With some added firepower, however...”

He sounded pleased, almost jubilant, as he voiced his desire to have me join him in a joint strike. I glanced up at him, and he looked utterly delighted, not a trace of dissatisfaction marring his face.

*Is he...trying to get back at me right here, right now? Unable to directly harm a royal, he resorts to taking his rage out on assassins instead? A roundabout*

*way of doing things if you ask me, but I'm not about to stand idly by as I get rescued.*

"All right, I'll help," I said somewhat reluctantly.

"Any time now, really," Theodore shot back dryly. "Hit the tornado with the most powerful fire magic you can muster. Leave the rest to me."

"The rest to you?" I echoed. "What are you planning to do?"

*Wouldn't the wind just dissipate the fire?* I almost wanted to ask, but Theodore's look of disdain shut me up at once. He shook his head. "I'm attempting to create a firestorm—a *firestorm*. Even a dimwit like you has heard the term before, yes?"

"Of course I know what a firestorm is," I shot back. "I'm not *that* stupid."

"You aren't? Well color me surprised. Perhaps if you studied harder, then I might not be—but no, this isn't the time nor place. Hurry up and cast your fire magic before the assassin finds a way to escape my spell." His expression clouded over again, his eyes narrowing as he returned his gaze to the man inside the tornado.

Realizing that we'd wasted enough time, I hastily began to channel my power. Truthfully, I wanted nothing more than to fire off another retort, but that could wait until later, when an unknown assailant wasn't threatening my life. I focused, coaxing the magic within me towards my outstretched palms. Sweat beaded on my forehead, and a rising heat radiated from my core as I amassed more and more energy. My body and soul screaming in defiance, I gave one final push and let forth the most powerful burst of fire magic I had ever conjured.

The crimson missile streaked through the air and met the tornado head-on. However, instead of dissipating upon contact with the howling wall of wind, the spell was absorbed by the tempest. Theodore seemed to be consciously modulating the tornado's nature, forcing it to incorporate the energies of my fiery projectile.

He let out a strained grunt. "The flames are...stronger than I expected." His face contorted as he struggled to exert control over the swirling vortex.

Whatever he was doing, he seemed to be succeeding—the tornado transformed into a towering inferno.

*Amazing...* This was true multi-elemental magic, and I was witnessing it with my very own eyes. Manipulating the energies of someone else's magic, even in this indirect manner, was an incredibly difficult feat. *Father, you sure picked one hell of a tutor.*

A sound akin to the shattering of delicate glass jolted me from my thoughts—especially as the sound was soon followed by an agonized, torturous scream. I couldn't see past the wall of flames, but I didn't need to to see it to guess at the grim nature of the scene inside. Theodore's plan had succeeded, and the assassin's vaunted barrier had faltered in the face of our multi-elemental onslaught.

A twinge of sympathy for my would-be assassin stirred in my chest, and as I offered a silent prayer for his soul, Theodore descended next to me. Had he already mastered the firestorm? He seemed utterly unperturbed as he landed gracefully on the grass. "You're amazing," I couldn't help but admit. "How did you do that? I can barely even control my *own* fireballs."

Theodore shot me a sidelong glance. His green-yellow peridot eyes were tinged with a melancholy look of maturity beyond his years. "How long has it been since anyone has paid me a true compliment?" I thought I heard him mutter.

"Sorry?" I asked.

"Nothing," he replied promptly. "Nothing at all. But you...you're quite impressive yourself. To conjure up that much firepower at your age is no small feat. It seems I've underestimated you." With these words, the young prodigy extinguished the firestorm with a mere snap of his fingers, and as he did so, his eyes softened into something resembling a smile. A tranquil aura seemed to emanate from him as he cast a final glance at the charred remains of the assassin.

Meanwhile, I blinked in surprise, my thoughts a whirlwind of confusion. *Did he just compliment me?* I'd always pegged him as self-righteous and preachy, the type of person who would never acknowledge the achievements of another. Yet, here he was, doing just that.

*Perhaps I judged him too quickly?*

Breaking out of my thoughts, I remarked, still somewhat incredulous, “You’re actually kind of a nice guy, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me, but what is the choice of the term ‘actually’ intended to communicate?” he shot back. “Choose your next words carefully, as they might just earn you another hour of lecture.” Teodore’s calm demeanor vanished as if it had never been, replaced by a visible vein throbbing on his youthful face as he turned towards me. Apparently I’d said something to upset him, but what exactly had it been? I’d spoken with every intention of praising him.

Confusion gripped me, and so did an overwhelming sense of impending doom. I took a step backwards, but I was met only with the solid sensation of a hedge. There was nowhere to run. “W-Wait. Can we talk about this? Use our words like the grown-ups told us to?”

“Talk?” he echoed mockingly. “Whatever could there be to talk about?”

I grasped at straws. “U-Um, the assassin? Someone did try to kill me, after all...”

“Oh, we needn’t worry about that. The knights will handle him. As most, we’ll be asked to give our testimony.”

“Y-You’re right, but... But...”

I could not win a war of words against Teodore. My shoulders drooped as I reluctantly resigned myself to defeat, eliciting a smug smile from him. Suddenly, he grasped my wrists. Alarmed, I tried to break free, but for some reason, it felt like he had me in irons, his grip unshakable.

*What? How can he... Wait, is he using strengthening magic?!*

“Now let us go, shall we?” he added with a downright gleeful smirk, “to the most engaging, most *thrilling* lecture you’ll have ever had the pleasure of attending.”

He led me out of the maze, his steps light—far *too* light, considering what we had just experienced. As we approached the castle, my spirits sank further and further, while his soared higher and higher; I could tell because of the cheerful

hum I could hear escaping his lips.

*I take it all back. There's nothing nice about this guy at all.*





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