



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

2



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Teodore

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



Flora

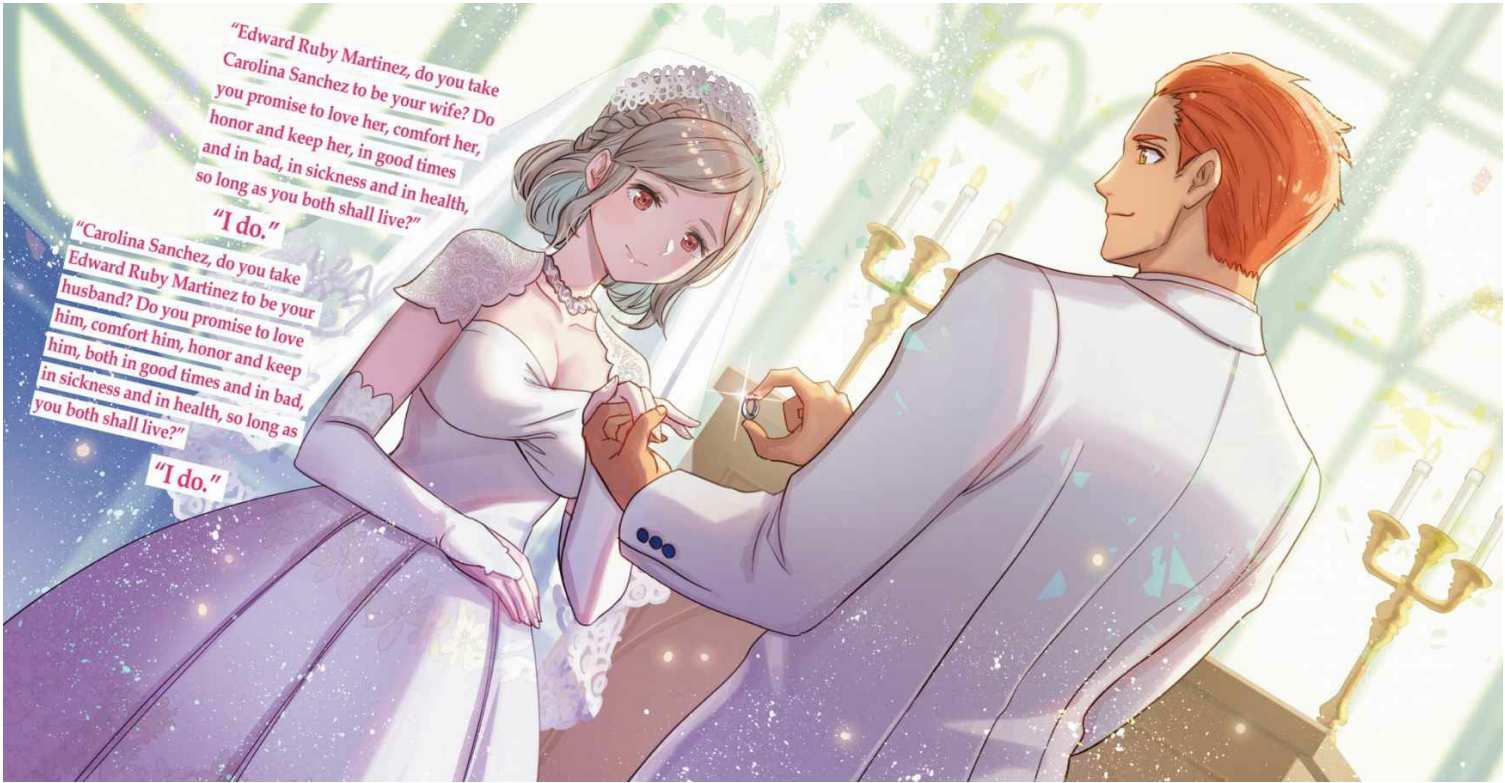
Eldest daughter of ducal House Sanchez. Lauded as the Saint-to-be, she is a multit talented and accomplished young woman. Only her sister is privy to her cruelty.

Story

Lady Carolina Sanchez spent her entire life enduring ceaseless and underhanded bullying from her sister Lady Flora Sanchez. Flora outwardly plays the role of a doting older sister, but she harbors a deep grudge against Carolina, whom she blames for their mother's death, as it occurred shortly after Carolina's birth. After living her whole life overshadowed by her sister, Carolina is suddenly married off to a prince of a neighboring country in order to resolve a political crisis. Her husband-to-be? The infamous "bloodthirsty" Prince Edward of Malcosias. Carolina is brought to Malcosias in secret, where she meets Edward for the first time. Contrary to the rumors (and much to her surprise), she finds Edward to be a warm and compassionate soul. After her arrival in Malcosias, she finds that her new in-laws welcome her with respect and love, and for the first time, Carolina experiences what it's like to be considered worthy.

As she settles into Malcosias, there comes a day seemingly like any other until she is attacked by a mysterious assassin. Suddenly she finds herself embroiled in a struggle for royal succession – the first prince, unable to claim the throne due to a debilitating disease, versus the second prince. Despite the danger to her life, Carolina proclaims to Edward that she will not back away from these challenges, and she chooses to remain committed to their marriage.

Meanwhile, a triad of major calamities besieges Carolina's home kingdom of Celestia: Increased sightings of fearsome mana-beasts, decline in crop yields, and a deadly epidemic, all at the same time. Though Celestian leadership attributes these calamities to the decline in power of Flora, the Saint-to-be, the truth is far more revelatory...



"Edward Ruby Martinez, do you take
Carolina Sanchez to be your wife? Do
you promise to love her, comfort her,
honor and keep her, in good times
and in bad, in sickness and in health,
so long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"Carolina Sanchez, do you take
Edward Ruby Martinez to be your
husband? Do you promise to love
him, comfort him, honor and keep
him, both in good times and in bad,
in sickness and in health, so long as
you both shall live?"

"I do."



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Can't Contain His
POWER
Forget My Sister!
I Don't Want to
Be a Saint! Almond
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Characters



Carolina

Second daughter of the ducal House of Sanchez. She displays an uncanny recognition of her role as a pawn in a political game. Surprisingly steadfast in her resolutions once they are made.



Edward

Second prince of the Malcosian Empire and the commander of the Pyreborn. He finds himself drawn to Carolina's compassionate nature.



Marisa

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



Owen

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



Raymond

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



Vanessa

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

Eric

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

Gilbert

First prince of the Malcosian Empire. Suffering from Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome, he lives a secluded and confined life.

Collett

Member of the Pyreborn. Carolina once saved his life.

Thank you for your purchase of Volume 2 of
*The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her
Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I
Was the Real Saint All Along!*

I hope you liked the new character
introduced in this volume.
I really enjoyed creating him.

Yoshiro Ambe

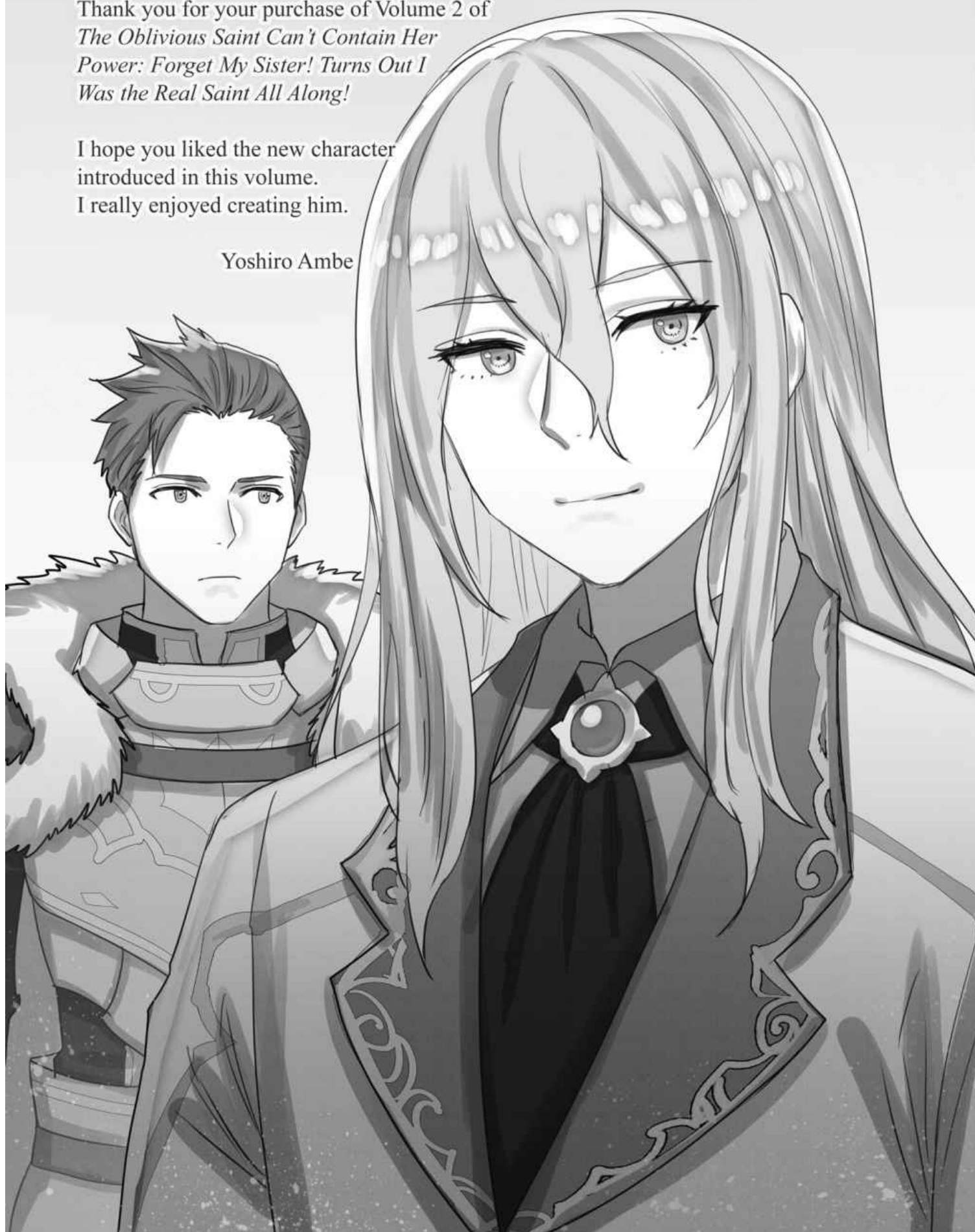


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Prologue: Teodore

The veil of night had fallen over the earth quite some time ago, and yet still I sat immersed in paperwork within the quiet confines of my office. Glancing at the daunting pile that had accumulated in my absence, I couldn't help but sigh softly. The sheer volume of paperwork seemed unbelievable, especially given that it had only piled up over the course of a mere handful of days while I had been otherwise occupied capturing the mastermind behind recent disturbances.

Just how many days will it take me to surmount this mountain of parchment? I pondered grimly. *Well, I suppose it could always be worse.* Prince Edward, working in my stead, had managed to reduce a portion of my workload, clearing out about a fifth of it, and I was determined to be thankful for small victories wherever I could find them.

Yes, small victories such as managing to successfully apprehend the suspect, I reminded myself. *For now, I'll count that as another win and grit my teeth to get myself through the rest of it.* With this resolve, I refocused on the document in front of me, scanning the text as I reached for my cup of coffee.

As it turned out, the same individual was responsible for both the attempted poisoning of Lady Carolina and the assassination attempt in the colonnade. We had already gathered numerous witnesses and ample evidence in our investigation of the colonnade incident by the time the poisoning had occurred, and that groundwork had enabled us to move unusually fast on this particular occasion. The suspect, a member of the first prince's faction, had been arrested on charges solely related to the colonnade attack, and it was only in the interrogation room that he had confessed to hiring an assassin to poison Lady Carolina as well. Frankly, it was the one silver lining of the whole situation: the two crimes being connected simplified matters. But as welcome a coincidence as it was, it was also hardly a debilitating blow to the nobility who had masterminded the crisis. The individual in our custody was but one head of this large, insidious hydra. Without a doubt, more heads lurked in the shadows, just

waiting to be dragged into the light.

“They’re getting bolder,” I murmured to myself. “Directly attempting to harm His Highness and his fiancée...”

Shaking off these thoughts, I tapped the air with my knuckles, summoning my extradimensional storage pocket. As I reached in, sifting through the important documents inside, my hand brushed against something small and unexpected. Puzzled, I paused. *Hm? I don’t remember putting in something so diminutive in here, but...*

Oh, wait. Yes, I do. This is Lady Carolina’s letter.

Extracting the envelope, I confirmed my initial assumption. Lady Carolina’s name was neatly scribbled on the outside, alongside Duke Sanchez’s signature. I realized, somewhat sheepishly, that I had never returned it to her. In the days since the Fete, I had been utterly consumed by its aftermath and subsequent investigations, to the point that I had completely forgotten that I still had the letter.

Studying the unfamiliar handwriting again, I gently ran my fingers over the envelope’s surface. Along with the thought, *I should return this to her soon*, the recent events in Celestia floated through my mind: crop failure, mana-beast incursions, a plague—three enormous calamities besieging the holy realm all at the same time.

I found the Celestians’ attribution of their misfortunes to the poor condition of their Saint-to-be grossly insufficient. The simultaneous emergence of three distinct crises, each without warning or apparent cause, seemed far too convenient. No matter how much “the Saint-to-be loved her dear sister,” I couldn’t bring myself to buy it.

I’d encountered Lady Flora Sanchez on several public-facing occasions, and my opinion of her was that she was no pushover. While her delicate, endearing appearance perfectly embodied the archetype of a fragile noble lady, I’d sensed a trace of something far darker, far more formidable lurking just beneath the surface. These were mere speculations, drawn from my superficial interactions with her, but at the very least, I was convinced that she was not the paragon of spotless integrity and modesty that she claimed to be.

“That’s quite enough conjecture about a woman I barely know,” I admonished myself, redirecting my thoughts to more practical matters. “These three calamities befalling Celestia, however, could present an opportunity.”

In recent days, I had been wrestling with how to properly atone for Owen’s misdeeds. It now appeared that an ideal solution had been under my nose all along. Duke Sanchez could belabor his indifference towards the incident all he wanted, but I could not overlook it. Honor demanded we acknowledge our role in the matter, and offering assistance to mitigate Celestia’s troubles as a form of reparation seemed like a fitting approach. Given the current state of affairs, they would likely find it difficult to refuse such an offer. Material aid was on the table, of course, but our potentially unique contribution lay in the prowess of the Pyreborn. Specifically the mana-beast issue seemed tailor-made for our intervention. By sending a unit to help combat these creatures, we would not only compensate for Owen’s folly but also garner glory for ourselves.

A half smirk curled at the corners of my lips. *My sincerest apologies, Celestia, for so shamelessly exploiting you in your time of crisis, but this is an opportunity too valuable to pass up.*

“All I do, I do for my lord Edward Ruby Martinez,” I murmured, my voice barely audible. Just then, the first light of dawn pierced through a gap in my curtains, casting a blinding ray across my desk. “Morning already?” I sighed, momentarily disoriented.

As I sat there, beset by a series of yawns, I didn’t know.

I didn’t know who the true Saint was.

I didn’t know that as Celestia deteriorated, Malcosias thrived.

The clues lay hidden somewhere within this mountain of paperwork, the answers tucked away in the depths of my mind, waiting to be unearthed.

Chapter One

A week had passed since the tumult of the Founder's Day Fete, and tranquility had at last returned to the imperial court of Malcosias. Today marked the day I welcomed Owen back into his role as my personal guard.

"Lady Carolina, on this day, I, Owen Klein, pledge my renewed devotion to your service." His words, imbued with formal etiquette, were a stark contrast to his past demeanor as the Pyreborn's notorious problem child. He bowed deeply, displaying none of his usual insolence or irreverence. The transformation was so profound that I almost wanted to ask, *Are you really Owen?* Even Marisa couldn't conceal her astonishment. I'd anticipated some change, but the extent of it took me by surprise, betraying my expectations in the most delightful way. It appeared that Collett's belief in Owen's potential was well-founded.

"Well met, Owen," I replied with a warm smile. "It's good to have you back."

"Yes, milady. Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall resume my duties." He saluted crisply and stepped back, assuming his post and standing at attention.

Marisa approached, taking Owen's vacated place before me. She knelt to bring herself to my level on the sofa, her eyes meeting mine. "Your Ladyship, may I review today's agenda with you? First, you have a meeting with Prince Edward regarding the upcoming ceremony, followed by a fitting for your wedding dress. I must unfortunately remind you that as the design of the dress is already finalized, major alterations at this point will be difficult to accommodate."

"Understood. Thank you, Marisa."

The day's schedule was more packed than I had anticipated. But then again, wasn't such busyness to be expected with the wedding merely a week away? Everything had to be in perfect order for the ceremony. As Her Majesty had informed me, the date was set and the invitations dispatched. There was no longer the slightest margin for delay.

“When is my meeting with His Highness?” I inquired.

“At ten o’clock, my lady.”

“That’s quite soon. Where will it be held?”

“Right here, in your chambers. I believe His Highness is likely on his way as we speak—”

Her sentence was cut short by a knock at the door. Glancing at the clock, its hands indicated it was only half past nine. Someone was rather eager...

“Enter,” I called.

“Excuse me,” came the reply.

As if summoned by our conversation, our eager visitor presented himself. His fiery red hair and mystical golden eyes were as captivating as ever, but something seemed amiss. It took me a moment to realize what it was—Lord Theodore was nowhere to be seen. They usually arrived together, so Prince Edward’s solo entrance felt somewhat...lacking. *Well, I’m sure the good Lord Theodore has a lot on his plate.*

I stood up and bobbed a curtsy. “Good morning, Your Highness. I am delighted to present myself, Carolina Sanchez, at your gracious service.”

“You know I don’t do well with formality, Carolina,” he replied briskly. “You can spare me all that.” Without pause, he strode towards the sofa where I had been sitting and took a seat beside me.

Hm? Why choose this particular sofa out of all the other available seating options? Was there something specific about this one that drew him?

As I tilted my head, pondering whether to relocate, the prince gently patted the cushion next to him. “Please, sit back down. I wanted to be close to you.”

“Oh?” I managed, slightly taken aback. “Of course, Your Highness, excuse me.”

I eased myself down beside him, feeling my heart’s rhythm quicken. We seemed closer than usual...or perhaps it was just my imagination? “M-Marisa, could you prepare some tea?” I stammered, a little distracted by the potency of my proximity to Prince Edward.

“Immediately, my lady,” she responded, bobbing her head in a polite bow before going about her work.

If only I could be as coldly indifferent as she was... I clenched my hand over my heart, as if to keep it from leaping out. Prince Edward and I had been close to one another before, but never for such an extended period as this meeting was scheduled to be. Would this proximity continue throughout our conference? Could my heart withstand it?

“In the interest of time, we must be brief,” the prince began in his deep, resonant baritone. “The ceremony will largely mirror a traditional one, so there’s little to discuss there. However, I...must unfortunately inform you that Duke Sanchez will not be able to attend.”

His hesitant words pierced through the pounding in my ears, chilling the faint warmth in my chest as if a bucket of ice water had been unceremoniously dumped over a delicate flame. A cold, numbing wave swept over me, freezing my thoughts in their tracks.

My father...not attending? This reality should perhaps not have been shocking to me, considering recent events. While the arrest of the true perpetrator behind the attempts on my life had exonerated the duke, it had done little to put to rest the other far-reaching ramifications that now enveloped us. My father had been a victim, plain and simple, but the political ripples of this scandal no doubt touched the nobility on both sides. With the ongoing succession crisis in Malcosias, the threat of further action against him and against Edward and myself loomed large. I understood the decision; it was a necessary measure for my father’s safety. Yet the understanding did little to soothe the ache in my heart.

I had so looked forward to him seeing me in my wedding dress...

Unbidden, tears welled in my eyes, and I quickly cast my gaze downwards to conceal them. I smiled. I had to smile, or I’d break right then and there. “I... I see. Thank you for telling me. Does this mean I’ll be walking down the aisle alone?”

“No, I cannot allow the bride to walk down the aisle alone on her big day.”

Confusion and surprise mingled in a squeak as I whipped my head back up to

look at Prince Edward. *He won't let me walk alone, but he won't invite my father either? Is that not utterly contradictory?* Traditionally, the bride and groom were each accompanied by a family member, and if none were available, they proceeded alone. That was the tacit custom, surely understood by the both of us, so I couldn't help but see the inherent fallacy in his statement.

As I blinked at him, trying to decipher his words, he gently placed a reassuring hand on my head. "Don't worry, Carolina," he murmured softly. "I will accompany you down the aisle myself."

"What?!" The word escaped me before I could hold it back. "But what about the Emperor? Surely I cannot deprive His Majesty of the privilege of walking with his son!"

"My father and I have discussed this, and he agrees. Walking together will also publicly display the depth of our affection."

"B-But...!"

A wedding was a once-in-a-lifetime event. The tradition of entering with family was deeply significant, and here was Prince Edward trying to deprive himself of that cherished moment for my sake!

"Carolina," he spoke gently yet firmly. "I have no intention of leaving you alone on your wedding day. This is a once-in-a-lifetime event, and I want you to experience it fully. And besides"—his eyes locked with mine, filled with an unusual degree of earnestness—"the guilt of you walking in alone while I joyfully enter with my father is something I don't wish to bear."

"Your Highness..." His sincerity was palpable, and his gaze intensely serious. It was clear he had given this much thought, genuinely wanting me to enjoy the ceremony, and this was the heartfelt conclusion he had reached. It was the kind of generous and unconventional solution only a man of Prince Edward's straightforward nature could conceive. Far from being objectionable, it had the potential to invigorate the age-old traditions of marriage with a fresh breath of daring. In a royal wedding, even the smallest action would inevitably capture the nation's attention. Whether this break from tradition would be received positively or negatively remained to be seen, but it would certainly give the public a lot to talk about. Perhaps it might even embolden other couples

without parents on both sides to feel less constrained by traditional expectations on their wedding day.

Yet for all of these practical considerations, the most compelling reason I found myself unable to decline his offer was its origin—it was a gesture crafted thoughtfully and selflessly for me. Arriving at this conclusion, I spun my next words with measured grace. “Very well, Your Highness. Then I shall gladly take you up on your kind offer. Consider our joint entrance confirmed.”

His gaze visibly softened slightly in response to my words. Those orbs of golden zircon were ever so kind, so gentle.



The meeting concluded smoothly, and soon after, I found myself in a familiar lecture hall that had been transformed into a private sanctuary for my wedding dress fitting. The room, now partitioned with curtains for privacy, was devoid of any male presence. Even Owen had to remain on guard on the far side of the door. Within these intimate confines, I saw a bustling assembly of maids, the wedding dress designer, and for some reason—although of *course* she was here—the Empress herself.

“All right, ladies. Let’s not waste time. Proceed with the fitting,” commanded the Empress on my behalf, effectively marshaling the maids into action. A chorus of ‘Yes, Your Majesty’ echoed in response, followed by a flurry of activity. Under her exacting direction, each maid was assigned a specific task. Guided by Marisa and her team, I was escorted to the back of the room, where my nearly completed wedding gown awaited—and what a gown it was. Made from sumptuous silk, the fiber caught the light, casting a subtle, shimmering aura. The design was meticulous in every aspect, each and every stitch a veritable work of art. The skirt, a many-layered confection adorned with fine white embroidery, was a study in understated beauty. The white-on-white motif made the patterns so subtle that they were almost imperceptible, yet the craftsmanship was undeniable, a testament to the artisan’s dedication.

“My goodness...” I murmured in awe. “This is beautiful—and the embroidery, so intricate...”

“I’m pleased it’s to your liking, my lady,” Marisa responded. “Shall we begin

the fitting?”

“Yes, thank you,” I replied, before a bevy of hands enveloped me. I turned my gaze away from the stunning dress, extending my arms to allow the maids to assist with undressing. Piece by piece, my attire, jewelry, and gloves were delicately removed, leaving me as unadorned as the moment I’d entered this world.

The gown was fitted onto me swiftly. Stepping out from the secluded area, I found myself under the scrutinizing gazes of the designer and the Empress. They observed me intently, their brows knitted in focus, while I tried my best to stand motionless, a bundle of nerves under their watchful eyes. The designer circled me, examining my form from every angle. It was an unsettling feeling (not to mention a tiring one), being the center of such unrelenting attention. And why was she mumbling? I couldn’t make out what she was saying, but... *Oh no, I hope it isn’t anything bad.*

My figure wasn’t too...*rotund* for this dress, was it? The pattern had been designed without the allowance of a corset, and thus, the silhouette lived and died by the wearer’s natural figure—a figure I was truthfully uncertain that I possessed. *Perhaps it’s time to tighten up the old waistline...*

Right as I made a mental note to perhaps reconsider my fondness for baked sweets, the Empress turned to the designer. “Carolina’s waist is more slender than I anticipated. The decision to forgo a corset was indeed wise, yet some adjustments are necessary.”

“Huh?” I squeaked.

“You took the words right out of my mouth, Your Majesty,” the designer agreed. “A slight intake at the waistline would be perfect.”

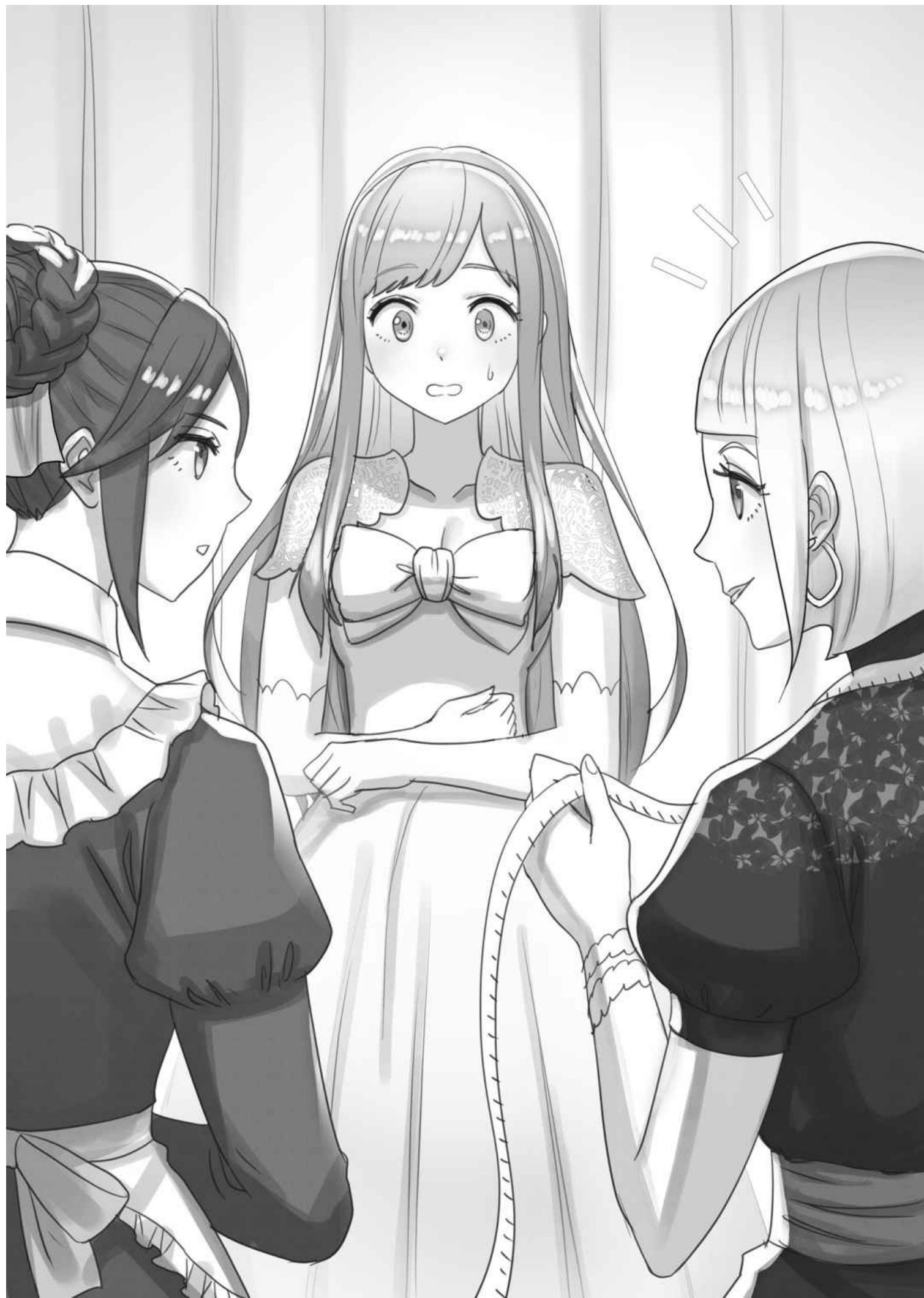
“Huh? Um...”

“And remove that ribbon on her chest,” the Empress added decisively. “It detracts from the overall elegance. Might we also consider a more diaphanous material for the shawl?”

“Indeed, the lady’s skin is too beautiful to be hidden.”

“Huh...?” I uttered for the third time, only to find my input drowned out by

their continued discussion yet again. It was as if I had become an invisible mannequin, merely a display for the dress, and as they delved into a passionate debate over potential alterations, I was left feeling somewhat excluded and overlooked.



In my eyes, the gown was already exquisite. The fabric felt luxurious, and wearing it was a delight, especially without the restrictive corset underpinning its structure. I was in love with the design, so any of their additional concerns quite frankly went straight over my head.

My thoughts were interrupted by a sudden knock at the door. *Owen?* I wondered, hoping there wasn't any trouble. Since the room was technically assigned to me for the time being, I called out permission for entry. To my surprise, the door swung open to reveal not just Owen but also Prince Edward and Lord Teodore!

As I stood momentarily speechless, Owen bowed his scruffy lime-green head in respect. "Please forgive our sudden intrusion. His Highness Prince Edward, Commander of the Pyreborn, and Lord Teodore, the Vice Commander, requested to—"

The Empress swiftly interjected, cutting Owen's explanation short. "Of course, let them enter. You, Owen, may resume your post outside."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Owen saluted sharply and swiftly exited the room, replaced by the prince and his councillor. I had seen the prince only a short while ago, but Lord Teodore? I didn't think I'd beheld him since the Fete.

"Hello again, Carolina," Prince Edward said, his eyes settling on me. "That dress suits you well."

"Thank you, Your Highness," I responded a bit mechanically.

Lord Teodore followed with a greeting that was both warm and unmistakably weary. "Your Majesty, my lady, it's been a while. It brings me great joy to see you both thriving."

"Hello, Teodore." The Empress greeted him automatically before pausing to take stock of Lord Teodore's actual appearance. "Not quite thriving yourself, though, are you? Take care to rest before you collapse."

"Lord Teodore, hello," I chimed in. "Your dedication is always appreciated." My greeting was cheerful, but like Her Majesty, my smile almost faltered at his

appearance.

With a gentle smile and a quiet, “I assure you, I’m fine,” he attempted to persuade us of his well-being. But between the gaunt cheeks, the dark circles under his eyes, and all the other signs he was on yet another of his sleepless streaks of overwork, I couldn’t bring myself to believe him. If only there was a way for the Pyreborn to function well in his absence...

“Ah, right,” Lord Teodore suddenly spoke, jolting me from my thoughts. “Lady Carolina, I have something for you—your letter from Duke Sanchez. My sincerest apologies that it took this long to find its way back to you.”

The letter from Father—I’d nearly forgotten about it amid the whirlwind of recent days. Lord Teodore produced the letter from his breast pocket and proffered it to me. Gratitude welled within me as I took hold of it, realizing he must have made the trip specifically to hand this back to me. The letter, impeccably preserved from its time extradimensional storage, now lay in my hands without a single crease or fold. “Thank you, Lord Teodore,” I said, clutching the letter to my chest like a precious treasure—after all, it *was* one. In place of my father, it would serve as my talisman. And now, with his absence at my wedding confirmed, it held even more significance.

“But dare I say, my lady, that you truly look magnificent,” Lord Teodore continued. “Of course, your beauty is undeniable on any day, but this is a step above.”

Before I could respond, Prince Edward interjected. “Yes, magnificent—that’s the word.” He narrowed his eyes. “Though I can’t help but think the dress is a little too...plain? As if it isn’t enough to match her beauty.”

The Empress weighed in with a hint of surprise. “Edward, I didn’t realize you had such an eye for detail. We were just discussing potential enhancements with the designer. Please, share any thoughts you have.”

“Yes, I have a few ideas.”

Like mother, like son; the impassive duo exchanged nods before rekindling the dialogue with the designer—a dialogue that seemed to be more impassioned than it had any right to be... Their willingness to contribute their insights was flattering, yet I couldn’t help but wonder about how this distraction

might impact their schedules. Both the empress and Prince Edward had myriad responsibilities; did they truly have the time to debate minutiae with my dressmaker?

I found my gaze unconsciously drifting towards Lord Theodore, and I caught his quiet comment: “Rings, dresses, it never ends...” He sighed, his shoulders drooping slightly under the weight of his responsibilities.

Lord Theodore, I really meant it when I said your dedication is always appreciated...



The remaining days and nights preceding the ceremony felt like a relentless race against time, and before I knew it, the momentous day had arrived. Seated in a waiting room adjacent to the grand cathedral, the venue for our wedding, I found myself fully clad in my completed wedding gown, hands clenched into fists to quell their trembling. Such was my nervousness that even a genuine smile seemed beyond my capability.

No one told me!

I hadn't been aware that the ceremony was to be broadcast throughout the empire using magical instruments! These priceless apparatuses, treasured heirlooms of the Martinez family, were capable of transmitting real-time images to every corner of the realm. Their irreplaceable nature and the significant amounts of mana required for their operation and maintenance meant that they were used once a year at most, reserved only for the most monumental occasions. So not only was the entirety of the Malcosian aristocracy in attendance going to witness my most personal and significant day, so was each and every member of the general populace! My face paled and my stomach churned at the prospect. I recognized the value in providing clear and immediate information to the nation at this critical juncture, but I wished they'd at least given me more than a few hours' advance notice to become accustomed to the idea!

The weight of the occasion pressed down on me, forcing a muted sigh from my lips. Marisa, ever attentive, paused in her minor adjustments of my gown and offered a comforting word. “Now, my lady, it wouldn't do for the bride to

look so troubled on her special day. I'm sure you're nervous, but do try and relax."

"I understand what you mean, Marisa," I replied, my voice strained with apprehension, "but the scale of the ceremony is...far grander than I'd imagined. What if I slip up? Make a mistake? How many Malcosians would witness my blunder?"

She offered a light chuckle. "You'll do wonderfully. Someone who has prepared as diligently as you rarely falters. Didn't you spend all of yesterday rehearsing the entire thing in your mind? You're overthinking it, my lady."

"Thanks, Marisa." I smiled tentatively at her. "I think I needed to hear that."

It was a touching gesture for Marisa to break her usual reserve in order to ease my anxiety. With a deep breath, I faced the mirror with renewed resolve. Reflected back was a young woman transformed, adorned in a breathtakingly beautiful gown, a gown which had become even more beautiful as a result of the meticulous alterations done in the past week. My face, expertly made up, matched the dress in its elegance. I caught myself marveling at the image, scarcely able to recognize myself.

As I admired my reflection, Marisa opened her pocket watch and showed it to me. "It's nearly time, my lady." The hands were inching towards the hour of my entrance.

Ten minutes! We had lingered longer than I'd realized. Prince Edward was likely already waiting. "Let's not delay any further, Marisa. His Highness and the guests await us."

"Yes, my lady."

Taking Marisa's hand, I rose carefully, mindful not to muss my dress or my hair, and we hastened together out of the waiting room. We made our way down the corridor to the designated spot. Approaching the doors to the nave, I saw Prince Edward—utterly resplendent in an all-white tuxedo.

I felt my feet slow to a stop. His usual black-and-crimson attire was striking, but in pure white, he was a vision to behold. The hall's light seemed to coalesce around him; his very presence seemed to command its radiance. For a moment,

all sound around me and even time itself seemed to fade away, leaving only his captivating figure and my lingering gaze.

Marisa's voice, calling my name, snapped me back to reality. I quickened my pace. "Your Highness! I apologize for the delay!" I called out.

He turned, his expression softening. "At ease, you're perfectly on time. And, um..." His voice trailed off as he reached out with a tender and tentative touch to brush my cheek. "You're breathtakingly beautiful. So beautiful that no one else should have the privilege of seeing you like this."

A sudden warmth surged to my cheeks, igniting them with a flush I couldn't control. His words... They were so direct! I hastily averted my gaze, unable to bear the intensity of his stare.

The heat radiating from my cheeks soon enveloped my entire being, a tingling sensation that made it a struggle to return my gaze to his. *Prince Edward, could you perhaps realize that there is a time and place for such declarations and that this is neither? And it's all made worse by the fact that I know you do not offer empty flattery. From anyone else, I might have shrugged off those words, but not from you!*

Thanks to Prince Edward, I was no longer nervous. Now only the red-hot inferno blazing from my cheeks gave me pause—a *far better* predicament! Out of the corner of my eye, I swore I caught Marisa smiling warmly at me, her eyes reflecting a mixture of amusement and affection.

Then, slicing through my chaotic emotions, came the partly muffled voice of the wedding announcer through the door ahead. "Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the bride and the groom."

There was no time to quell the raging fire within me. Cheeks yet ablaze, I gently hooked my arm through Prince Edward's. In that instant, the majestic white doors swung open, revealing the hallowed cathedral, its pews teeming with guests. As the initial turmoil in my heart began to quiet, a wave of thunderous applause and enthusiastic cheers rushed in to fill the void, punctuated by joyous shouts of congratulations.

"Seems that even the largest cathedral in Malcosias couldn't quite accommodate everyone, huh?" Prince Edward noted as he scanned the space

before him.

I couldn't help but giggle at his somewhat superfluous observation. "Indeed, Your Highness."

He looked down at me, I looked up at him, and we exchanged a knowing smile. I wondered how that interaction looked to the crowd, but I didn't have to wonder for very long—at that instant, a high-pitched squeal, reminiscent of an adoring fan's, pierced the air.

Stepping into the cathedral, keenly feeling the people's blessings, we began our walk down the aisle. The air was alive with cheers and well-wishes.

"Congratulations!"

"Oh, blessed day!"

"There's our beautiful bride and groom!"

"Wishing a lifetime of happiness to the lovely couple!"

Even though the ceremony had only just begun, and even though nothing could make up for the absence of my father—this was, without a doubt, the grandest ceremony any girl could dream of. The brief procession carried us to the front of the cathedral, where the bishop awaited us. It was a special honor to have him officiate our wedding rather than a lesser member of the clergy.

As Prince Edward and I stood side by side, we bolstered each other's spirits. The bishop turned to us, his face adorned with a gentle smile, and he began to lead us through our vows.

"Edward Ruby Martinez, do you take Carolina Sanchez to be your wife? Do you promise to love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

"Carolina Sanchez, do you take Edward Ruby Martinez to be your husband? Do you promise to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in good times and in bad, in sickness and in health, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do."

“And now, the exchange of rings.”

The bishop turned the case sitting on his lectern towards us, revealing two exquisite rings nestled within—each set with a small but brilliant ruby.

Laying eyes on the rings for the first time, I was struck by their beauty. The deep crimson of the rubies, mirroring the color of my own eyes, sparkled with an intense brilliance—it seemed all that talk about rubies between Prince Edward and his family hadn’t just been for show. Indeed, the allure of the pieces extended beyond the gems themselves. It resided also in the intricate craftsmanship of the rings, each the work of a master artisan, both of our names delicately etched inside the band of each one, a glittering symbol of our union.

Speaking of, hadn’t someone mentioned that Prince Edward had designed these himself? It must have been quite the effort, but that effort and care was evident in every detail.

Lost in admiration, I barely registered Prince Edward gently sliding one of the rings onto my finger. The sight of the stunning gem resting there ignited a surge of emotions within me—warmth flooded through me, and I felt the heat rushing to my eyes.

No, Carolina, not now. Hold back the tears.

I pursed my trembling lips, steadying my emotions as I reached for the other ring. With a shaking hand, I carefully slid it onto Prince Edward’s finger.

It was the simple act of wearing our rings that caused the reality of our bond to finally start to sink in. Above all else, it was a feeling of overwhelming happiness.

“You may kiss the bride,” the bishop’s voice suddenly rang out.

The kiss. The one part of the ceremony we hadn’t rehearsed, our first real kiss. A flurry of nerves twisted in my stomach. Could I do this right?

Such worries seemed not to bother Prince Edward in the slightest. He appeared completely serene as he let his eyes drift shut, his lips slightly parting. As if spurred on by some unseen force, I mirrored him, leaning into the unknown.

It was an instant. A mere moment during which I registered the softness of his lips upon mine, but it was enough to send a fresh wave of warmth cascading over me.

My first kiss—it tasted like pure, unadulterated happiness.

The ceremony, resplendent with joy and celebration from start to finish, had concluded without incident. The subsequent parade through the streets of the capital had also gone as flawlessly as it possibly could have. It was now nighttime. As the day wound down and the warm afterglow of cheers and blessings slowly faded from my mind, I still couldn't quite allow myself to relax. It was impossible, not when what loomed ahead was the inevitable, intimate culmination of every sacrament of holy matrimony: the wedding night.

Although I had been freshly bathed, my skin was clammy and almost translucent in its paleness. I paced about restlessly in Prince Edward's bedroom, a tumult of emotions swirling within me as I awaited his arrival to...consummate our marriage.

Why had I neglected to consider this?

How had I neglected to consider this?

Even in a marriage born from political convenience, the expectation of consummation remained...I had surely known that. The primary duty, for all members of the nobility, was to continue the lineage—to produce offspring—so why had I even for a second believed myself exempt from that expectation? Perhaps I'd been too busy to even spare that idea a moment's thought, but now, it was too late for regrets. The truth was that I was woefully underprepared for this moment—and moreover, I was nervous beyond belief.

As I spun on my heels, completing yet another circuit around the prince's cavernous chamber, the door behind me clicked open. Into this, the domain of the second prince, there was only one individual who dared enter without announcement, and that was...

I pivoted slowly, and the sight of my new visitor arrested my breath. There stood my prince, his fiery red hair slightly damp, torso partially exposed beneath the drape of a rich dressing gown, and under that, the folds of a

loosely tied bathrobe. Fresh from his own bath, Prince Edward radiated an allure that was...*intense*.

W-Women are supposed to be the fairest sex, are we not?

"Sorry, that took longer than usual," he said softly, piercing the thick silence.

"No, heavens no. In fact, I'm probably early," I stammered, my voice betraying my inner turmoil.

I screamed internally. *What are you even saying, Carolina Sanchez?! Normally! Talk normally! Keep stuttering like that, and he'll catch on to how nervous you are! For now, find something, anything, to talk about!*

"Um, it's been quite a day, hasn't it, Your Highness?" I ventured. "The ceremony—it was wonderful, wasn't it?"

"You're quite right about that."

"And, oh—the rings! They're absolutely beautiful. I heard you designed them yourself, is that true?"

"Yes, that's true."

"And, um..."

Why can't we keep the conversation going at all?! I know you're a man of few words, Prince Edward, but are you always this difficult to talk to, or...?!

Even the monosyllables he had managed to bestow upon me felt hollow, as if his mind were elsewhere. As I observed his motionless and somewhat distant demeanor, a nagging feeling that something was amiss grew within me. "Are you feeling all right, Your Highness? You appear somewhat preoccupied," I inquired with a gentle tone.

"I'm feeling just fine," he assured me.

"Fatigued, then? The exhaustion from the day's events and a lack of rest finally catching up to you?"

"I won't deny feeling a bit weary, but it's nothing too concerning."

"I-I see..." My voice trailed off, even more uncertainty seeping into my mind. "Have I, by any chance, upset you? You haven't moved since you entered, nor

have you met my gaze...”

Finally, his eyes locked onto mine, his voice rising in intensity. “No, that’s not it at all! I...” His voice faltered, and a rosy blush crept across his face, reddening his cheeks until they glowed like two ripe apples—a reaction that I hadn’t anticipated.

A tense silence enveloped us, each seemingly lost in the other’s gaze. He was the first to falter, his eyes darting away once more. “That’s not it. I just, um, I...” An uncharacteristic stutter overtook his speech, and he awkwardly rubbed his neck.

Please, Your Highness... My heart is at its limit with your uncharacteristic hesitance. Had I truly offended him in some manner? I wanted to take him at his word, but his evasive gaze seemed to speak volumes. My frustration escaped me in a soft sigh, and my eyes fell to the delicate, frilly negligee I was wearing.

Oh, the negligee...

Of course! That was it, wasn’t it? How could I have been so oblivious? Any young man would’ve been hard-pressed to act normally under such intimate conditions. He didn’t strike me as the womanizing type, so if my intuition proved itself correct, this could very well be the first time he’d ever seen a woman clad in such apparel. Finding myself perhaps a little too eager to accept my own half-baked conjecture as truth, I watched as he approached, still averting his gaze. He removed the dressing gown he wore over his bathrobe and held it out. “You should wear this. The nights here can be quite cold.”

“Oh, thank you,” I murmured, draping the brocade over my shoulders. The garment was so large that it cascaded down well past my knees.

“The bed is yours tonight—I’ll take the sofa,” he continued casually.

His words caught me off guard. “The bed is...mine?” I echoed, slowly grasping his meaning. “N-No, Your Highness, I couldn’t possibly... And besides, this is our wedding night, shouldn’t we be...”

Wait.

Now just what are you saying, Carolina Sanchez? Why... Why, it almost sounds

like you were looking forward to this! Is that truly how you want him to interpret you, as a woman too eager, too shameless?!

Before I could clarify, Prince Edward interjected softly, “I know, Carolina, that you aren’t that kind of woman. Anyone in your shoes would be having the same doubts.”

A wave of relief washed over me. I was grateful that he understood my intention without needing an explicit explanation. However, my comfort was fleeting as he finally looked me in the eyes again. He tenderly cupped my cheeks, his touch warm, his gaze intense. “I’d like to...wait before we consummate our marriage,” he finally confessed, his voice strained. “It’s not that I find you...undesirable, Carolina. I just... I’m not ready. If I were to take you now—I fear my self-control would falter. I worry that I would lose myself to the intensity of my passion, greedily consuming you and your love until the morning, yet still I might find myself unsated, and that’s...that’s not who I want to be. I don’t want to be that way with you.”

He pulled me into an embrace, and through the thin layers of fabric separating us, I felt the warmth of his body. His heart beat in rhythm with mine; his whispers brushed against my ear. “Until I can be sure I can treat you with the gentleness and respect you deserve, I’d like for us to wait. I’m well aware that I’m being nothing short of selfish, but I want our first time to be special, to be *right*, for both of us.”

His words were firm yet gentle, reflecting sincerity and respect, without a single note of compulsion or coercion. I couldn’t help but bask in the care he felt for me. This man... Surely he’d agonized over the weight of this night far more than I had; it was deeply etched into his expression, acutely laced within his voice. And while I understood and appreciated his perspective, my own concerns still lingered in my mind.

“Very well, Your Highness. I’ll wait for you—until you’re ready. But I do have one request: whenever we are to spend the night together, could I ask that you don’t wander off? Regardless of what we do or don’t do behind closed doors, I’d prefer to avoid becoming the subject of rumors.”

For a noblewoman marrying into another family like myself, producing heirs

was of paramount importance—even more so when the imperial family she married into was one in which polygyny was officially recognized. In such a system, one male heir could have multiple wives, and the relative frequency of a husband's visits to each wife often signified affection and favor, influencing the power dynamics among them. Currently, with neither the emperor nor Prince Edward exercising their right to choose multiple partners, the imperial harem and its inherent power struggles had been notably absent, but there was no telling how long this would last. In my case, as a foreign bride newly integrated into an unfamiliar land without established allies, my rapport (and, crucially, my *appearance* of rapport) with Prince Edward was everything.

"Of course," he responded with an ease that laid to rest some of my anxieties. "I came here tonight with that very intention."

"Then I am relieved we understand each other," I replied.

"I won't neglect my duties to you," he assured me, gently pulling back from our embrace. "But for now, why don't you get some rest? It's been a long and demanding day."

He was right. Despite the ceremony's success, the day had drained me, leaving me on the edge of exhaustion. A soft smile played on my lips as I looked up at him. "I think I will. Goodness knows I need a good night's rest right now."

And so, my wedding day, which had simultaneously been both endless and fleeting, drew to a close. I prepared for bed, eventually slipping into a deep slumber—but not before my prince and I had engaged in a fierce debate over who would, in the end, claim the bed for the night.



With the wedding day finally behind me, I'd earned myself a much-needed reprieve from my hectic days in Malcosias. On one such leisurely day, I ventured into my partly completed palatial residence for the first time: the Emerald Palace. It was an architectural marvel, the palace's exterior and interior unified in cool hues of green and white, the scale of it evoking words like "charming" and "lovely," rather than "grand" or "majestic."

As I strolled through yet another corridor with soaring ceilings, the realization that I was now royalty began to truly take hold. "*This* is going to be my home?" I

murmured to no one in particular, a mix of awe and anticipation coursing through me. With the empress and Lord Theodore having overseen most of the arrangements, from selecting furniture to appointing staff, there was little for me to worry about and everything for me to enjoy.

Marisa, who had been guiding me through the expansive palace, paused in front of a pair of ornate double doors. “This is your room, Your Highness,” she announced. Honestly, her declaration was almost unnecessary. The emeralds embedded in the woodwork were a clear indication of the room’s significance.

That being said, the empire certainly spares no expense, does it? Emeralds set into doors... That’s enough to make even the wealthiest noble in Celestia raise an eyebrow.

Brushing this unseemly thought aside, I gripped the handles, pushed open the opulent doors, and allowed the sight that greeted me to steal my breath away.

A sumptuous artisanal carpet that surely even the elite would think twice before buying, a delicate glass coffee table, a chandelier that was undoubtedly the pride of the craftsman who created it, and that sofa! It looks to be a masterpiece of the latest fashion, crafted by a distinguished atelier of the highest caliber.

I’d heard that the empress had ordered a complete refresh of all the furniture, but I must have missed the part where she’d said to upgrade every last piece to the pinnacle of luxury! For the second time in recent memory, I’d found my expectations betrayed in the most delightful way.

Delightful, but at the same time...

“Say, Marisa,” I ventured uneasily. “The furnishings—do you know their total cost?”

“I’m not aware of the specific amount, Your Highness,” she replied with her usual grace. “But if I were to venture a guess—enough to buy a small principality outright.”

“I... I suppose sometimes ignorance *is* bliss,” I murmured, deciding it was best not to dwell on the matter for my own peace of mind. “Have my clothes been moved here?”

“Yes, Your Highness. Everything from the royal castle proper has been transferred. Your clothes you may find in the walk-in closet to your right, and accessories are located within the drawers and on the shelves. If you’d like to confirm that everything is in order, I can arrange to—”

“No, that’s quite all right,” I said, dismissing her offer with a firm shake of my head. “I just wanted to know where I might find them.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Marisa responded, taking a step back.

Acknowledging Marisa’s unwavering professionalism with a wry smile, I sank into the plush (and exquisitely fashionable) sofa, a sigh of relief escaping me. Finally, I was off my feet. The trek from the imperial castle to the Emerald Palace had been quite the journey. Perhaps a foot massage was in order tonight? I could certainly make it happen, given the entourage of servants that were suddenly at my disposal. “Ah, that reminds me. Marisa, could you tell me about the rest of the staff who are assigned here?”

Assuming the role of the lady of the Emerald Palace was not merely a position of leisure; it came with its own set of responsibilities. While I wasn’t expected to oversee the day-to-day operations—that was Marisa’s domain as the newly appointed head maid—it was imperative that I understood at least the basics of estate management. I needed to be prepared for the moments at which critical decisions would rest upon my shoulders.

Marisa’s reply came quickly. “As head of the Emerald Palace, you have twenty-three handmaidens, including myself; forty-one maids; six butlers and underbutlers; and five cooks in your service. Your personal guard is, for various reasons, overseen by the Pyreborn.”

Various reasons, she says, but the reasons for that are abundantly obvious. If the extremists who had already made two attempts on my life were intent on reaching me, it’d be much more effective to bribe a guard with a weapon in hand than a servant armed with nothing but a broom. Not that the latter was completely harmless—they would be more than capable of carrying out a poisoning—but given the strict food-tasting protocols in place, having any poison find its way to me would be no small feat.

Marisa continued, oblivious to my thoughts. “For the present, this is the team

entrusted with the palace's operation. Should the need arise to increase our staffing levels, rest assured that you will be promptly notified."

"Understood," I replied with a light nod of appreciation. "Then I shall leave the palace in your capable hands."

"Your trust honors me deeply, Your Highness."

Placing her hand over her heart in a show of fealty, Marisa took a few steps back, then turned and exited the room. I exhaled a deep sigh of relief and sank further into the comforting embrace of the sofa. The palace would no doubt be in good hands with Marisa at the helm, so perhaps this might present an opportunity for me to delve deeper into imperial history and magical studies? Lord Theodore had imparted the basics, but that was just that—the basics. If I truly wanted to become a member of the imperial family, I needed a more profound understanding of their empire.

Perhaps I should see about acquiring new study materials? I mused, only to be snapped from my thoughts by a sudden knock on the door. *Who could it be? I wasn't supposed to be expecting any visitors today.*

Composing myself, I called out, "Enter."

"Excuse me," announced a cool, familiar voice. With a click, the door swung open to reveal none other than one half of the duo that had masterminded this palace, the Frost Witch herself, Empress Vanessa Ruby Martinez.

I sat frozen, eyes wide, my full attention locked on my unexpected guest for a long moment before my mind finally kicked in once again. Hurriedly, I sprang to my feet, gathered my skirt, and curtsied. "Your Majesty, your presence is, as always, a welcome surprise. I am delighted to present myself, Carolina Sanchez... No, Carolina Ruby Martinez, at your gracious service."

"Hello, Carolina. Still sticking to your formal mannerisms, I see?" the empress replied serenely. "We're family now, dear; let's try to act like it, shall we?"

"Y-Yes, of course!" I quickly straightened up, smoothing down my skirt and meeting the empress's gaze. She entered the room with a nonchalant air, her eyes sweeping across it dispassionately.

"Yes," she murmured with satisfaction, more to herself than to me. "This is all

coming along nicely indeed. I chose the individual pieces, but seeing them together like this is quite something else.”

“Oh!” I gasped. “Did you come today to inspect everything?”

“Partly,” she acknowledged, “but I mainly came to deliver this.” In a fluid motion, she produced an envelope from her pocket. Bearing the imperial seal, it gave off the air of an official invitation. “I’m hosting a tea party tomorrow. And I would like you to attend.”

“You would like...*me* to attend?” I echoed, taken aback.

“Indeed. You have as of yet few people to call friends here in the empire, don’t you? I thought it’d be a good chance for you to forge some connections. Unless, of course, you think I’m intruding too much into your affairs?”

“No, of course not!” I assured her. “In fact, I’m beyond grateful for the invitation!”

My expression must’ve brightened in an instant, and the empress smiled subtly back at me. Trembling slightly, I accepted the invitation, holding it with a reverence that betrayed my excitement and eagerness.

It was said that being invited to one of the empress’s tea parties was proof of one’s high standing. I couldn’t assert whether I truly merited such recognition, but this invitation undoubtedly presented a golden chance to cement my status within the court. Furthermore, a public display of the approval of the empress might serve as a powerful deterrent against any continued threats from the extremists. This was an opportunity I simply couldn’t afford to miss.

“Please, make yourself comfortable. I’ll pen my acceptance of this gracious invitation at once,” I offered.

“Take your time,” the empress replied with an air of ease.

She gracefully settled onto a sofa. As if summoned by magic, the doors swung open, and Marisa appeared with a well-appointed tea tray. The empress perched upon the sofa as if it were a throne, cradling a freshly brewed cup of tea. Her demeanor exuded tranquility, suggesting no hurry to depart. Marisa approached me, presenting paper and a pen. Without hesitation, I composed my response, affirming my eager participation in the event.

As I sealed the envelope, a flurry of excitement stirred within me. *My very first tea party in Malcosias...* The thought of what I ought to wear lingered in my mind, which swirled with ideas and possibilities.

Caught up in my anticipatory reflections for the rest of the afternoon and evening, the time seemed to slip away unnoticed, and before I realized it, the break of dawn had signaled the arrival of the awaited day.



The empress's tea party was in full swing, set amid a garden resplendent with tulips of every hue. Holding a steaming cup of the finest black tea, I brought it to my lips, inhaling its rich fragrance before taking a delicate sip that, to my dismay, tasted like absolutely nothing.

I was nervous. So much so that my sense of taste had seemingly abandoned me. Make no mistake, I was just as excited and grateful to have been invited as I had been yesterday; it was just that, in the ensuing hours, an increasing tide of apprehension had swelled and swelled within me, until it had all but swallowed my initial eagerness. I sat, still as a marble statue under a gazebo, surrounded by a circle of elegantly smiling ladies whose acquaintances I had yet to make.

"Princess Carolina," one of them remarked with a light giggle. "Now this is a pleasant surprise indeed."

"I'd been wanting to have a chat with you—little did I know how soon that opportunity would present itself!" another chimed in.

"My most heartfelt congratulations on your nuptials, as belated as they may be!" gushed a third.

"And might I say, the ceremony was an absolute triumph!" the last added.

Their genteel laughter filled the air, a symphony of high-society mirth. Despite my initial concerns about my unexpected presence causing offense, they seemed genuinely welcoming—at least outwardly. I yearned to accept their gracefully poised cordiality at face value, but a lingering doubt persisted, preventing me from fully letting my guard down.

"Th-Thank you all for your kind words, truly," I managed to respond. "Yet it must be said that the ceremony's success was largely due to Their Majesties'

gracious support. I am immensely grateful to them.”

The empress interjected smoothly, “I merely did what any parent would do. And Carolina, remember, we are now family. I would be most delighted if you would call me ‘Mother.’”

This set off another flurry of approving remarks from the ladies.

“My! How heartwarming to witness such familial affection!”

“Truly, I am green with envy!”

“There’s nothing quite like the bond of family, is there?”

Perfect. This was precisely the impression I wanted to cultivate. Had the empress, or rather, my *mother*, shown any less warmth, I feared the others might have mirrored her demeanor. Her intuitive understanding of my situation was a blessing.

The conversation then drifted to an unlikely subject.

“Ah, that reminds me!” simpered one of the ladies. “I heard that the people have really taken a liking to Prince Edward following that live broadcast.”

“I can certainly see why. He is quite the figure, isn’t he?” observed another.

“And that moment he shared a tender smile with Princess Carolina? Utterly endearing.”

Their faces lit up with fond memories as they discussed Prince Edward; it seemed their impression of him had also softened. Their chatter mostly dissected the outward aspects of his appearance, with little regard for his character—a slight disappointment, but any improvement in his public image was welcome. Regardless of whether he wished to sit on the throne, a well-regarded prince was a good prince.

Their attention then shifted to my left hand.

“Can we talk about that ring too? Such a gorgeous stone!”

“A pigeon blood ruby, if I’m not mistaken?”

“My! Those rare, coveted gems?”

“How could one doubt Prince Edward’s affection for Princess Carolina after

seeing that ring on her finger?”

The ring hadn't left my finger since the wedding day, and now it sparkled radiantly under the midday sun, captivating their gaze. *Pigeon blood...* Even with knowledge beforehand, the reality still felt surreal. I had consciously avoided asking about the price, knowing I wasn't prepared for the answer. Despite the fact that I knew that the value of the ring didn't translate directly to the depth of Prince Edward's affection, I could at least appreciate the effort he had made on my behalf.

I found myself gazing at the ring, and I felt a softening in my expression as I was momentarily lost in its beauty. *The color is so much like that of my own eyes...*

A decisive snap of the empress's fan caught my attention. “That's quite enough about the happy couple. The garden of their bliss isn't ours to wander. Now, ladies, have we all decided where we're spending the summer?”

Talking about summer, at this time of year? I wondered, but one glance up at the cloudless blue expanse above communicated volumes about the temporal reality of the season. Where had the time gone, truly?

“We plan to return to our usual summer retreat, same as last year,” one lady volunteered.

“My husband is exceedingly occupied this year,” said another with a sigh. “It seems we will remain at our primary residence for the summer.”

“We're escaping to our northern villa to celebrate our anniversary,” the third said with a smile that fell a little at once. “Alas, it will be but a brief two-week sojourn.”

“My husband's duties are taking him to the frontier,” chirped the last. “I've heard it's refreshingly cool there, so I'm considering accompanying him.”

My goodness... Everyone seemed to have already deeply considered their summer plans while I had...none at all? I wondered what Prince Edward had in mind, if anything. With the increased activity of mana-beasts during the summer, the Pyreborn would undoubtedly be busy. Then perhaps it would be safe for me to assume I'd be remaining in the capital? Not that I minded. In

Celestia, we sheltered from the summer heat within our domains and estates. In our small, climatically consistent nation, retreating to different locales for the season was an unfamiliar luxury, a sharp contrast to the vast and diverse Malcosias.

As I wondered what the coming months held in store for me, I scarcely noticed the conversation among the ladies dwindling until suddenly, their collective gaze turned towards me, eyes sparkling with curiosity.

I... I have a bad feeling about this.

“And what of your summer plans, Your Highness?” one of them inquired.

“Huh?” I blurted out in a panic. I’d barely been listening to their last few minutes of conversation, and here I was being made the center of it. My eyes darted across the sea of expectant faces, and I could feel my complexion pale. *Wh-What am I supposed to say?* Summer plans? With Prince Edward? I hadn’t even *seen* him since the night of our wedding, let alone discussed anything with him. Could I be candid here? *Should* I? Or would they think less of me for having nothing yet arranged?

As my silence dragged on, my eyes roaming uneasily, my gaze locked inadvertently with that of the empress. In response, she shut her fan with an emphatic click. “Carolina will be going on a honeymoon with her new husband. I am certain Edward is tirelessly working to make time in his schedule for such a sojourn as we speak.”

Her response ignited a flurry of delighted reactions from the group.

“My! How wonderful.”

“Now that’ll be a summer to remember!”

I breathed a sigh of relief. That had indeed been the most diplomatic way to answer the question. It gave the impression that Edward and I thought often enough about each other to make plans, but it also provided us with some degree of plausible deniability in case it fell through. This was exactly the sort of acumen that might be expected of one who stood at the top of Malcosian politics.

The conversation then shifted to the empress. “And what of your own

summer, Your Majesty? Last year, you didn't have the opportunity to do much at all, but surely this year..."

Her response was pragmatic. "Duty calls for both Eric and myself. We will be staying put once again this summer."

"That is such a shame," another lady chimed in.

"I-I was being thoughtless. My sincerest apologies," the first speaker backtracked.

"Nonsense, my dear. Eric and I both think nothing of it. Besides, a practitioner of frost magic such as myself has little fear of the heat."

T-True... The summer sun would be no bother to a user of frost magic, especially if they were the renowned Frost Witch. A tendril of jealousy curled its way towards my heart as I gazed upon such a powerful mage.



Three days after the delightful tea party hosted by the empress, I found myself navigating the corridors towards the Pyreborn headquarters, heeding an unexpected summons from Prince Edward.

Upon entering his office (which was noticeably less cluttered than I'd last seen it), I settled onto the guest sofa across from the prince, with Lord Theodore standing at attention at the prince's shoulder. As Owen took his accustomed place behind me, a wave of unexplained nervousness washed over me.

Why did he summon me here? And without warning at that? Have I inadvertently caused some trouble? The only recent event of note was the tea party, which certainly seemed to have concluded without any issues...

My gaze shifted anxiously between the two men, my mind racing with speculation about the nature of this unforeseen meeting. Then, Prince Edward's intense gaze landed on me, stilling my fidgeting. "Carolina, I apologize for calling you here on such short notice, but recent matters have demanded our attention and prevented earlier communication."

Recent matters? To what could he possibly be referring? Malcosias isn't about to embroil itself in another war, is it? That would be hard to imagine since there

aren't exactly any remaining powers on the continent that could pose a significant challenge...

Besides, I found it hard to believe that a conflict was breaking out and this was the first I was hearing of it. My agitated musing only served to confuse me more, so I returned Prince Edward's apology with a brief shake of my head.

"Not at all, Your Highness. You have your responsibilities, I'm sure."

"Your understanding is much appreciated," he said, his shoulders drooping in relief. His eyes softened, but just for a moment, before his expression grew even more earnest. "Carolina, listen closely. In three days' time, at first light—we will depart for a combined honeymoon and summer retreat."

"Huh?" I couldn't mask my surprise. *A honeymoon? Summer retreat? Wasn't that exactly what the empress mentioned at the tea party?*

I wasn't experiencing déjà vu, was I? I blinked repeatedly, trying to reconcile this unexpected moment of synchronicity between mother and son.

Honeymoon, honeymoon, honeymoon, honeymoon... The word echoed in my mind, over and over, gaining clarity with each repetition, until finally, on the tenth pass, everything fell into place. *The empress was serious all along?*

I'd thought for certain that her words had merely been a graceful fabrication to save face—an embellished account to help dig me out of a social hole, but it had, in fact, been reality? And in just *three days*? That wasn't enough time to prepare myself mentally, let alone physically! Not that I would be handling the latter anyway—Marisa would undoubtedly be taking care of all of the practical particulars. "Th-Three days is incredibly short notice!" I exclaimed in protest.

Prince Edward's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, Carolina. I know it's sudden, but —"

"This was the best effort we could muster, given His Highness's demanding schedule," Lord Theodore interrupted. "His duties as the Pyreborn's commander cannot bear to have him away from his post for long."

"Right," affirmed Prince Edward. "It took a massive effort to even get us this far. Well, it took Teo a massive effort, anyway."

"Yes, it was all me," the man in question confirmed, adjusting his spectacles

with a hint of pride.

If Lord Theodore had needed to get involved with the scheduling, then perhaps they really had moved mountains to make this work. However, that did little to assuage my concerns over the suddenness of it all.

“What of the duration of the honeymoon—I mean, summer retreat?” I asked. “The specifics of the journey?”

“Allow me, Your Highness,” Lord Theodore said with a graceful bow, his impeccably groomed golden locks glimmering in the light. “The retreat is planned for one week. We’ll be traveling north to a royal villa, to an area renowned for its moderate climate and serenity—the perfect locale for a brief summer getaway. We have already contacted the lord of the domain and have his utmost approval. You’ll even have the opportunity to explore the nearby town and mountains.”

“It’s quiet there,” Prince Edward added. “I believe you’ll appreciate the respite. And if you’re still intent on receiving that magical examination you were promised, we can arrange for it there—away from the capital’s prying eyes.”

The magical examination! That had completely slipped my mind amid everything else. And Prince Edward was right. Perhaps it’d be better to have that done in relative privacy. Though I’d best keep in mind what Lord Theodore had said about high expectations...

“Beyond that, the itinerary remains flexible, as the getaway itself was ironed out only in the last twelve hours,” Lord Theodore continued. “Even still, I’d wager that both of you will enjoy the change of pace.”

A curious piece of information caught my ear. “Wait, the schedule was ironed out in the last twelve hours?”

Short notice, indeed, but... Wait. The empress’s tea party—wasn’t that three days ago? Then what does that mean? That she really did lie back then, and this only came about after the fact?

Prince Edward jumped in to clarify my unspoken concerns. “Yes, my mother came to me yesterday afternoon. ‘What are your plans for this summer, Edward?’ she said. ‘Might I suggest you take Carolina on a trip? It would also

double as your honeymoon.’ She was...very insistent about it. Before that, I’d forgotten summer retreats were even a thing that nobles did.”

“Thus, we adjusted His Highness’s scheduling posthaste,” Lord Teodore added. “Not taking a honeymoon wouldn’t be a good look for our newlyweds.”

“Not that appearances matter to me,” Prince Edward interjected, his golden eyes taking on a soft yet intense gleam. “I just wanted to take you somewhere special.”

His words set my heart ablaze. Frantically, I clasped my hands over my cheeks, trying in vain to shield the blazing crimson blossoming there. *Th-This is so unfair, Prince Edward! How can you expect me not to react when you say such things with such sincerity?*

Cursing him silently for his devastating honesty, I stammered, “I-I think I understand the situation. We are to depart for our honeymoon—I mean, summer retreat—in three days. I’ll prepare myself!”

“Please do,” the prince gently responded.

“And should you require any assistance in the form of man power, just say the word, and the Pyreborn will be there to assist,” Lord Teodore offered.

“Th-Thank you both...” *Though I hardly think I’ll be requiring any of the Pyreborn’s expertise just to pack...* I mused, concealing this thought behind a wry smile. *Well, until the luggage needs to be moved, anyway.* I nodded. “Yes, well, I thank you both for your time. Good luck with your duties, and I’ll see you both once again in three days’ time.”

Rising from my seat, I exited the office with Owen in tow. The afternoon sun flooded in through the windows, causing me to squint my eyes gently as we proceeded down the empty corridor.

“This summer promises to be quite an adventure.” The thought left me in a quiet whisper. With each step down the corridor, my anticipation for the upcoming honeymoon grew, painting a hopeful picture of the days to come.

Chapter Two

The day of our departure for the promised summer retreat arrived more quickly than I'd imagined. I awoke before the first light, and by the time I had gone through the process of getting dressed and prepared for travel, the sun was already climbing into the sky. Marisa, Owen, and I hastened to the Pyreborn headquarters, finding Prince Edward and Lord Teodore awaiting us—and absolutely no one else.

We're a little short on people for a royal outing, aren't we?

We were right on time, early even, yet our party numbered only five. I'd known the trip had been hastily put together, but *this* hastily? Surely we'd need more people just to reach our destination?

"Will it be only the five of us traveling?" I inquired.

"No, others from our order have already begun the journey by carriage and horseback," Prince Edward clarified. "The five of us will be traveling via teleportation. Teo can only manage so many people at once, but don't worry, we'll meet the rest of our attendants there."

Ah, teleportation magic, of course. I'd completely forgotten that such a thing was even an option. I'd thought for sure we'd be traveling by carriage. I let out a sigh at my own ignorance, my eyes drifting over the room until they settled on the sight of Lord Teodore, hunched over the coffee table. "One hundred... Twenty..." he seemed to mutter as he pored over a heap of parchment.

"So Lord Teodore's been calculating the coordinates?" I asked.

"Indeed," Prince Edward responded. "Actually, he completed the calculations yesterday. He's just double-checking now. Teleporting with incorrect coordinates can lead to...unfortunate results."

"Unfortunate...how?"

"You might end up in an unknown territory. Barring that, atop a misty mountain, or even at the bottom of the sea. You could teleport straight to your

death, depending on how badly you've botched the equations."

The thought sent a shiver down my spine. *Well, isn't that pleasant... Not only could we get lost or stranded, we could even meet an untimely demise...* "That certainly would be unfortunate..."

"Right? But don't worry," he reassured, placing a comforting hand on my head. "The caster can usually sense if something is awry and abort the teleport midway. It's very rare for a faulty teleport spell to be cast to completion."

Lord Theodore sprang to his feet. He walked over to us, holding a single piece of parchment. "I thank you all for your patience. The final checks are complete, and we are now ready to proceed. Everyone, form a circle."

Having done this once already, I promptly positioned myself. Marisa, on the other hand, who was evidently experiencing teleportation for the first time, looked utterly lost, and her eyes darted around for guidance. Eventually, with some gentle prodding from the rest of us, she joined us to form a tight circle, and Lord Theodore placed the parchment with the magic circle drawn on it at our feet. "Hold hands with the people next to you and do not let go—for any reason—until the spell is complete," he instructed. "I'm sure we'd all prefer to avoid being lost in space-time or ending up somewhere unintended."

His warning rang somewhat duller for me upon hearing it for the second time, but apparently not so for Marisa, who looked visibly unnerved. *I suppose even someone as composed as her isn't completely immune to fear.* If she was anything like me, I knew exactly what sort of thoughts were running through her head. "What if I accidentally let go? In what sort of place might I end up if I do?" Even with Lord Theodore's guidance, one couldn't help but worry. I gazed upon her fondly, a reflection of myself just a few weeks earlier. Taking her hand, I offered a warm, reassuring smile, hoping to alleviate some of her trepidation. Prince Edward grasped my other hand firmly, his warmth a comforting presence at my side.

"Very good. Let us begin," Lord Theodore announced. Scarcely had the words left his mouth when the ambience of the room seemed to shift—a soft breeze stirred, accompanied by an intangible pressure that enveloped us. This sensation, unfamiliar yet instinctively alarming, set my teeth on edge.

Previously, when we had teleported a shorter distance, the spell hadn't provoked these sensations, but now, Lord Theodore's immense magical strength was unmistakable. Even to a novice like myself, it was evident that the quality and magnitude of his arcane power was extraordinary. I recalled learning that the power necessitated by typical spellcasting was barely perceptible. Only in cases of exceptional casters like Lord Theodore, who were capable of massive releases of energy, could the force of their magic manifest physically. This wind, this overwhelming sensation, must be just that.

So this is what it takes to be a magical genius of Lord Theodore's caliber. Mastering every school of the arcane arts was clearly not enough for him; he also apparently had to have vast enough amounts of power at his disposal to ensure that no one would ever even come close to his level. As I observed this prodigy among prodigies, the magic circle beneath our feet began to resonate with his power. It began to glow, brighter and brighter, reaching a blinding intensity.

"We are teleporting...now!" His strained whisper barely reached my ears as the light engulfed us, plunging me into a world of sheer silence. Eyes still squeezed shut, my grip tightened on each hand in mine, feeling them clutch harder in response. The deafening silence, the anxiety, the desolation, crushed my heart for one second, two seconds, before the light faded away. The warm kiss of natural sunlight on my face, the gentle rustle of nature all around—I felt the signs of the material world returning.

"Teleportation complete—you may now open your eyes," came the voice of Lord Theodore. Slowly, I allowed my eyelids to flutter open—revealing, right before us, a grand old estate bathed in the dazzling light of the morning sun.

My breath left me. *The stunning architecture, the sloping roofs caressed by sunlight, what a view!* I was captivated; it was as if I'd witnessed a fantastical painting come to life. My earlier anxieties were blown away, replaced by a wide smile of awe and delight. "This place is beautiful!" I couldn't help but exclaim.

Prince Edward's voice, ever so slightly buoyant, responded, "I'm glad you like it. The view at this hour is one of the reasons I chose an early departure."

I glanced up at him in surprise; his eyes, narrowed in affectionate

appreciation of the scenery, reflected a deep fondness. He still held my hand tightly in his, and he gave it a squeeze. The realization that he had arranged this early departure to share this enchanting moment with me elevated my spirits even more. “Thank you for thinking of me, Your Highness.”

“Naturally,” he replied. “I couldn’t imagine enjoying this view with anyone but you.”

My eyes drifted to him again, drawn by the softened joy in his expression. In that moment, framed by the picturesque landscape, he appeared even more striking than usual. His golden eyes seemed to beckon me closer, and his gaze sparked a deep blush on my cheeks and a rapid pounding in my chest. It was a relentless, almost uncomfortable rhythm that made it seem as if my heart would jump right out from between my ribs. Yet despite the intensity, it wasn’t at all unpleasant. *Just what is this feeling?*

Lord Theodore’s sharp clap broke my reverie. “All right, everyone, let’s head inside. The mornings are still brisk this time of year. We wouldn’t want any honeymooners catching a cold on their first day, now would we?” he quipped, gesturing towards the estate. Marisa, perhaps feeling some of the same urgency, quickly scurried ahead with our luggage in tow.

“Brisk,” is it? I’d never have guessed it, warmed as I am by the inferno roiling within me. I clapped my free hand over my burning cheeks, a wry smile forming as I tried to still the rapid pulsing in my breast.

“Let’s head inside, Carolina,” Prince Edward suggested, his voice drawing me back to the present. “We don’t want to give Teo reason to lecture us. Upset him and we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“I can hear you perfectly fine, *Your Imperial Highness*. I’ll let it slide this time on account of the occasion, but try me again, why don’t you?” Lord Theodore said with a terrifyingly sweet smile.

“N-No, I think I’ll pass...” Prince Edward quickly looked away from Lord Theodore before shrinking into himself like a scolded schoolboy.

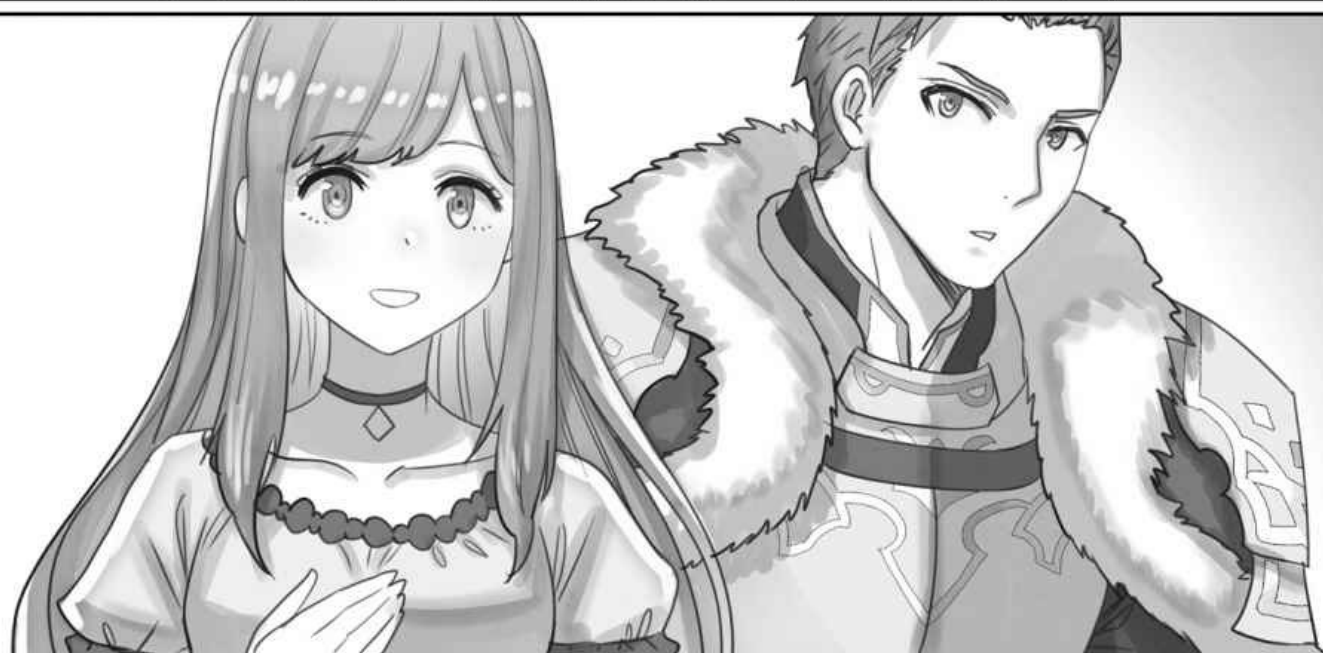
I couldn’t suppress a giggle at the scene. Without another word, we began our short trek across the grounds to the estate—my hand still intertwined with Prince Edward’s.



A brief tour of our temporary residence and a quick breakfast later, the next item on our itinerary was an audience at the nearby estate with the lord of these lands, Count Kissinger.

In this way, I'd inadvertently found myself in Marisa's family domain. Seated in the count's drawing room with Prince Edward, I nursed a cup of tea, gazing lazily out at the garden. There, the handmaiden in question was speaking with a lady with identically hued raven hair, who seemed almost certainly to be her sister. Marisa didn't look happy. Her expression was as impassive as always, to be sure, but once I'd discovered we were visiting her family's demesne, I'd thought she might be a bit more relaxed with her own relations. I'd hoped that this homecoming would be a welcome surprise for her, but perhaps I had overstepped in this assumption?

Is this reunion...unpleasant for her? As I contemplated whether we should return to the villa right away, the drawing room door swung open, denying me a quick retreat.



“Oh, my deepest apologies. I am late!” A jovial, rotund middle-aged man bustled into the room. He dipped his head in profuse genuflection a few more times, accompanied by a nervous rub of his rather pronounced stomach, as he approached. *Marisa takes after her mother, then...* I thought wryly as I took in his animated and flustered demeanor. It was almost like playing a reverse game of “spot the difference” as I scrutinized the portly man, searching for any familial resemblance to Marisa. Without being told, I would have never guessed their relation...

As Count Kissinger took his seat across from us, he produced a handkerchief from his breast, dabbed off the sweat that had beaded on his forehead, and then bobbed his head once again for good measure. “My sincerest apologies for keeping the both of you waiting. Please forgive me!”

“No, no, it’s as much our fault for arriving early as it is yours. Please, you needn’t continue to bow,” I reassured him.

Prince Edward chimed in, “She’s right. In fact, this entire trip was sprung on you quite suddenly, I’m sure.”

“Oh, bless you both for your graciousness,” the count responded, his eagerness to appease us evident in his manner. With his apologies out of the way, he cleared his throat and formally welcomed us. “It is a great honor to host Prince Edward and Princess Carolina in our humble lands. On behalf of all here, I extend our warmest welcome. We are committed to ensuring your stay is comfortable, so please, should you require anything, do not hesitate to approach me directly.”

“Thank you. We appreciate your hospitality and look forward to our stay,” replied Prince Edward.

“And we are grateful to be under your care for the next week,” I added warmly.

Hearing Count Kissinger’s earnest and modest welcome, I couldn’t help but smile. In that moment, I discerned the shared trait between father and daughter—their sincere and unassuming nature. Hosting royalty must have come as quite the shock to him, but despite his somewhat clumsy entrance, Count Kissinger, much like Marisa, proved in the end to be adept at handling

social situations with grace and humility.

“May I inquire about any plans Your Highnesses might have for the coming days?” Count Kissinger asked with polite curiosity.

“Certainly,” Prince Edward responded. “Our itinerary is mostly open, but we do intend to visit the local church at some point over the course of our visit.”

“The church, Your Highness?” Count Kissinger echoed. He seemed a little bewildered, but still as polite as could be.

“Yes, we have some matters to attend to there.”

The count’s inquisitive demeanor immediately vanished, understanding the implied discretion. It seemed that he was as astute as he was friendly. “Ah, of course. In that case, might I suggest visiting in four days’ time, at noon? His Holiness will be present then. It might be an opportunity for a direct conversation with him, should you desire it.”

“I see. Thank you for that.” Prince Edward’s reply was somewhat curter, less engaged, than I had been expecting.

But to think that His Holiness himself would make visits all the way out here... My assumption had been that, much like how a king ruled a nation from his castle, someone of His Holiness’s position and influence would similarly delegate from the central cathedral in the capital. But it appeared that my assumptions had been just that.

“If the schedule allows, might I also recommend you pay the town a visit?” the count continued.

“The town?” I echoed.

“Yes. There’s a morning market there that I believe Your Highnesses may enjoy. While it may seem modest for royalty, I assure you, it is quite the delightful experience. In my humble opinion, it is worth visiting for the atmosphere alone.”

A “*morning market*”... The unfamiliar term struck an odd chord with me. My gaze wandered out the window as I struggled to recall where I’d heard it before. *Ah, it was in one of the novels I read, wasn’t it?* The morning market was

a regular event held by smaller communities. It evoked imagery of stalls brimming with fresh produce, seafood, and meats, all offered at reasonable prices. The prospect of visiting such a market was enticing, yet I couldn't help but wonder about the propriety. Would it befit royalty to mingle openly with the common folk? Could our presence potentially stir unease among the nobility?

Lost in thought, I uttered a hesitant "umm" as I mulled over the dilemma. However, before I could reach any decision, Prince Edward took the initiative. "If it is as delightful as you say, then perhaps we should pay this 'morning market' a visit. We certainly have the time to spare."

"Truly?" Count Kissinger's enthusiasm was palpable. "Then perhaps disguises would be prudent. The market's provincial charm might be thrown off a bit by a royal presence. But... Oh no, your faces must be known to the public now after the broadcast of your wedding. In that case, perhaps makeup to obfuscate your features or going hooded might be viable options..."

Prince Edward jumped in before the count could ramble much further. "I think we'll manage. The footage from the broadcast doesn't show our faces clearly, and it's unlikely that commoners would expect royalty at their market. Simple attire should suffice."

Huh? Why is His Highness so familiar with the wedding footage? But more importantly, is he genuinely considering a visit to the morning market? Won't we risk damaging his image, an image that has only just begun to improve? The idea of the market excited me, yet I was torn, concerned about the potential repercussions for our public personas.

As I grappled with these thoughts, my gaze flitted about, betraying my uncertainty. Sensing my inner turmoil, Prince Edward leaned closer, offering a quiet reassurance. "It'll be okay," he murmured, his words open to a thousand different interpretations, yet inexplicably soothing. Somehow, his simple assurance seemed enough to quell the storm of worries in my mind.

"If additional clothing would be helpful, I could arrange for—"

"Thank you, Count, but we should be able to manage on our own. We appreciate your thoughtfulness," Prince Edward interjected, rising to signal the

conclusion of our discussion. Following him, both Count Kissinger and I quickly rose to our feet.

“Count Kissinger, we are grateful for your valuable advice today,” I said.

“It is my absolute pleasure, Your Highness,” the count replied with a gracious nod.

“Yes, well, thank you for everything, Count. We must be going now,” Prince Edward added.

“I shall escort you to the door,” the count offered.

Prince Edward acknowledged him with a nod, then unexpectedly took me by the hand, leading me out of the estate.

The prince was rather assertive today, wasn't he? He was always kind, but taking me by the hand, without seeking assent to do so? Such confidence was unlike him. Was this newfound boldness due the absence of Lord Theodore, whom we had left at the villa? If so, then I couldn't suppress a tinge of gladness that he was absent, as rude as such presumption might seem.



We bid farewell to Count Kissinger and made our way back to the villa. After changing into more inconspicuous attire and leaving the villa under Lord Theodore's care, we set off for the morning market. As we entered the market square, I was taken aback by the bustling scene before us. I clasped my hands to my cheeks, my eyes wide with amazement.

This... This is exactly what I imagined when I read about it in the novel! Stalls stretching as far as the eye can see, brimming with colorful produce, fresh-caught fish, and lively chatter!

The energy of the market, especially at such an early hour, was infectious. While I reveled in the picturesque and vibrant atmosphere of the town, I noticed the curious glances of the passersby. Despite our attempts to blend in, it seemed we'd failed to pose credibly as commoners by any stretch of the imagination. Our presence seemed to stir whispers among the crowd. “Nobles? Merchants?” the murmurs speculated as we moved between the stalls.

“It appears our disguises don’t quite pass muster,” Prince Edward whispered to me.

“Not quite, but we’re less conspicuous than before, at least,” I muttered back.

“Very true. Our original clothes would have made us stand out even more.”

Our exchange was hushed, a reflection of our newfound awareness of how the commoners perceived us. It became clear we had underestimated the challenge of donning a convincing disguise. Observing the townspeople more closely, I noticed that their clothes were often dirtied at the hem and bore signs of wear—frayed edges and loose threads. Against such a backdrop, our pristine “lowly” attire was a dead giveaway of our higher status.

“If anyone asks, we’re merchants,” Prince Edward murmured. “Let’s not invite trouble by revealing our true identities.”

I indicated my agreement, and we continued to weave our way through the bustling market, a little more secure in our newly defined guise. While the majority of the stalls dealt in produce and seafood, occasionally we passed the odd vendor that sold prepared food. The aroma of grilled chicken skewers wafted through the air, igniting my senses. Despite having just had breakfast, my mouth watered at the scent. I lamented the notion that perhaps we weren’t supposed to partake in such “common” fare.

With a longing glance at a nearby stall, my shoulders drooped slightly. To my surprise, Prince Edward abruptly halted in front of me. Before I could ask him why he’d stopped, he called out to the stall owner. “Two chicken skewers, please.”

“Two extra tasty chicken skewers comin’ right up,” the owner responded heartily. “One for the handsome fella and another for his lovely lady.”

“Thanks,” was Prince Edward’s deadpan reply as the enthusiastic stall owner rolled up his sleeves. He selected two beautifully grilled skewers, wrapped them up, and handed them to us. Without missing a beat, Prince Edward exchanged the skewers for some coin, and soon we were on our merry way again.

What...just happened? Did he just do that because he noticed my gaze lingering on the stall? The thought mortified me. The last thing I wanted to do

was give him the impression that I was a glutton.

“Carolina, take one. I thought it’d be nice for us to enjoy these together,” Prince Edward said, proffering me a skewer.

Did he say that out of courtesy, or did he genuinely mean it? I couldn’t tell, but I was glad for his offer nonetheless. As my face softened into a smile, I grabbed hold of the piping hot skewer and...stared at it, unsure of how to go about eating it. The children around us bit directly into theirs, but such a manner of eating flew in the face of every form of etiquette I knew. That being said, what kind of stares would I attract if I were to produce a knife and fork in such a setting?

I glanced at Prince Edward. He looked utterly unbothered as he brought the skewer to his mouth and took a big, satisfying-looking bite, a style of eating that rather suited his big, burly nature.

If that’s good enough for Prince Edward then that’s good enough for me! Nobody here is going to scold me for poor table manners, anyway! Just don’t think about it too hard, Carolina! I thought to myself as I bit into the skewer, savoring the burst of flavors—the succulent chicken, the perfect balance of sweet and salty in the sauce. It was more robustly seasoned than the fare to which I was accustomed, but delightfully so. *The sauce! My goodness, the sauce! How did they make it?*

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Prince Edward said, glancing down at me.

“It’s delicious!” I exclaimed.

“In that case, perhaps we should buy all the remaining stock.”

I gasped. “I couldn’t possibly eat that much!” I protested with a fervent shake of my head, desperately trying to stop his act of madness. The skewers were scrumptious, but even then, my appetite had limits!

To my surprise, Prince Edward chuckled heartily. “I was joking, of course. But maybe we should have someone pick up a few boxes to go later.”

Was that the first time I’d ever heard Prince Edward laugh so freely? I found myself staring at him, my mouth slightly open, as his laughter subsided into a mischievous grin. His eyes, gently crinkled at the corners, seemed to radiate a

charm I hadn't noticed before. My heart suddenly found itself thrown into a frenzied pace once more, and I quickly turned away from him. His smile was...too bright, too dazzling!

"Carolina, what's wrong? Did you find something interesting over there?" He tried to follow my gaze.

"N-No, Your Highness. I just... Your smile was so charming, I couldn't keep looking."

He looked at me, surprised. "My smile? Was I really smiling?"

H-He didn't even notice? That was his unconscious reaction?! But then again, I suppose someone like Prince Edward would never smile unnaturally. Or at all, really... A wry smile touched my own lips at the thought. "Yes, you were, Your Highness. Laughing, even."

"You don't say? Well, it wasn't my intention."

"Laughing is rarely a planned act, I believe," I teased lightly.

Well, not in its natural form, anyway. In the world of nobility and royalty, where appearances reigned supreme, a false smile was often the norm, whereas expressions of genuine joy were all too scarce. Some aristocrats might even lose touch with their authentic smiles, perpetually wearing a facade. But none were like Prince Edward—he who never smiled without genuine cause.

"I suppose that's true," he replied. "But more importantly, you found my smile...charming?"

"Charming...? Ah!" I squeaked, louder than intended. Heads turned in our direction, drawn by the sound, but my embarrassment overshadowed my concern for the sudden attention. *Did... Did I say that part out loud? It's true that his smile was very charming indeed, but I never meant to say that to his face! How utterly mortifying!*

Another wave of mortification washed over me, and I looked down, trying to hide my beet-red face. My head spinning, my heart racing, I teetered on the brink of fainting. "Um, um... Well, you see, that...was..."

It was no good. Bashfulness had addled my brain; any excuse I tried to

manufacture wasn't passing my lips in a coherent manner. With no other option, I dropped my voice to a whisper and mumbled the truth. "Y-Your smile is very charming, yes."

Prince Edward nodded, a look of contentment crossing his face, as the surrounding onlookers gave us understanding smiles. In an attempt to conceal my embarrassment, I took another generous bite of my skewer, seeking refuge in its delightful flavors.



The lingering shame only slightly hindered my ability to enjoy the morning market as we concluded our visit. Laden with fresh produce and seafood, we returned to the villa, where both of us retreated to our respective rooms for a brief repose. I would have been content to relax in the living room with Prince Edward, but he insisted I couldn't rest in his presence, and I...couldn't argue with that, even if I'd wanted to.

My feet ached. We'd covered an extensive distance on foot, but the trip had been every bit worth the effort. The early morning bustle, the tantalizing food, and the energetic atmosphere had made it a memorable outing. The only minor disappointment had perhaps been our ineffective disguises, which had drawn more attention than we'd anticipated, but aside from that, it had been an ideal excursion.

Trade seemed to be booming, the area felt safe—if I were Marisa, I'd be proud to hail from here. But I wasn't her, and so I couldn't understand her oddly distant demeanor since our arrival. It wasn't evident in her expression or her work—she was as professional as always—but I could sense an underlying sadness, a shadow of gloom that she wasn't hiding as well as she might have thought. Earlier, when she'd been helping me change, I'd even heard her sigh. Did she really dislike returning home this much? "Or am I just overthinking it?" I asked myself.

"Overthinking what, milady?"

Drat, I cursed internally as I realized I'd spoken aloud and Owen had picked up on it. With a gesture, he placed a magical barrier over the door, approached, and knelt before me. I could only thank my lucky stars Marisa wasn't here. It

would've been a whole different story if she'd overheard me. *Shape up, Carolina!* I chided myself, clapping a hand over my mouth.

Owen looked at me inquisitively with a tinge of concern. He then placed a hand over his heart, his lime-green curls swaying slightly as he bowed. "If something troubles you, milady, I'd be glad to hear you out. Perhaps I may even be able to assist."

Spill the beans, my inner Owen translator seemed to fill in the blanks. It was true that Marisa's mood was weighing on me, but not so much that I'd label it a "trouble." Besides, if I were to take this up with anyone, it should be with the woman herself. Discussing my observations with someone else, without Marisa present, didn't quite sit right with me. Yet I questioned whether Marisa, ever so reserved, would open up about her personal feelings even if I asked directly.

I let out a sigh. "I suppose I should."

Perhaps a second opinion might offer some clarity. If nothing else, Owen would at least be able to tell me if I was overreacting. *Who knows, maybe it's something as simple as Marisa disliking the sounds that all the insects make here?*

"Owen, may I ask you something?"

"What is it, milady?"

"It's about Marisa. She's been...awfully sullen since we've arrived here, don't you think? I even suggested she take a day off so she could visit family, but she declined so firmly it almost seemed rude. Do you have any insight into what might be troubling her?"

Owen's response wasn't immediate. He remained silent, his gaze fixed on the floor, as if weighing the gravity of what I had asked. I couldn't read his face, but his hesitation spoke volumes; he clearly knew something, but seemed uncertain about sharing it.

Had I really stumbled upon so sensitive a matter? I was about to retract my question when Owen raised his gaze to meet mine, his sunstone eyes imbued with earnestness. "To speak frankly, I believe Lady Marisa's discomfort stems from issues with...her elder sister."

“Her elder sister?” I repeated, surprised. “I saw her speaking with a woman in their garden earlier, but would that be House Kissinger’s eldest daughter or the second?”

“The second daughter, I believe—Marielle Kissinger. The eldest has been married off for quite some time now.”

It seemed my intuition this morning had proved correct. Though I hadn’t been able to catch a clear glimpse of her face, one look at those beautiful, raven locks had been enough to raise the distinct possibility of a family connection.

Owen continued, “My knowledge on the matter is secondhand, but the daughters of House Kissinger have a strained relationship. Marisa’s appearance, it appears, is a source of envy among her sisters.”

“Even for the eldest?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Yes. From what I’ve heard, she was particularly harsh towards Marisa. Snide remarks, harassment, other unkind behaviors,” Owen explained. “Though it must be said that this all occurred before her marriage.”

Right, Owen had mentioned that, hadn’t he? But what of Lady Marielle? Curious, I decided to probe further. “Is Lady Marielle lacking suitors? Considering Marisa’s age, Lady Marielle must be at least nineteen. Is the count concerned that she might be required to resign herself to a life of spinsterhood?”

“That is, um...” My simple question seemed to give Owen pause. His gaze shifted uncomfortably, and my curiosity only grew. Had I touched a nerve?

For a moment, Owen maintained his silence in the face of my inquisitive gaze, but soon he began cautiously, “The rumor runs that...Lady Marisa stole a potential fiancé from Lady Marielle.”

I could barely react. The diligent, professional Marisa, involved in such a scandal? And *stealing* a potential fiancé? Such a choice of wording! The Marisa I knew might inadvertently charm a man with her poise and beauty, but I could hardly imagine her *stealing* one.

Owen elaborated, “Lady Marielle had been betrothed to a highly desirable suitor—handsome, accomplished, the whole package. But her overbearing

behavior—unwanted advances, unannounced visits, and whatnot annoyed him to the point that he approached the count directly with intent of withdrawing his proposal. He expressed interest in Lady Marisa instead, or else he threatened to call off the marriage altogether. Technically, they are still engaged.”

“I-I see...”

Unwanted advances and unannounced visits... I could only imagine how persistent Lady Marielle must have been if her actions were so off-putting that they had led to her fiancé withdrawing his proposal. Likely, it had been a political marriage as well, making her suitor’s frustration understandable. I couldn’t see this as anything but Lady Marielle reaping what she’d sown, but things were, of course, rarely so simple in high society. And to think I’d not known that my own handmaiden was promised in marriage!

“Lady Marielle publicly accused Lady Marisa of seducing her fiancé, refusing to acknowledge her own role in the situation. The harassment only escalated from there,” Owen explained. “It was then that Lady Marisa, pushed to her limit, utilized her connections with said fiancé and the count to secure a position at the royal castle. That’s the whole story, milady. In her position as your lady-in-waiting, Lady Marisa is beyond the reach of her family, especially Lady Marielle.”

The complexities of Marisa’s situation at the castle were more intricate than I had realized. Nastiness between siblings was nothing new to me, but this level of cruelty seemed as senseless as my sister Flora’s behavior towards me. Marisa had done nothing but find herself caught in the cross fire of all this, but even still, she had been forced to seek refuge in employment far from home. The smoldering coals of sympathy glowing in my heart quickly ignited with indignation. I pursed my lips shut in silent frustration, but before these emotions could fully settle, Owen leaned in closer, his voice hushed. “And um, it should be noted that that fiancé in question is...the vice commander.”

“Oh, Lord Teodore?” I responded calmly and automatically before the rest of my attention caught up with my words. “Wait, Lord Teodore?!”

Y-Yes, now that I think about it, Lord Teodore is in fact “the whole package”—

beautiful, accomplished, a prodigy to boot, but... No, no, no, I can hardly believe this to be true!

I couldn't hide my bewilderment at the revelation, my eyes fluttering at the intensity of my surprise. There was, however, one facet of the story that convinced me of its validity more than anything else, and that was the detail that of *course* Lord Teodore would find the actions of Lady Marielle insufferable enough to warrant calling off the engagement. He was a man of his work, and what were unwanted advances and unannounced visits but needless distractions? It would also be just like him to suggest a switch in siblings rather than cancel the engagement outright.

But then another question arose: why would Lord Teodore choose *this* place as our retreat destination, given the fraught history between himself and the Kissinger family? *Well, I suppose the answer is obvious: there was no other option.* The urgency of our trip had likely left little room for alternative arrangements. Lord Teodore wasn't cruel for cruelty's sake—he wouldn't create such a situation on purpose. If there had been a better option, he surely would have taken it.

But this revelation didn't change the reality for Marisa, now back in a place she likely wished to avoid. I resolved to limit her outings from the villa to only those that were strictly necessary. With this resolved, our conversation on the matter came to an end.



The remainder of my first day at the villa passed quietly, and the following morning I found myself and Prince Edward seated in the dining room, enjoying a peaceful breakfast. As I looked through the expansive windows, I was greeted by a sky so brilliantly blue it was almost surreal, with not a single cloud in sight. Such a splendid day seemed too precious to waste indoors. “Your Highness, how about a walk after breakfast? The weather is simply too delightful to ignore,” I suggested.

“A walk?” Prince Edward pondered, intrigued. “That sounds like an excellent idea. I’ve heard the natural scenery here is quite remarkable. Let’s do that after we finish here.”

“Yes!” I replied buoyantly. *A walk with Prince Edward! Talk about a rare treat!* I bubbled internally, thoroughly looking forward to our time ahead. I was already in a good mood, and the day had barely even started. As I delicately carved off another sliver of steak, already contemplating what to wear, a distant commotion caught my attention.

Muffled voices filtered in through the window from outside, their tones fluctuating in intensity. “...me in!” “I...allow that!” “I demand that...I am?!” “This is...in!” The words were fragmentary, but the underlying fervor was unmistakable. It almost sounded like an argument, or at the very least, an impassioned debate. I exchanged puzzled looks with Prince Edward. “Quite the ruckus,” he remarked.

“Indeed. What could that be about?” I wondered aloud.

As we finished our breakfast, the voices persisted. *Just what is going on? Is it a dispute among the servants?* Given the volume of their conversation, however, I could hardly imagine royal attendants breaking decorum in such an outrageous manner. *Could it be visitors, then? But to call this early in the morning seems unthinkable.*

Suddenly, Prince Edward stood up, his chair scraping against the floor. “I’ll go see what’s happening,” he announced, glancing out the window. It seemed his patience had worn thin.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “Then I’ll accompany you.”

He considered my offer for a moment before nodding. “All right, but should I deem the situation dangerous, you must return inside at once.”

“Understood,” I agreed with a nod.

I quickly stood, smoothing out the wrinkles in my dress, and followed Prince Edward out of the dining room. As we navigated through the silent hallways (curiously devoid of any servants), we eventually found our way outside. There, we discovered the absent staff, all gathered and gazing towards the front gate.

What...is this? They abandoned their duties to all...congregate outside?! My mouth fell open at the sheer absurdity of the sight. Glancing up, I saw Prince Edward’s eyes mirror my own shock. Regaining his composure, he addressed

the group sternly. “What is going on over here?”

The situation had clearly unsettled the servants, because only then did they, the elite professionals that they were, realize that their employers were standing directly behind them; startled, they swiftly turned to face us.

One of the attendants stepped forward, bowing deeply before speaking. “Your Highnesses, forgive our intrusion on your morning. It appears that Lady Marielle, the second daughter of House Kissinger, has arrived unannounced to the villa. The butler and the knights are currently attempting to resolve the situation. We were drawn here by the disturbance as we sought to ascertain the origin of the disruption.”

“That deranged woman again?” Prince Edward sighed. “Why has she come here?”

“As we have all just arrived on the scene as well, the precise details elude us at this moment, Your Highness. However, it seems her arrival pertains to a matter concerning Lady Marisa and Lord Teodore. She has been insistent on seeing them, confronting the butler with considerable fervor. Given her noble status, the staff are reluctant to forcibly remove her, resulting in the current impasse.”

That is...quite the situation. And Lady Marielle... She is quite the little shrew, isn't she? I mean, what sort of prim and proper young lady would barge into a royal villa, demand to see her sister and ex-fiancé, and expect to be let in? In fact, what sort of person with a sane mind would choose such a course of action? This was the kind of thing that would have anyone of lesser status tried and hanged for lèse-majesté on the spot.

Prince Edward contemplated the case briefly before decisively addressing the servants. “I understand the situation. Return to your duties; I will handle this matter.”

A unified response of “Yes, Your Highness,” echoed, followed by a synchronized bow. The crowd of servants parted, forming a clear path towards the source of the disturbance (not that we needed any help locating the source of the racket, given the perpetrator’s impressive volume). We walked between the orderly lines of the staff as they returned to the house, and we approached

the commotion at the gate. There, as described, was a *visibly* agitated Lady Marielle, surrounded by a group of butlers and knights.

Her shrill voice pierced the air. “Let me through this very instant! I demand to see Marisa and Lord Theodore!”

Next came the strained voice of the butler, having long lost its composure. “My lady, as I’ve told you many, *many*, times by now, this is a royal villa currently occupied by Their Majesties Prince Edward and Princess Carolina for their summer retreat. Unscheduled visitors are not permitted!”

“Did I say I was here to visit Prince Edward or Princess Carolina? No! I’m here to see Marisa and Lord Theodore. Why can’t you understand that?!”

“Again, this is a *royal villa*, my lady.”

The lady, obstinate in her demands; the butler, clearly at his wit’s end; the knights, similarly vexed—the scene was a study in frustration. Variations of *For crying out loud, lady, no means no* were writ large upon each of the faces of the assembled knights. It was a pitiful spectacle all around. Pitiful for Lady Marielle who wouldn’t take no for an answer, pitiful for the butler and the knights who couldn’t resolve the situation on their own... How exhausting! Clearly, our intervention was a timely one.

As we drew closer, Prince Edward’s authoritative voice broke through the chaos. “What seems to be the issue here?”

The butler hastily dipped his head low and sputtered, “P-Prince Edward! Princess Carolina!”

The knights followed suit. “Apologies for the disturbance,” one said hurriedly. “Please allow me to escort Your Highnesses back to the villa!”

“Your Highnesses needn’t concern yourself with this!” another knight assured us.

Even as the attendants attempted to corral us back towards the house in a panic, Lady Marielle managed to compose herself enough to offer a curtsy. *Well, that’s some relief—it seems that a lack of common sense doesn’t directly translate to a lack of manners.*

Prince Edward's voice cut through the commotion with firm authority. "Enough," he said, quieting the servants. "As the current occupants of this villa, it is our responsibility to uphold its privacy and sanctity." His gaze then shifted to Lady Marielle. "You, Marielle Kissinger. What brings you here?"



His tone, confrontational and icy, was a stark contrast to the warmth he usually displayed around me, and I instinctively shrunk back in fear. In that moment, I was reminded that beyond his kindness lay the commander of a military order. As a veteran of the battlefield, of course he was thoroughly seasoned in the art of intimidation.

Yet as I say that, the unfortunate target of his ire seems utterly unfazed—more spirited than before, even!

“I’ve come to see Marisa and Lord Theodore, yet these servants of yours dare to deny me entry!” Lady Marielle snapped. “Your Highness, I implore you to do something about the shocking treatment I have received at the hands of your people!”

My word. Forget spirited, she was downright impudent, making baseless demands of a prince. The whole crowd of onlookers, including me, looked on with mouths agape. *It isn’t common sense she’s lacking; it’s any sense at all!*

“And why exactly should I grant such a request?” Prince Edward shot back. “Who are you to make demands of me?”

“I am not making a demand, but a simple request,” she replied jauntily. “I can’t see how you would have any reason to refuse, so please, let me in. I’ll be sure to profusely express to you my sincere gratitude.”

“I have more than enough reason to refuse. Theodore is my right-hand man; Marisa is Carolina’s trusted handmaiden, and I am not disturbing them for the likes of you. If you are capable of understanding that, then I advise you to leave—now—and I’ll overlook this incident and refrain from mentioning it to the count. We are here under his auspices, after all.”

That was likely the longest continuous speech that I’d ever heard the prince speak. Without waiting for a reply, he turned on his heel. As his arm was linked with mine, I found myself swiftly turning with him, and together we trekked back to the villa.

I wanted to hope Prince Edward’s firm stance was enough to discourage the impertinent little lady from any further attempts to reach Lord Theodore and Marisa—but for some reason, this seed of hope refused to take root within me,

leaving me to sigh deeply in resignation.



Prince Edward and I headed to Lord Theodore's chamber at once to seek clarity about the incident with Lady Marielle, and to our surprise, we were immediately greeted with fervent apologies. Not one, but two figures received us when we entered, one with golden hair and the other with raven locks. Both bowed deeply before us.

My, so this is where Marisa was? In Lord Theodore's chamber?

Lord Theodore spoke first, his voice tinged with regret. "This situation was mine and Marisa's to resolve, but we thought our direct intervention might exacerbate matters."

Marisa, her voice equally remorseful, added, "We never anticipated it escalating this far when we sought assistance from the butler and the knights. I deeply regret the trouble this has caused Your Highnesses."

Their heads remained fixed in penitent bows; it was clear that the situation distressed them greatly. Their apologies were so formal that even I felt uncomfortable. The circumstances had been beyond their control, and I wished they could see that.

"There's no need for such talk," Prince Edward briskly reassured them. "Part of our duty as royalty is to ensure the well-being of those under our care. There's nothing more to it."

"But, Your Highness..." Lord Theodore began to protest.

I chose that moment to interject. "Prince Edward has chosen to overlook the issue, which means he has no desire to pursue blame. Unless you mean you find issue with His Highness's judgment?"

It was a last resort, a low blow to use their earnestness against them, but I deemed it necessary to cut through their stubbornness. It had immediate effect—the both of them fell silent, though their internal struggle was yet evident. In unison, they both breathed a sigh of resignation.

Marisa was the first to concede. "I understand. I will speak no more of today's

events. But I do wish to express my gratitude for your intervention with my sister. Thank you.”

Lord Theodore echoed her sentiment. “Allow me, as well, to extend my thanks.”

As one, they performed a graceful bow, their bodies aligning in perfect right angles—their shared sense of duty was such that they even rose from their gesture of gratitude at the same time. Observing their synchronized movement, it was clear that in more ways than one, these two were remarkably suited to one another. *Poor Lady Marielle; it seems that you are outmatched.*

“Now, please step inside, Your Highnesses,” Lord Theodore spoke again. “I’ll ring for tea, and we can—”

“I shall handle that, my lord,” Marisa interjected promptly. “Kindly entertain Their Highnesses in the meantime.”

My observations about the appropriateness of their union aside, the betrothed pair could stand to talk to each other with a little more warmth, couldn’t they? I was aware that I, matched in political marriage myself, was in no position to judge, but I found myself curious. Did they ever talk about matters unrelated to work? Did they ever drop their stiff formality around each other? The thought that they were more akin to business partners than betrothed brushed past my mind, a realization which stirred an inexplicable sense of dissatisfaction.

We gathered around a low table, settling into our seats as Marisa prepared the tea. Once we had taken our first sips, Prince Edward initiated the conversation. “So, what’s the plan? I doubt today’s events will deter that woman from coming back.”

“As a first step, we should report the incident to Count Kissinger,” said Lord Theodore.

“Ought we to involve the count in handling Lady Marielle?” Prince Edward asked. “I had intended to overlook today’s little episode.”

Lord Theodore nodded. “That appears to be our most viable course of action.

Given Your Highness's decision to downplay this morning's occurrence, it would be difficult for us to pursue any official recourse, but to completely overlook what happened means to act as though the incident never transpired."

In other words, by turning the other cheek, we'd essentially forfeit our right to object further, which seemed a strategically unsound choice. The resolution, it seemed, would now fall to Count Kissinger, who (unlike his daughter) appeared to possess sound judgment. I believed he would handle the situation both responsibly and discreetly.

"Then we have no choice. Let us leave the matter to the count," Prince Edward concurred.

"Understood. I will draft a letter immediately," Lord Teodore responded.

The prince murmured in agreement, and Lord Teodore moved over to his desk and began writing. Meanwhile, Prince Edward reflected out loud, "You attract rather peculiar people, don't you, Teo? I can't recall meeting a more unreasonable little lady."

"That sentiment is mutual, Your Highness," Lord Teodore replied, his gaze unwavering from his task. "During her incessant visits, I often fantasized about sending her to the bottom of the ocean. Unfortunately, due to our families' important trade connections, I had to refrain."

"You were at your wit's end back then, weren't you?" the prince observed with a subtle quirk of his lip. "Though, given your temper, I remember thinking you'd crack on day three, but instead, you managed to hold out for an entire month."

"The moment I learned Marisa was available, I wasted no time in ending the engagement with Marielle."

Vexation etching his brow as his pen flew across the page, Lord Teodore reminisced about the past with a decidedly less-than-fond attitude. It was rare of him to reveal such overt discontent. I understood all too well the source of his frustration, of course. To a serious man like him, someone as undisciplined and disorderly as Marielle would prove to be more than just a simple irritant—their personalities clashed in just about every conceivable way.

That being said, why would Lord Theodore go to such lengths to honor his marital obligations to the Kissingers? I couldn't believe that he, of all people, would endure such annoyance, even going so far as to swap daughters to maintain an engagement, without good cause. Was this something duty-related? Curiosity got the better of me, and I decided to ask this directly. "Why is a union between yourself and House Kissinger so significant, Lord Theodore? With your renown and ability, you could have sought a woman with higher status to..." My words trailed off as I realized what I was inadvertently implying. "Not that I intend any disrespect to the count and his family, truly!"

I'd done it again. My penchant for speaking without thinking had landed me in another awkward situation. It mattered not how much I might want to take them back; the words were already out. My shoulders drooped in disappointment as I tried to salvage the situation. "Pardon me. Please, disregard my earlier question and—"

Prince Edward cut my apology short. "Can we tell her, Teo? Carolina's able to keep a secret. Surely, it can't hurt?"

Wait, Prince Edward cut my apology short? Does he know about this already? If he does, then does that make me the only person here not in the know? Am I once again the odd one out in ignorance?!

Now I just felt silly. As Lord Theodore rolled up his finished letter, I could feel his scrutinizing gaze on me for just a second. "Very well. It was never a secret per se."

"Th-Thank you!" I stuttered back, taken aback by his willingness to share.

"Only because it's you who is making the inquiry, Your Highness," he replied with a glib smile. He tied up the letter and handed it to Marisa before rejoining us, sitting across from Prince Edward and me. "Simply put, my union with House Kissinger is a means for the Pyreborn to gain access to resources, of which they are in dire need. Of course, what we gain is only access, not ownership, and we shall pay for everything we require."

"Resources?" I queried, seeking clarification. "Do you mean provisions? Like fish and produce?"

"Precisely," he confirmed. "The Pyreborn are tasked with expeditions that

take us far and wide, and provisioning for these missions is a significant undertaking, requiring trade with various domains for essential supplies and armaments. Usually, this is a straightforward process, but there are some who deny the Pyreborn access to their markets. And they deny us not for substantial reasons like a devastating drought or a lack of resources, but...”

He paused, allowing Prince Edward to interject, “Some deny us access to their markets simply out of disdain for our practice of inducting commoners into our ranks. It’s a narrow-minded outlook that has hindered us more times than I care to count.”

Narrow-minded is quite the understatement! How could anyone choose to impede the Pyreborn, knights dedicated to protecting the realm, over such trivial reasons?

Lord Theodore adjusted his spectacles, his tone matter-of-fact. “The empire supports us financially, but coin is useless if no one will take it. That is when the idea struck me: perhaps we could enter into an agreement with the lord of a resource-rich domain. In this way, we could gain access to a steady stream of supplies with minimal need for negotiation.”

“And the ideal domain ended up being the one governed by Lord Kissinger,” Prince Edward clarified.

I see... Rather than go to the trouble of bargaining with multiple parties for their expedition supplies, securing a single, reliable source was more practical, even if it meant taking on unfavorable pricing at times. The Kissinger domain could no doubt handle large, sudden orders—an efficient solution indeed.

Lord Theodore continued to explain, “At first, we were prepared to pay double the market rate for supplies. However, after learning of the count’s interest in a matrimonial alliance, we negotiated a deal: half the market price for goods and a perpetual contract in exchange for my marriage to one of his daughters.”

“I-I see...” I muttered, absorbing all the details. It was a very *Lord Theodore* move to enter into a marriage for such pragmatic reasons, yet it surprised me that the count would agree to a perpetual contract. Lord Theodore was a catch, to be sure, but to agree to a contract that would only be annulled in the case that the Kissingers fell to ruin or the Pyreborn ceased to exist seemed

foolhardy. Perhaps the count was more of an ambitious man than I'd realized.

Mulling over everything I'd learned so far, I reassessed my impression of Count Kissinger, although I wasn't yet certain if he'd proven to be more shrewd or more gullible than I'd initially assumed.



The conversation in Lord Theodore's chamber continued for a while longer, abruptly coming to an end when the prince and I remembered we'd agreed to go on a walk. Hastily readying ourselves, we set off from the villa, accompanied by an unexpectedly large retinue. There were over twenty knights shadowing us, Owen included, as well as the ever-decorous Marisa.

Under normal circumstances, Marisa's presence on a mere walk would be unnecessary, but our plans had evolved to include a picnic, necessitating someone to wait on us. It needn't have been her, as there were plenty of other handmaidens available, but she had insisted, and frankly, I'd found no reason to object.

No *real* reason, but I still harbored a quiet hope that we wouldn't run into a certain spirited little shrew...

As we meandered down a secluded path, I cast a quick glance back at Marisa. She was cradling our sizable picnic basket, and she certainly seemed to be her usual composed self, yet I was consumed with concern. Was she merely putting on a brave face?

Perhaps I should ask her if she wants to turn back? Unable to quell my anxiety, I continued to cast frequent glances back at her, searching for a trace of hesitation in her demeanor. My attention wavered from the path ahead, and my foot caught on an errant stone. A startled yelp tore from me as I lost my balance, but Prince Edward swiftly caught me, his arms encircling me protectively from behind, his presence alarmingly close.

Mortified, I stammered an apology. "I-I-I-I'm so sorry!" *H-His face is so close to mine!*

"Watch your feet," he gently admonished, his rumbling baritone so close it tickled my ear.

“Y-Yes, thank you!”

As Prince Edward carefully released me, the lingering sensation of his strong arms around me sent waves of warmth radiating through my body. My heart raced audibly, and my cheeks burned with a heat that felt almost scorching. Embarrassed and flustered by the intimacy of the moment, I covered my face with my hands, feeling the heat of my skin emanating like twin suns against my palms. His mere touch—no, I mean, his rescue!—had set off such an intense reaction within me.

“Carolina? Are you okay?” the prince asked me with concern.

“I-I’m fine—just fine! Nothing wrong with me at all!”

“All right. Well, just let me know if there is.”

“I will, thank you!”

He seemed unconvinced by my assurance, but he also didn’t press any further. Instead, he extended his hand towards me, a gesture of patient support. There was no hurry in his demeanor, no sense of coercion. His offer was a silent testament to his character; Prince Edward was the kind of person who wouldn’t leave me if I hesitated, nor would he force me to move ahead. He would pause if I needed a moment, never showing frustration, just patiently waiting until I was ready.

A gentle smile blossomed on my face, and I placed my hand in his, a little shyly. “Thank you for waiting, Your Highness.”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t dream of leaving you behind.”

My fiery-headed prince was a kind and gentle soul; it was as simple as that. As we strolled through the lush greenery, a slice of natural beauty rarely found in the capital, we paused underneath a particularly majestic-looking tree. Glancing at each other, we suggested practically in unison, “Let’s picnic here, shall we?” Giving Marisa a nod, she responded at once and spread out a large sheet, arranging our sandwiches neatly before us.

Biting into my sandwich, I savored the crispness of the fresh vegetables and the lightness of the sauce—a delightful blend. “Marisa, were these made with the vegetables from the market yesterday?”

“Indeed, Your Highness. Are they to your liking?”

“Yes, very much so! The light sauce complements them beautifully.”

“I’m pleased to hear that. I’ll be sure to pass your compliments on to the chef.”

“Please do.”

Marisa acknowledged my words with a nod, and I returned my attention to my sandwich. There was just something about the great outdoors that made good food taste *that* much better. “It’s so peaceful here, and beautiful,” I remarked quietly.

“Indeed, a picnic is a refreshing break from...” Prince Edward’s words trailed off midsentence. His hand, halfway to his mouth to take another bite, stilled, and a crease formed between his brows. He was staring intently at a dense patch of tall grass nearby. To me, it appeared indistinguishable from every other patch of wild grass we’d seen today, but something had caught his attention. At first, I didn’t grasp the gravity of his focus, but the suddenly alert stances of the surrounding knights, hands poised over their swords, signaled the presence of a lurking danger my less observant self had missed.

Could there be someone hiding in the grass? Another assassin? Away from the safety of the castle, we were more vulnerable—the extremists would be foolish not to take advantage of the situation. The realization sent a shiver down my spine, and I pressed my lips together in silent apprehension.

Prince Edward’s voice pierced the tense silence, calm yet authoritative, “Come out now. I know you’re in there.”

No response. Whoever it was that lurked in concealment was remarkably stubborn, continuing to hide when they’d already been noticed.

“Last warning,” Prince Edward cautioned, his patience wearing thin. A flicker of fire magic sparked to life in his hand.

Fire magic? He isn’t going to... Is he?

He was. A second later, a fireball hurled its way towards the grass. Although it wasn’t particularly large, it was still a live flame, and the brush caught fire

immediately. An ear-piercing shriek erupted from the greenery, and our elusive guest emerged in a panicked flurry.

“F-Fire, fire! My dress is on fire! Put it out, put it out!” Lady Marielle, the cause of this morning’s disruption, stumbled into view. Her appearance, so contrary to the feared assassin I had imagined, left me momentarily speechless. Beside me, I thought I heard Prince Edward mumble, “Unbelievable.”

With a wave of his hand, he extinguished the flames licking merrily away at both the grass and Lady Marielle’s hem. “And here I was expecting someone a little more formidable,” he said with a sigh, shaking his head in exasperation. The knights exchanged incredulous glances, their expressions a mix of disbelief and mild rebuke. *Hardly seems like a proportional response, boss*, their faces seemed to be saying.

Well, the reaction had been understandable given the circumstances. *You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself for setting fire to such a fiery lady, Your Highness*, I thought wryly. After all, we were fortunate that our unexpected visitor was merely Marielle, not an assassin.

However, what she said next made me think an assassin might almost be preferable. “This is the worst. The absolute worst! I *finally* manage to escape from under my father’s watchful eye, and this is what happens to me? Did you really have the absolute gall to set me on fire? I simply wanted to follow Marisa for a little while! Where is the harm in that, I ask you?”

As she stamped her little feet on the ground in a show of childish defiance, we all surely had but one thought going through our heads: *So she didn’t learn her lesson after all...*

Well, I didn’t know what we had been expecting.

Interlude: (Marisa)

“Forget it! Forget about the dress! I’m here to see Marisa, so please do tell me if you are capable of fetching her or not! I would have words with my sister, and I shall not be denied!” Marielle’s demands cut through the air, a finale to nearly twenty minutes of what could only be described as a toddler’s tantrum.

Twenty excruciating minutes of unseemly behavior in front of royalty, without the slightest hint of a proper introduction to boot—it was a lamentable truth that this person was my sister. Standing there, hands defiantly on her hips, she embodied the very essence of arrogance. Any hope I had harbored that this morning’s events might have instilled a semblance of humility in her had clearly been misplaced. I’d known she was foolish, but *this* foolish? Her blindness to the earlier graciousness shown by Their Highnesses only deepened my sense of shame.

Prince Edward, undaunted by my sister’s petulance, stood firm. “As I’ve stated this morning, you cannot demand anything of me.”

“But please, Your Highness, can’t you make an exception? I simply want to talk to my sister!”

Princess Carolina, on the other hand, addressed Marielle with patience and understanding, as if she were lecturing a wayward child. “Now, Lady Marielle, while I’m sure to you the matter seems simple enough—you simply want to speak with your sister—you must see that to everyone else, it might sound like you, a lady of a noble house, are insisting that we, the royal family, allow you to deprive us of the service of one of our handmaidens. Do you see how that might not be construed as proper behavior?”

My lady’s gentle chiding was direct, yet Marielle appeared utterly baffled. While I outwardly maintained my perfect poise and posture, in my mind, I pressed a palm to my forehead in sheer disbelief. *Is she truly incapable of comprehending the folly of her actions?*

“Why, pray tell, might it not be construed as proper? Why may not a lady of a noble house make demands of royalty?” Marielle asked, her voice tinged with

genuine confusion. “Is it a matter of the degree of peerage? Is my title not enough to grant me audience?”

Marielle’s impertinent statements left everyone speechless. Princess Carolina, visibly exasperated, pinched the bridge of her nose, muttering under her breath, “I’m not sure how I can make this any simpler...”

Prince Edward, regaining his composure, interjected, “This isn’t a matter of title or rank. It’s rare indeed for any member of the nobility to request personal favors from royalty.”

“Rare, you say?” Marielle echoed. There was a glint in her eye that heralded another round of misunderstandings. “Then how might I earn such a privilege?”

The prince’s response was measured. “Such a privilege is generally earned by either proving yourself through significant service to this country, or by obliging a member of the royal family.”

Marielle’s eyes brightened in misguided hope. “Ah, so all I need to do is oblige Your Highnesses, and then you’ll permit me to see her!”

The audacity of her assumption brought another wave of dumbfounded silence. Marielle’s grasp of the idea of “obligation” seemed to miss the mark entirely. Since the nobility were subject to the royal family, most of the tasks that the aristocratic houses performed were viewed as a customary display of fealty, and such actions would never incur a debt. True debts of gratitude within royal circles were often born of extraordinary circumstances, such as saving the life of a royal.

Noticing the prince’s stunned silence, Princess Carolina intervened with a weary sigh. “Owen, please escort Lady Marielle back to the count’s demesne. Make sure he knows everything that’s transpired here.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Owen approached Marielle, taking her by the wrist to lead her away.

Marielle recoiled, her voice shrill with indignation. “Wh-What is the meaning of this?! Unhand me, you dirty bastard!”

Owen’s reply was firm but tinged with a hint of sarcasm. “Indeed, milady, as long as you refrain from resisting. Let’s proceed.”

“H-How dare you! I am the daughter of a count—and a legitimate one at that!”

“In this context, your status is irrelevant,” Owen retorted. “My role is to protect Princess Carolina, and you are currently an intruder disrupting a royal event. My actions are well within the bounds of my duty.”

Owen, commendable in his calm, brushed off my sister’s vitriol like it was nothing. Observing him, I marveled at the transformation he had undergone in mere weeks. Stepping away from the shadows of his past, he seemed to have found a new sense of liberation, a freedom that was palpable in his every action.

Away from his past...

Owen and I were alike in many ways, although the similarities between our situations were somewhat limited in scope. He and I had both grown up in “unfavorable” conditions, yet I was painfully aware of the fact that the magnitude of his suffering had far exceeded mine. And while he had been trapped by his past, unable to move beyond it, I considered myself different.

For when I thought about my past, I felt...nothing at all.



Being acknowledged as the most beautiful woman in the empire inevitably draws all manner of gazes—those of admiration, envy, desire, affection. This was my reality, a world where every step I took was shadowed by the jealousy and desire of others, where my mere presence stirred the waters of envy and attraction. My life was a tumultuous sea of inadvertent relationship woes and resentful whispers, whose choppy waters I navigated out of necessity, but none of these experiences could have braced me for the storm that brewed between my sister and Lord Theodore.

It happened a month after the official announcement of Lord Theodore and Marielle’s engagement. On that day, I’d been summoned, without warning, to my father’s office.

Upon entering, I found not only him, but Marielle as well. I could immediately tell something was off. My mind raced with a million questions and a million

more theories.

Why is Marielle here? It isn't time to announce her wedding already, is it? That would be much too soon—the pair of them haven't even been engaged for half a year. Then has a suitor finally been found for me? With Marielle's future accounted for, I am next in line, after all, so it's possible...but then why would Marielle need to be present? I glanced at my sister as I came to stand next to her in front of my father's desk; she radiated an air of eager expectation, her eyes alight with what seemed like joy. This only deepened my confusion. Could this meeting be about some familial matter that involved us both?

My father, seated behind his grand desk, suddenly rose to his feet. His voice, heavy with the weight of unspoken worries, broke the silence. "I apologize for the impromptu meeting, but there is a matter of grave import I must discuss with the both of you," he said, his words trailing off into a muted sigh.

Bad news, then? I thought, bracing myself for whatever was coming next.

He took a deep breath. "The matter concerns Marielle's engagement to Lord Theodore."

The severity in his tone, the solemnity of the surroundings—everything pointed towards something ominous. Yet, to my utter astonishment, Marielle's reaction was the polar opposite. Her face lit up with a radiant smile as she characteristically failed to read the atmosphere of the room. "My! Is the marriage finally set to go ahead? You should have informed me sooner! We need to book venues, send out invitations! Tell me, Father, what did Lord Theodore say?"

If so, then why am I here? I couldn't help but take Marielle's optimism with a heavy pinch of salt. I wouldn't need to be here if this was about wedding plans. That was something to be sorted out by the couple in question; to involve outsiders, even family like me, this early in the process would be untraditional, to say the least.

As my father hesitated, his gaze evading ours, I could sense the gravity of what he was about to reveal. "Let's not jump to conclusions, Marielle. The reason I've called you here is not to discuss wedding plans. In fact, it is rather the contrary."

“The...contrary?” my sister echoed slowly. Her sense of danger seemed to activate at last. She blinked her eyes in disbelief and pursed her lips shut anxiously.

Unable to bear the weight of his lonely burden of knowledge any longer, our father’s gaze fell to the floor. Finally, he spoke, his voice steady but somber. “I need you both to understand the gravity of what I am about to say,” he began, looking significantly at my sister. “Marielle, the engagement between you and Lord Theodore has been...called off.”

A shiver shot down my spine. Marielle, brimming with anticipation mere moments ago, now looked as if she had been struck by an unforeseen storm, her face a portrait of shock and confusion. “What?” she whispered. “Called off?”

My father let his words sink in for a moment before turning his attention to me next. “And Marisa. Please, do not be alarmed, but it has been decided that you will be taking Marielle’s place as Lord Theodore’s betrothed.”

The revelation hit me like a frigid tide, leaving my thoughts scattered in its wake. For a brief, suspended moment, I was engulfed in a stunned silence. When my mind finally began to function, it churned out a single, incredulous thought: this was downright lunacy. Marrying a man hailed as the mage of his generation was one thing, but marrying a man who was my sister’s former fiancé was a leap into insanity.

A torrent of thoughts cascaded through my mind, each more frantic than the last: *Why me, of all people? It can’t be me! Why, I’ll be labeled a seductress who stole my own sister’s fiancé! But how could I be, when I haven’t so much as exchanged a single word with Lord Theodore? And the rumors! Doesn’t Father care about the scandal this will cause? The whispers and sidelong glances? No, I’m sure it hasn’t occurred to him, but that isn’t even the worst part! The worst part is how Marielle is about to react!*

I struggled to think of anyone who harbored a more bitter grudge against me than Marielle. Her heart was a shriveled, blackened lump of envy and spite, and she was absolutely not the type of person to take such news with anything resembling grace.

With a deliberate slowness, I turned to face my sister.

She was furious. Seething. Her face was contorted in rage, her petite frame trembling with barely contained passion. In the next moment, she lunged at me, her voice a venomous hiss. “You harlot! You hussy! The nerve of you to usurp my place, stealing my betrothed as if you’re entitled to everything I hold dear!”

“M-Marielle?!” I stumbled back, trying to get out of her reach. “What are you doing?! Please, Sister, calm down!”

She tore at my hair without mercy, clawing at me with a wild ferocity. Tears blurred my vision as I begged her to cease, but my pleas were lost in the maelstrom of her wrath. My sister, once provoked, was not so easily placated. Hurriedly, my father leaped out from behind his desk and pulled Marielle away from me. He restrained her in a firm hold as she thrashed about in childish rage.

“Marielle, enough!” Father’s voice thundered. “Marisa is not at fault. It is your actions that led us here. Your unannounced visits to both Lord Theodore’s abode and his place of work, your incessant need to be at his side—these were the cause, not any action taken by your sister!”

“What?!” Her screech was a mix of incredulity and denial. “How is my desire to be with my fiancé a fault? No, this is all Marisa’s doing!”

Behind the veil of her frenzy, there was a fleeting glimmer of realization, a brief understanding of the truth of our father’s words. Yet it was drowned out by her refusal to accept any blame. She shook her head vehemently, as if to physically cast off the truth, her entire being screaming a silent denial.

I had a nagging suspicion as to what had caused this mess. Since her engagement, she’d been leaving our manor with an alarming frequency. If, on all those occasions, her destination had been Lord Theodore’s, then my sympathy lay with him. Treating a politically motivated union the same as one born from true love was bound to create discontent.

But the decision to drag me into the midst of their tangled affairs is unthinkable. Then again, I’m sure Father’s decision was born more from desperation than not.

Perched on the edge of understanding, at war with the fervent internal wish to reject this outlandish scenario, I tried to soothe myself by fixing my disheveled hair. *It's always me, isn't it?* I mused bitterly, the thought echoing in my mind, grieving my role as fate's unwilling plaything. Amid these reflections, Marielle's tearstained face thrust itself into my field of vision. "Give me back my Theodore! My life is ruined because of you!" she wailed at the top of her lungs. "He is accomplished, brilliant, and he was *mine*! You... You manipulative strumpet!"

She grabbed a cushion from the nearby sofa and hurled it at me. I watched its slow trajectory; it brushed my shoulder before dropping to the floor. A harmless object, but it was a signal of what could come. Vases, bowls, and plates were all within her reach, but before she could escalate any further, our father released Marielle from his grasp, throwing her to the floor. "I said that's enough, Marielle!" he bellowed. "It's always, always Marisa's fault with you—take some responsibility for once in your life! Do you have any idea the trouble you've caused? Do you not even feel a shred of remorse?"

A strained, wordless grunt left Marielle as she trembled in a puddle on the floor. Her fists were balled tightly, tears streaming down her face.

Ignoring my inconsolable older sister and her childish tantrum, our father returned his attention to me. "Marisa," he said with a weary sigh, "we will discuss the specifics privately later. You may leave."

"Yes, Father," I responded, my tone brisk. Eager to escape Marielle's wrath, I seized the opportunity to escape. Casting a final, lingering glance at her weeping form, I withdrew from the room.

The truth was that I desperately wanted to implore my father to reconsider this doomed engagement. However, his final words had carried an air of inevitability, suggesting that the matter was as beyond his control as it was mine. With a miserable sigh, I nudged open the door to my room. As I contemplated the bleak horizon of my new reality, a deep, consuming despair washed over me.

The prospect of Marielle's intensified harassment and bullying loomed large in my mind. It wasn't the verbal barbs or the emotional torment that instilled

fear in me; rather, it was the imminent possibility of physical harm that unsettled me deeply. Sinking into my sofa, I exhaled another long, unhappy sigh. As my thoughts spiraled, consumed by the anxiety of the deeply fractured sisterly bond between Marielle and myself, my eyes landed on a particular book nestled in my meticulously arranged bookshelf. *Cinderella*, the spine read. This story had been a cherished part of my childhood.

How naive I'd been to adore that tale. I had clung to the belief that enduring the endless, biting envy of those around me would eventually lead to my salvation by a Prince Charming, gallantly astride a white steed. But that savior, that fairy-tale ending, had never materialized—and now it never would.

My eyes swam with melancholy as I approached the bookshelf and tenderly withdrew the book. Tracing my fingers along the image of the blonde girl on the cover, I whispered wistfully, "Lucky you, Cinderella."

For the first time in my life, I found myself envious of someone else. "If only I could be like you," I mourned, the tears brimming over in my eyes.

That was the day I cried my heart out and then swore to forever conceal my deep sorrow beneath a veneer of stoic patience.



Emerging from the depths of my recollections, I felt a surge of profound anger welling up within me, bringing everything around me into sharp focus. The emotions that I had suppressed for years erupted fiercely, compelling me to clutch at my chest in a futile effort to contain them.

Marielle had always been like this, green with envy, fabricating spurious tales of how I had wronged her, casting me as the villain in her private narrative. When Lord Theodore had called off their engagement, when she had found herself pursued by less distinguished suitors, her mantra had remained unchanging: *This is all Marisa's fault*. By alleging that I had seduced Lord Theodore, that I was clandestinely sabotaging her prospects of marriage—this was the only way she could live with herself.

The irrationality, the sheer folly of it all, her delusion of infallibility—I found it ludicrous, risible, and utterly repugnant. As I watched my sister being escorted away, my eyes shone with the full force of my contempt.

“Marielle, listen to me.”

The words slipped from my lips unbidden, catching even myself by surprise. I saw Princess Carolina’s eyes widen in shock at my sudden outburst. It was unlike me to speak so impulsively, to break even the smallest protocol in the presence of royalty. My utterance was a breach of decorum, but in that moment, I could no longer restrain myself. I needed Marielle to hear this at least once.

“Marielle—I despise you. Your immaturity, your senselessness, and your sheer lack of judgment are among the qualities I abhor most in this world. I hate how you incessantly heap baseless blame upon me. I hate how you never acknowledge your own failings, and I hate *you*. Everything about you. So please, dear sister, spare me your presence in the future. For if you dare to appear before me ever again, I will not restrain myself as I have done over the course of our entire lives.”

My voice, colder and more cutting than I had anticipated, carried the sharpness of my anger, yet remained controlled and steady.

I finally said it. The truth that had been my secret burden, hidden from everyone, was now out in the open. It felt as though an immense weight had been lifted from my shoulders, a freeing release of years of pent-up frustration. I wished I could have framed the look on my sister’s face at that moment to hang on my wall forever. Oh, how good it felt.

I met her look of stunned disbelief with a gaze that was both icy and unyielding. “I am Marisa Kissinger. Fiancée to Lord Teodore Garcia, royal handmaiden to Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez, and I will tolerate no further disrespect—not from my own sister, nor from anyone else. Remember that.”

In response to my first overt act of defiance, my sister stood there, completely dumbstruck.

Hurry up and realize, dear sister.

Realize that we are nothing alike. And realize that sometimes, it really is just your fault.

Those aquamarine eyes, so similar to my own, flickered with emotion, like the

crashing waves of a storm-tossed sea.

(Carolina)

With no one willing to wait for the mood to resettle after our picnic had been so thoroughly disturbed, we trudged back to the villa. That night, as I lay in bed, my mind tirelessly replayed the day's events. The first image that surfaced was of Marisa's apologetic figure in the wake of her sister's departure.

"I deeply regret my actions; please accept my sincerest apologies," she had said, her head bowed in remorse.

Marisa's sudden outburst had caught me off guard, and while it had surprised me, I couldn't say I desired to punish her for it. True, her behavior had been a stark departure from the expected decorum of a handmaiden, a role that typically required one to remain reserved and detached from private emotions, even at great personal cost. But before she had been a handmaiden, or even a fiancée, she was foremost a victim. As for Prince Edward and myself, neither of us could fault her for her actions. We'd simply acknowledged her apology with a nod, leaving unsaid whether we truly accepted it or not.

I turned over in bed, gazing out of the open window at the moon. The cool, gentle breeze of the night provided a soothing contrast to the heat of my thoughts. In the aftermath of her outburst, Marisa had appeared unburdened, almost serene, as if she'd finally cast away a weight she'd long carried. Clearly, the sentiments she'd expressed had been festering within her for years, and in that moment, she had found her release. While it had been a minor act of retribution, insufficient to counterbalance the years of mistreatment, it seemed to have made an impact. Lady Marielle had appeared utterly bewildered by her sister's words.

"An act of retaliation towards her sister..." I murmured to myself. Before I even knew it, my thoughts had floated inevitably to Flora. They drifted to her beautiful padparadscha-sapphire eyes and the way they often glared at me with venom. They drifted to her shapely lips, and how they looked when parted to spew forth hatred. The feelings I harbored for this woman, lionized as the epitome of grace, were a complex mix of loathing, inferiority, and envy. Yes, even a woman like her possessed qualities I envied: her talent, her ability to

flawlessly execute anything that was asked of her.

Yet this in no way excused her actions. Though she'd never resorted to physical violence, I'd grown up amid her relentless teasing and bullying. The aspect of her behavior I loathed the most was her pretense of affection in public while she simultaneously worked to undermine my reputation.

Take for instance, a particular incident during which Flora had subtly belittled me in public. She'd said, "My dear sister is beginning to learn the cello. I've been assisting her as much as I can, but somehow, she just isn't improving. Could it be that I'm not a good teacher?" A seemingly innocuous statement, but it had conveyed two things: one, that she was a skilled cellist capable of teaching, and two, that I was utterly lacking in musical talent.

On another occasion, she'd remarked, "I constantly advise Carolina to stay abreast of the latest fashion trends, yet she seems so reluctant! My fashion choices always receive compliments, so I'm sure they would suit her as well. Don't you think this bright pink dress would look lovely on her too?" This comment had dripped with insincerity. She'd known all too well that a bright pink dress would clash with my ashen hair, and her real intent had been to draw attention to her own striking silver-white locks. It was astonishing to me now how her veiled mockery had gone unnoticed by those around us.

These were just two instances among countless others. Prior to my marriage to Prince Edward, I had been nothing more than a mere tool to accentuate her splendor. As a result, I'd grown up isolated, with not a single person I could call an ally. Any attempt to expose Flora's true nature or her disparaging remarks had been swiftly shushed and censured. *Don't lie! Respect your elder sister!* I would be admonished, my words dismissed as insignificant falsehoods in the ears of those who were beguiled by Flora.

This was precisely why I harbored a profound envy towards Marisa for her bravery in confronting her sister. Though my path with my own sister had diverged dramatically, and I doubted I would ever get a similar opportunity, I yearned for the strength to express myself to Flora with the same resolve that Marisa had shown against Marielle...should the chance ever arise for me to do so.

With these thoughts teetering closer to hopeful aspiration than any kind of definitive resolve, I let my eyes drift shut. As if in a gesture of empathy, clouds veiled the moon's soft light, plunging my room into a restful darkness. In the quiet of my chambers, I surrendered to sleep, letting my consciousness slip away into the peaceful embrace of the night.



On the third morning of our summer retreat, Prince Edward and I found ourselves once again seated at opposite ends of the long dining table, indulging in a leisurely breakfast. My gaze wandered to the window, taking in the unblemished blue sky and the lush greenery of the garden below.

You can't see the front gate from here, I noted absentmindedly.

"I wonder if Lady Marielle will be making another appearance again this morning," I murmured, tearing off a piece of bread and popping it into my mouth.

Prince Edward glanced up from the document in which he was currently engrossed. "I don't think we need to worry about her any longer. We received word this morning that the count has chosen to cloister her." He flipped the document around, showing it to me. "Look, here," he said, gesturing at a particular line. Peering closer, I could make out the words, "I have decided to send Marielle to a convent." Count Kissinger's actions painted the picture of a father devoted to his daughter's welfare right up until the end. Sending Marielle to a convent seemed less a punitive measure and more an attempt to shield her from the fallout of her actions. Such places often provided sanctuary from external affairs, an asylum that even royalty would have trouble breaching. With Marielle safely out of reach, it seemed the repercussions would inevitably fall upon House Kissinger itself.

"In the end, the count chose his daughter over his house," I remarked.

"Indeed. What a foolish, foolish man." Prince Edward shrugged in exasperation before setting aside the document to resume his breakfast.

My thoughts then drifted to Marisa. Was she aware of this development? And if so, what were her feelings towards her father's protective actions? Would she feel anger towards her father's leniency, or nothing at all, choosing to put the

whole thing behind her? My gaze returned to the clear blue sky, hoping, almost whimsically, that it might hold the answers to my questions. *If only my heart could be so clear, so unburdened.*

“Something interesting out there, Carolina? You seem quite absorbed,” said Prince Edward, snapping me out of my reverie.

“Oh, no, not really. It’s just... The sky is so remarkably blue today,” I replied, my response trailing off unconvincingly.

“Yes, it is. The perfect day for a hunt.”

“A hunt, Your Highness?” His comment caught me off guard. The perfect day for a leisurely walk outside, I could understand, but a hunt? Were hunts a common pastime in Malcosias, or was this quirk more specific to Prince Edward, commander of the Pyreborn?

“Indeed. Have you ever taken part in one?” he inquired, then quickly added, “No, I suppose you haven’t.”

“I indeed have not,” I replied. “Not as a direct participant at any rate. I have observed one from afar.”

I remembered the great hunts of Celestia. What a bloodbath they had been—not for the prey, but for the ruthless noblewomen using it as an opportunity to jockey and vie for favor and position.

Prince Edward wiped off his mouth with a napkin. “Then let’s go on one today.”

My gaze widened, resettling on him. *What did he say? Go on one? As in, a hunt? Today?* He’d said it with such nonchalance that I questioned whether I’d heard him correctly.

In the face of my silence, he elaborated, “There’s a mountain nearby that’s home to a variety of mana-beasts. That’s where we’ll hunt. Naturally, I don’t expect you to engage in any actual hunting yourself. You can simply accompany me and observe.”

“Mana-beasts, Your Highness?” I echoed, a little uneasy.

“Yes. Well, only creatures like goblins and orcs, nothing too formidable. Rest

assured, with Owen and myself at your side, you will be perfectly safe.”

The thought that crossed my mind was tinged with a hint of irony: *If you want to keep me “perfectly safe,” Your Highness, perhaps you shouldn’t be taking me into dangerous places to begin with!* His prowess was undeniable, but venturing with me into such an environment seemed like an entirely unnecessary risk. I might be safe enough around domesticated mana-beasts, but wild ones? I opened my mouth, intending to voice my concerns, but as I caught sight of his bright, eager eyes, the words simply evaporated.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll set out immediately after breakfast,” he declared with a finality that left little room for dissent.

“Y-Yes, Your Highness...”

His unexpected fervor left me feeling as if I had no choice but to acquiesce, as though the opportunity to object had been denied me in the face of his boyish excitement.



After breakfast, I changed into attire better suited for active pursuits and set off with Prince Edward to a local mountain known as Mount Gespenst. It was an unremarkable ridge of wilderness in most respects—except for the hordes of mana-beasts that called it home. These creatures weren’t considered to be particularly formidable, and members of the local militia and independent hunters typically managed their presence well. It was only during their aggressive breeding season that the royal knights were called upon to maintain control.

Arriving at a serene clearing to rendezvous with the rest of our party, Prince Edward surveyed the surroundings with a keen interest. “I’ve only visited this place during the fall, in the midst of mating season. It’s quite different in the summer,” he noted, his tone reflecting an almost childlike curiosity.

Why, he almost made it sound like we were on a fun little educational excursion, rather than the actuality: we were, in fact, headed into a perilous domain teeming with potential dangers!

Didn’t he say there were goblins here? And orcs? They wouldn’t dare attack

us...would they? I knew that neither sort of creature was a powerful adversary, especially not for the warriors accompanying me today, but I couldn't help but worry.

I-I'm not going to get eaten, am I?

Even with the most formidable military commander in all the empire and my loyal bodyguard Owen at my side, I felt like I was going to cry. The dread, the anxiety, the wish to turn around and go home right this very instant, gnawed incessantly at my insides.

Will they grasp me in one clawed fist and eat me whole, starting from the head, or are they more like humans in their consumption habits, butchering and dividing up their food before they...? Ahhh! I don't want to think about it!

Suddenly, Prince Charming himself rode up alongside us on a white horse, and with a gallant sweep of his arm said, "Fear not, Your Highness. With me, the vice commander of the Pyreborn, at your side, there is no cause for alarm."

Never mind, it was merely Lord Teodore.

"I understand why you might feel uneasy with Prince Edward alone as Your Highness's escort, but I am someone you can count on," he added, a practiced smile curving the arc of his lips.

Despite his glib manner, his presence did offer some comfort. "It is indeed reassuring to have you with us, Lord Teodore," I agreed, "but I hope we aren't pulling you away from more important matters. You've been quite secluded these past few days, so I wondered if you might be quite busy."

"While I appreciate Your Highness's concern, I've just about squared everything away," he said. But then his tone shifted, and his eyes glinted with something unreadable, yet undeniably unsettling. "Besides, there is something of great import that I must confirm out here. Personally."

Confirm? Out here? I wondered as I studied his broad smile. *It must be important indeed if he's taken the time to come out here with us.* My curiosity was piqued, but I felt it improper to ask. Whatever his reasons were for joining us, they were likely beyond my purview.

"Enough talk." Prince Edward, eager to proceed, spurred us on. "Let's move

forward. We won't find anything by lingering here."

"Agreed," concurred Teodore. "Owen, lead the way. I'll cover the rear."

"Yes, sir." With a resolute "yah!" and a snap of his reins, Owen spurred his steed into action. The animal reared briefly in surprise before bolting forward, its hooves pounding the earthen path, signaling the start of our venture up the slopes of Mount Gespenst.

Aren't we going too fast for a windy mountain road? This became my new concern only a few minutes into our journey. *We are shaking an awful lot...* The constant jostling and the fear of a possible fall made me shrink back into the saddle, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. My sense of balance felt so off-kilter that I desperately wanted to shout for a halt and to be let off this dreadful ride at once.

It was Prince Edward's voice that cut through the fog of my fear. "Straighten up, Carolina. That's dangerous form."

"I... I can't!" I stammered, panic-stricken. "I'm going to fall."

"You're not," he replied. "You have me. I'll catch you before you fall."

"B-But, what if you don't?" I fumbled to correct myself. "Ah! Wait, no!"

Oh, no. What did I just say?! My words had tumbled out before I'd been able to stop them, betraying my anxiety with another feeble complaint. *How unseemly of you, Carolina!* I admonished myself. *Why, it almost sounds like you're doubting Prince Edward's capabilities right to his face! Even if you didn't say it explicitly, the implication was abundantly clear!*

Now you've done it... Feeling the blood drain from my face, my body trembling in distress, I quickly stammered out an apology. "My apologies, Your Highness, please disregard my previous statement, I didn't mean to—"

"If you fall, Carolina, I'll leap off my horse to catch you," he interrupted in his deep, reassuring baritone. "I'll wrap my arms around you and ensure you're safe before you hit the ground. I'll be a good cushion, if nothing else."

"What?" I murmured in disbelief. *Did he just suggest I use him as a cushion?*

Cautiously, I turned my head around to look at him—our eyes met.



“So hopefully, that offers you some comfort,” Prince Edward continued, a hint of playfulness in his tone. “Though I suspect Teo would employ his magic to save you long before I’d get a chance to serve as your willing pillow.”

And with that, he smiled—somewhat mischievously—and cast a glance back at Lord Theodore, who was trailing a few paces behind us. Theodore responded with a nod, his expression radiating absolute confidence.

“Rest assured, Your Highness, I will ensure that nary a scratch comes your way today,” Lord Theodore affirmed.

“See?” Prince Edward chimed in again. “So, sit up straight. With us by your side, there’s no need for worry or fear—you’ll be just fine.”

Encouraged by their combined reassurances, the anxiety that had held me prisoner began to dissipate. I straightened up in my saddle, lifting my gaze to the path ahead, and what I saw was breathtaking.

The mountain road, which had previously instilled nothing but quaking fear, now revealed its true beauty to me. The sunlight filtering through the lush green canopy overhead, the branches of the nearby trees that seemed to stretch themselves towards us in welcome, the dandelions dancing lightly above the ground, and even the scattered stones along the path all contributed to a mesmerizing panorama.

This ever-changing landscape was like a living piece of art. I had been so focused on the ground, so absorbed in my worries, that I had missed the splendor around me. Was this the wild beauty of nature about which I had heard others speak? Despite the continual jolting from the horse and the uneven terrain, the captivating scenery around us somehow made those discomforts fade into the background. “I never realized mountain trails could be this beautiful,” I remarked.

“Indeed,” Prince Edward confirmed. “There’s a unique charm to the mountains that’s unmatched.”

“I can hardly imagine mana-beasts calling such a picturesque locale home,” I mused, still taking in the view.

“It’s quite the opposite. They’re attracted to nature’s beauty. It’s in the barren

mountains and forests ravaged by wildfire where you won't usually..." He paused midsentence, his thoughts shifting. "But speaking of mana-beasts—where are they?"

Now that he mentioned it, there had been a surprising lack of... *Hah, listen to me talk as if I've been on a mana-beast hunt before.*

Prince Edward looked around, his expression turning to one of confusion. "We've ventured quite deep into the wilderness. It's unusual not to have seen any by now. It's almost as if they're deliberately avoiding us."

Mana-beasts avoiding us? I wasn't aware they had the mental capacity to act with such intention. I looked up at him questioningly, and he glanced down at me, both of us sharing a moment of puzzled silence. Lord Theodore's voice broke through from behind. "Your Highnesses, perhaps we should abandon the hunt for mana-beasts today. I believe there's a herd of deer not far ahead. How about we alter our plans to pursue them instead?"

He looked utterly delighted as he said this, a grin stretching from ear to ear. Hardly the correct reaction in the face of an unsuccessful hunt, if you asked me. Something about his glib smile was...even glibber than usual, and it stirred a sense of unease within me. *Why is he so happy about this?*

Prince Edward seemed unperturbed by this odd behavior. "Very well," he nodded. "Let's hunt some deer and head home." After communicating the altered plans to Owen, we veered off our initial course, and soon we reached a small pond. We dismounted a fair distance away, choosing to approach the rest of the way on foot to avoid alerting the deer.

"All right. Let's burn them to a crisp and get outta here," Prince Edward declared.

Yes, let's burn them to a crisp and— Burn them to a crisp?! What does he plan on doing? Incinerating them with his fire magic while they're still alive?

While I stood there with my mouth agape in disbelief, Prince Edward nonchalantly extended his palm. A swirling mass of flames coalesced in his hand, and with a whoosh, a fireball launched itself towards the unsuspecting deer.

“Carolina, get down,” he instructed urgently.

Before I could process what was happening, heavy cloth obstructed my view, enveloping me in darkness. I yelped in surprise as Prince Edward wrapped his arms and his cape around me from behind, swiftly pulling me into a crouch. Encased in his protective embrace, my heart pounded in my ears, drowning out all other sounds. Then, a resounding boom erupted, overpowering even the thunderous beats of my heart.

An explosion?! What just exploded?! He only wanted to hunt some deer, no?!

“And we’re good,” Prince Edward casually stated, pulling his cape away from my face.

“‘And we’re good,’ my foot, Your Highness!” retorted a voice pitched high in exasperation. “Was such a drastic measure really necessary, you oaf? I had my reservations when you mentioned ‘burning them to a crisp,’ but this is excessive!” Lord Theodore, his hair in disarray and his glasses askew, glared at Prince Edward. The throbbing vein on his forehead suggested that he was not happy.

“I’m sorry, all right?” Prince Edward muttered, looking somewhat sheepish. “I didn’t exactly intend to do that, but as I was casting, my energy just kind of surged.”

Lord Theodore’s eyes immediately narrowed. “Your energy *surged*?” he said, adopting a considering pose, thoughtfully stroking his chin and falling into silence.

Surveying the aftermath, it was evident that Lord Theodore’s rebuke had been warranted. The spell’s effect had been a narrowly averted disaster. Had it not been for Owen’s quick thinking to erect a barrier and Lord Theodore’s spell to mitigate the shock wave, we might have shared the fate of the surroundings. The ground was scorched, vegetation blackened, trees stripped bare as though ravaged by a ferocious windstorm. The sight of the desolation was harrowing. At the epicenter, the deer, which were the intended targets, had been reduced to nothing more than charred and ashen outlines on the blasted earth.

Prince Edward looked hopefully at his vice commander. “So, Teo... About those deer...”

“Are you serious?” he responded with a disdainful snort. “No, we absolutely cannot eat them anymore. After your little display, they’re naught but charcoal.”

The prince’s shoulders sagged. “Yeah, I thought as much,”

“I very much doubt that you thought of much at all.”

Lord Theodore’s overt disapproval was palpable as he let out a sigh that was heavy with exasperation. Prince Edward, meanwhile, appeared genuinely remorseful, saddened by the unnecessary loss of life he had caused. I observed, touched, as he silently offered a prayer for the deer, an act of penitence for his unintended consequences.

In the midst of this, Lord Theodore stood up, seemingly more than ready to leave the scene behind. “I don’t think we’ll be finding any more deer today. Let’s return to the villa. It’s nearing lunchtime.”

As he said this, I heard *someone’s* stomach—it could hardly have been *mine*—growl intensely.



Ultimately, we returned to the villa without any successful quarry to speak of, and after a necessary change of attire, we reconvened in the dining hall for lunch. Settling into my seat, I grasped my knife and fork, eagerly anticipating the meal. As I savored a bite of the delectable chicken cutlet, my attention couldn’t help but be drawn to Lord Theodore. He was casually sipping wine at the table I shared with Prince Edward, as if his presence here was the most ordinary thing—which it was not. Someone inviting themselves to dine with royalty was presumptuous at best and willfully impudent at worst. I couldn’t imagine that someone of his conscientious nature would commit such a faux pas thoughtlessly, so just what was he playing at?

As Lord Theodore finished his entrée, he finally spoke. “I heard about Celestia’s recent findings regarding the origins of the recent outbreak of plague,” he started, directing his words to me. “It was due to negligence at the waterworks bureau, wasn’t it?”

“It appears so,” I replied. “According to my father, the Bureau of Water

Management admitted to a serious lapse in the completion of their duties. Since the Saint-to-be's presence had been doing much to keep the water clean, they had grown complacent. Unfortunately, it seems my sister's current condition has brought the situation to light."

"Interesting. Very interesting," Teodore hummed, dabbing a napkin at the corners of his mouth. "I wager those responsible will soon be dismissed from their roles. Although, that alone won't solve the crisis at hand, would it?" He flashed me a smile. "Ah, that reminds me. Your Highness will be visiting the local church tomorrow?"

"So I can be tested for magical ability, yes," I replied. "But don't worry, I'm not expecting much."

"Good, good. In that case, perhaps I shall accompany Your Highness."

Both Prince Edward and I glanced up from our dishes, dumbstruck. I, in particular, stared at Teodore as if he'd spontaneously sprouted a third eye in the center of his forehead. *He wants to come with me to my examination? Why?! First the hunt, then lunch, now the exam... Isn't Lord Teodore a terribly busy man?! Is it possible that he, always so consumed by his duties, has finally overworked himself to the point that he has lost all capacity for rational decision-making?*

"L-Lord Teodore," I began cautiously. "Perhaps it might be beneficial for you to rest?"

"Right," Prince Edward chimed in, echoing my concern. "You seem exhausted. It's hard to believe you'd prioritize Carolina's exam over your responsibilities if you were in your usual state of mind."

Lord Teodore feigned offense at our reactions. "Oh, please, Your Highnesses, just who do you take me for? Even I have been known to prioritize things other than work on occasion."

Prince Edward's fork slipped from his grasp and clattered to the floor. "What...did you just say?! Y-You have priorities...outside of work?!"

"Has hell frozen over...?" I whispered under my breath, equally stunned.

Lord Teodore shook his head in mild exasperation, seemingly amused by our

shock. “All right, I thought we were all enjoying an amusing bout of banter at my expense, but it seems you both genuinely see me in a distressingly one-dimensional light.” As we grappled with this new side of Lord Theodore, the head chef arrived with dessert. *Ooh, cheesecake.*

But no, back to Lord Theodore. He isn't seriously unwell, is he? The idea of calling a doctor briefly crossed my mind, but the way he was clearly relishing his cheesecake suggested he was the picture of health, not a man suffering from any serious illness.

Finishing his dessert, Lord Theodore rose from his seat. “At any rate, this situation is not what Your Highnesses imagine it to be, so I'll enjoin you not to worry. Now, if you'll excuse me, some paperwork is awaiting my attention.” He started towards the door without waiting for a response, but then he abruptly paused and looked back at me. “I'm looking forward to tomorrow, Your Highness.”

His unexpected comment caught me off guard, and I managed a tentative nod in response. “Indeed so,” I replied, my voice slightly unsteady.

A pleased smile crossed his face before he turned away, continuing his exit from the dining hall. As he disappeared from view, my mind raced with questions. *That was strange... Why would he return his attention to me specifically to say that? What was his intention behind any of his odd recent actions?*

A growing sense of suspicion and curiosity bubbled within me. His behavior today was utterly out of character, and his motives were unclear. Despite racking my brain, I couldn't decipher his intentions or the reasoning behind his actions. Failing to come to any concrete conclusion, I returned my focus to my cheesecake.

Chapter Three

The rest of the day did little to clear up the uncertainties clouding my heart, and my uneasiness lingered as I rose the next day to visit the local church. This had been the day recommended by Count Kissinger if we were to have a chance of speaking with the high pontiff himself.

The church, aside from the grand cross dominating the nave, was a space of pure white, so pristine it seemed almost fantastical in nature. Given the distance of this parish from the capital, it wasn't a large church, but it teemed with worshippers nonetheless. The faithful sat in the pews, immersed in prayer, their expressions serene.

As Prince Edward and I entered, the pastor approached us, his voice hushed to respect the tranquil atmosphere. "Prince Edward. Princess Carolina. This way to the magical examination room, if you would please follow me."

We trailed behind him as he led us to a chamber separate from the main nave. The room was modest, befitting a place of worship, furnished only with a simple wooden desk, a guest area, and shelves lined with holy scriptures and various church documents.

"I'll prepare some tea. Please, make yourselves comfortable," the pastor offered, turning back to the way we had come.

Lord Teodore, who had accompanied us, interjected with a congenial smile. "No, that's quite all right, Father. We are here solely for Carolina's examination. After that, we'll take our leave."

The pastor, acknowledging Lord Teodore's words, paused and nodded before turning his attention to a specific section of the shelves.

This was another unusual move from Lord Teodore. Normally, he would've thanked the pastor and graciously accepted his hospitality. What made his impatience seem even more unwarranted was that we weren't short on time—we had nothing else on our fixed itinerary for the day. Even now, as he sat on

the sofa, his finger rhythmically tapped against his leg, betraying a sense of urgency. It was evident something was amiss, but the reason for his tenseness remained elusive.

I leaned towards Prince Edward and whispered in his ear, “Your Highness, don’t you think Lord Theodore has been acting strangely? He’s been restless—far too restless.”

Prince Edward whispered back, “You think so too? Indeed, it is strange, as if he’s not himself. But it doesn’t seem as if he’s charmed under the arcane sway of someone else either.”

“Then could it really just be exhaustion catching up with him?”

“It’s possible,” he responded thoughtfully. “He has been buried in paperwork lately. I’ll ensure he gets some time off soon.”

Concluding our quiet discussion with a mutual nod, we agreed that a break might be just what Lord Theodore needed. A few days of rest could work wonders, but that would have to wait until our summer retreat had concluded.

Meanwhile, the pastor’s hand paused on a particular section of shelving; it seemed he had found what he’d been looking for. “Ah, here it is: the magical instrument used for assessing magical proficiency. Princess Carolina, are you ready?”

“Yes, Father,” I replied, straightening myself.

The pastor retrieved a white book from the shelf and set it on the table as he sat across from us. Its cover was plain, devoid of any text or markings.

This is the magical instrument in question? I thought, slightly let down by the anticlimactic nature of its appearance. The instrument we used in Celestia was completely different. I couldn’t quite remember what it resembled, but it was certainly larger...and much more metallic than this...book? The magical technology in Malcosias was advanced indeed.

“The process is quite straightforward,” the pastor began to explain. “Simply place your hand on the book and recite, ‘reveal unto me mine own true measure.’ If Your Highness possesses magical abilities, the pages will reveal the specific affinities you possess. Conversely, if Your Highness lacks magical

abilities, the pages will remain blank.”

So the book can test for both the presence and extent of magical abilities... As I absorbed his explanation, a mixture of awe and trepidation filled me—not springing from the fantastical nature of the book itself, but instead from the fear of being determined to be nonmagical once more.

I gripped my hands tight, staring at the blank white book before me, when Prince Edward’s voice, calm and reassuring, broke through my tension. “It’s all right, Carolina. It doesn’t define you—whether you possess magical ability or not.”

“Indeed, Your Highness,” affirmed Lord Theodore. “There’s no need to look so grim. The outcome will be what it will be. Nothing you do now can alter it.”

They were right; the outcome of this test was already set. I was already old enough that my magical affinity had settled, and nothing I felt or did would change anything now. *Don’t count on it, Carolina; it was a long shot from the start.* “You’re right—both of you. The results are what they are,” I acknowledged, feeling a sense of calm settle over me.

With newfound resolve, I placed my hand on the cover of the mysterious book. Taking a deep breath to steady my heart, I recited the incantation. “Reveal unto me mine own true measure.”

As the words left my lips, an intense light burst forth from the book, filling the room with a brilliant, white radiance. I instinctively shut my eyes against the overwhelming brightness, waiting for the light to fade. It took a moment, two moments, and when the intense glow finally diminished, confusion set in.

What...was that? The pastor didn’t say anything about a shining light, did he?

“A shining light?” A stunned Lord Theodore echoed my thoughts. “Father, what is the meaning of this?”

“I... I don’t know,” the pastor repeated, equally taken aback. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

What? The pastor doesn’t even know what happened—meaning that this bright flash of light wasn’t a normal part of the process? Then what...is this magical instrument defective? My curiosity piqued, I picked up the tome to

inspect it more closely. It appeared unchanged—still an ordinary-looking book, leaving me unsure whether this was a positive or negative sign.

Then maybe I should open the tome and check the results? Even if the instrument is in some way defective, the contents of the tome might reveal—Not that I'm expecting anything!

Despite the bizarreness of it all... No, exactly *because* of the bizarreness of it all, that smoldering glimmer of hope within me burned anew. With trembling hands, I leafed through the pages, one by one, only to find...

"It's completely blank..." I muttered, "Does this mean that I'm...nonmagical after all?"

The stark reality of the blank pages hit me hard. It felt like waking from a fleeting dream to a harsher truth. I knew it: I was magicless, powerless, useless, and unneeded by anyone and everyone. I must have known it—so why did it still hurt so much? *Oh, how silly I am...* All that talk of "no expectations" and it being "a long shot from the start," and my unconscious self had still stubbornly clung on to a faint hope.

As I gently closed the tome, trying to hold back the tears welling up in my eyes, Prince Edward placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. "Don't sweat it. Magic or not, you are still Carolina, my one and—"

A sudden outburst interrupted his words. "That's impossible!"

Lord Theodore...?

He looked agitated, even frantic, beyond belief. With a menacing glower, he snatched the book from my hands, such an uncharacteristically brash and impulsive action that it had me doubting my senses. I looked at him wide-eyed, the intensity of his reaction momentarily jolting me out of my own disappointment.

"Teo, get a grip!" Prince Edward's voice was firm, laced with concern. "What's gotten into you?"

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no! This... This can't be! Princess Carolina *must* possess magical ability; otherwise my theory is wrong—all wrong! I... I refuse to accept this!" His words tumbled out incoherently as he feverishly flipped

through the tome, muttering “no” and “impossible” under his breath. He was utterly distraught, even more so than I was. Just what had he been expecting from this examination?

“This thing is defective! I demand an immediate reassessment! Quick, bring us another tome, and we—”

“There is no need for that, my child.”

As Lord Theodore’s words climbed into near hysteria, a new, authoritative voice intervened, slicing through the tension.

We all turned towards the source of the calming presence. Entering the room was an elderly man dressed in a white-and-gold cassock, a mitre on his head, holding a cross-shaped cane. His attire was unmistakable. It was none other than the thirty-ninth pope of our faith, His Holiness himself, Melvin Clark White.

“Let my words serve as proof of Princess Carolina’s examination results,” he declared. “For what dwells within her is not the form of arcane magic with which you are all familiar, but something else entirely—a power of a very different nature.”

His words echoed through the chamber, causing a ripple of disbelief and curiosity.

My voice was so quiet it was barely a whisper. “Not...arcane magic?”

“Indeed,” the pope continued, his tone imbued with a deep sense of solemnity. “In terms of its rarity, it is a power far more uncommon than magic itself.”

A...special power? That I was in possession of...?

“That is the purpose behind our meeting today, for me to unveil the sacred origins of the authority bestowed upon you,” His Holiness explained. “This moment is but a manifestation of God’s inscrutable plan, an act of divine providence. It is by His benevolent hand that we have been led to this juncture.”

His words resonated with the same gravity and elegance found in holy scriptures. Then, to the astonishment of everyone present, His Holiness did

something completely unexpected: he lowered himself before me. The entire room gasped in shock at the sight of the pope bowing to anyone, let alone a mere slip of a girl like myself.

“It is an honor to meet you—beloved child of God,” he said, his head bowed deeply in a gesture of reverence and recognition.

(Flora)

At that selfsame hour, at a Celestian diocese of the holy church, the day of my trials had finally arrived. Despite my best efforts, no solution had presented itself that might ease my travails. Even as my condition was yet deteriorating, I was escorted down the church's immaculate white corridors by the head priest. Paladins in full regalia lined our path, their presence a solemn reminder of the gravity of the occasion.

I'd just passed the first trial: the magical examination, but that was to be expected. It was the impending second trial that would prove to be the first real challenge—the water purification test. I would soon stand against three hundred thousand liters of putrid, muddy water, and it would be up to me to purify all of it into crystal clarity. It was a test of brute magical force, a measure of the sheer volume of holy magic I was capable of channeling, and it was the assessment that winnowed the wheat from the chaff. It was here that most aspirants stumbled, and even those who did pass would go on only to fail at the third and final test. Indeed, the journey to Sainthood was fraught with trials so daunting that successful candidates were a rarity, their numbers in recent memory few enough to count on the fingers of a single hand.

The priest who was guiding me halted abruptly before a door, jolting me from my anxious thoughts. "Here we are. The venue for the second trial," he announced.

Lifting my gaze, I beheld the intimidating door. It was adorned with a coat of arms depicting a sun and moon, and it was flanked on either side by a pair of paladins in their striking white armor.

At the priest's command, the paladins gave a knightly salute, and then proceeded to pull open the massive doors, revealing the path ahead. A wave of anxiety washed over me as the doors swung open, and I swallowed hard.

This was it. If I failed to prove my power here, the title of "Saint-to-be" would be stripped from me. In the worst-case scenario, the label of "fraud" might be tacked on in its stead.

“Lady Flora Sanchez, come forth and partake in this holy trial,” the priest intoned, his voice resonating into the shadowy depths of the room.

“Enter,” an arrogant, pompous voice replied. I was all too familiar with it. Only one person in Celestia carried themselves with such self-importance, even in the face of nobility, and that was the Archbishop of Celestia—Jonathan Mills. As the head of the Celestian see of the church, dispatched from the pontifical diocese over a decade ago, Mills was an unscrupulous malfeasant, in every sense of the word. Avaricious, utterly self-concerned, and insatiably thirsty for power, it would forever remain a mystery to me how someone of his ilk had ever managed to ascend to the rank of archbishop.

A twinge of annoyance flickered within me as I recalled his disdainful demeanor. Quelling this irritation with a deep sigh, I figuratively bent a knee to his authority and stepped into the chamber. This room, designated for the second trial, contained only myself and Archbishop Mills. Evidently, he had ensured the chamber was emptied of all other witnesses for the purpose of the trial.

As the doors shut behind me with a definitive clunk, even the head priest was excluded from the proceedings. *The only witnesses to this trial would be myself and the Archbishop?*

“Now that it’s just the two of us, O miracle daughter of House Sanchez, let’s begin, shall we?” Archbishop Mills said with a sneer, his voice dripping with contempt. With a theatrical flourish, he whisked away the sheet at his feet, unveiling a rectangular pit brimming with foul, stagnant water. The stench assaulted my senses, drawing an involuntary grimace from me.

The volume of water, three hundred thousand liters, was daunting—far more daunting in reality than in any of my mental preparations.

Mills gestured towards the murky expanse with exaggerated reverence. “Your task, my dear, is quite simple: purify this pit in its entirety. Surely, a prodigy heralded as the ‘Saint-to-be’ can effortlessly accomplish such a feat?”

His demeanor, the contemptuous glint in his eyes, his voice steeped in sarcasm—all of it incensed me. If not for his position, I would have eagerly orchestrated his social ruin with a well-placed rumor or two. Clenching my fists

to contain the surge of anger, I responded with a calm, simple, “Yes.” Masking my turmoil with a serene smile, I positioned myself at the edge of the pool. Drawing a deep, steadying breath, I prepared to confront the challenge before me, poised a short distance from the muddied waters.

It’s okay. You’re okay, Flora Sanchez, I told myself. If anyone can do this, it’s you. For you, whose beauty and talent provokes longing gazes laden with envy wherever you go, these trials are a necessary step in your journey to greatness. For you, whose greatness was promised from birth—the only impossibility in your life is failure.

...Right?

With these thoughts as my mantra, I cautiously raised my hands above the murky depths. Channeling my inner strength, I focused on the energy swirling within, guiding it towards my outstretched palms.

Please, God, let me succeed in purifying this water! I silently willed, my prayer more a desperate plea than a confident invocation.

Releasing the magic, I watched as tendrils of holy energy cascaded from my fingertips, delicately grazing the water’s surface. For a fleeting moment, the water before me shimmered with purity—a small oasis of clarity amid the filth. But the triumph was short-lived; the clean water was quickly swallowed up by the surrounding muck.

Why, why, why, why?! The release of magic felt the same as it always did, so what is the meaning behind this dismal result? Where is that familiar swell, that surge of power that always used to pulse through me?! How... How?! Confusion and frustration swirled within me, coalescing into a stark realization that I voiced without intending to. “So it really is true...”

“What’s true?” The archbishop’s voice cut through my turmoil.

Startled, I realized that my private admission had been uttered aloud and had caught his attention. His eyes, which had been languid and mocking, were now sharp and focused, reflecting an unexpected spark of genuine interest.

He rose, closing the distance between us with swift strides. “Answer me, Flora Sanchez!” he demanded. “What is this truth of which you speak? Does it relate

to the recent calamities plaguing Celestia? Have you discovered something about your waning powers?”

His spittle flew in my face, and his fingers dug into my shoulders, but I barely registered the pressure. Engulfed by a sense of despair and helplessness, my mind was fixated on the painful truth I had just acknowledged. The extent of my powers—it wasn’t my own doing after all. The true source had been Carolina, my sister. She had been the child blessed with Divinity.

Divinity, as its name suggested, was a sacred force, a divine gift. This celestial power shared similarities with the arcane energies fueling magic, yet it stood distinctly apart. Magic drew upon mana as its source, but Divinity was a direct endowment from God Himself. It was an exceptionally rare gift; in fact, the only other living recipient of such grace was...the high pontiff himself.

Moreover, Divinity and mana were fundamentally incompatible. They repelled each other like oil and water. This inherent repulsion likely explained why mana-beasts had never besieged Celestia. The very essence of their being, composed of mana, would find the presence of holy energy intolerable, prompting them to flee. Hence, Carolina’s presence had served as an inadvertent barrier against these creatures. But Divinity’s influence extended beyond mere repulsion of beasts. From the information I’d gathered during my desperate research, it endowed its host with three other significant powers:

First, an enhanced healing ability. Unlike the restorative effects of holy magic, Divinity amplified the body’s natural healing processes to heal. This also boosted the immune system, providing considerable protection against disease and sickness.

Second, a purification ability. This power enabled the cleansing of water and rejuvenation of barren soil. Likely, this had been the reason behind Celestia’s recent agricultural prosperity and its resilience against disease and plague.

The third, and perhaps most impactful power in my case, was the ability to amplify arcane power in others. The mechanics behind this phenomenon were not fully understood, but some texts suggested that Divinity was able to excite mana, temporarily augmenting its potency. It was this last ability that had elevated me to my position as the “Saint-to-be,” and now, with Carolina absent,

my extraordinary capabilities had diminished, grounding me once more in a harsh reality of mediocrity.

Irony, wasn't it? The sister I'd belittled and dismissed as worthless had been the source of my own worth all along. I had stumbled upon this truth some time ago, yet acknowledging it was like swallowing fire. It was a bitter pill, but now, in the face of undeniable evidence, acceptance was my only recourse. My stubbornness, my decision to persevere through the trials, had been a final stand against my newfound powerlessness—and it had all been futile.

A deep sigh escaped me. By this time tomorrow, the truth would be public. I would be scorned, the whispers swirling around me, calling me "the pitiful woman who failed," or "the charlatan who fooled us into believing she was the next Saint."

This is the worst thing imaginable. Absolutely the worst. Everything that could have gone wrong has indeed done so. Lost in my self-pity, I barely registered the Archbishop's impatient demand, "Answer me, woman! What is this truth you speak of?!"

His words were like distant echoes. I remained silent.

"Are you ignoring me, you recalcitrant wench?!"

His anger was inconsequential against the depth of my despair.

"Is it wealth you desire? Name your price, and it shall be yours. Now, tell me what you know!"

Money? Seriously? That's what he thinks will sway me? I was in despair, not destitution. As I grieved the impending death of my social stature and future, he spoke again, this time with an offer that pierced through the haze of my grief.

"I'll aid in preserving your reputation! I cannot declare you passed, but I can suggest your failure was marginal. What do you say to that?"

Amid his barrage of meaningless words, one resonated: reputation. Could he really preserve my facade as the untainted flower of high society? Was it possible to leave this place still perched at the apex of the social hierarchy, unblemished in the public eye?

Slowly, I raised my gaze to meet his, uncertain of his true intentions. He flashed a crooked grin, as if triumphantly thinking, *She's taken the bait*. "That's right," he murmured, almost slyly. "I'll concoct any cover story you wish, provided it concludes with your failure. So, tell me quickly, girl, what have you discovered? Should your information prove valuable, your reward will be even greater."

His words might have been whispers from the Devil himself. I clenched my lips, my eyes darting away as I weighed his proposal.

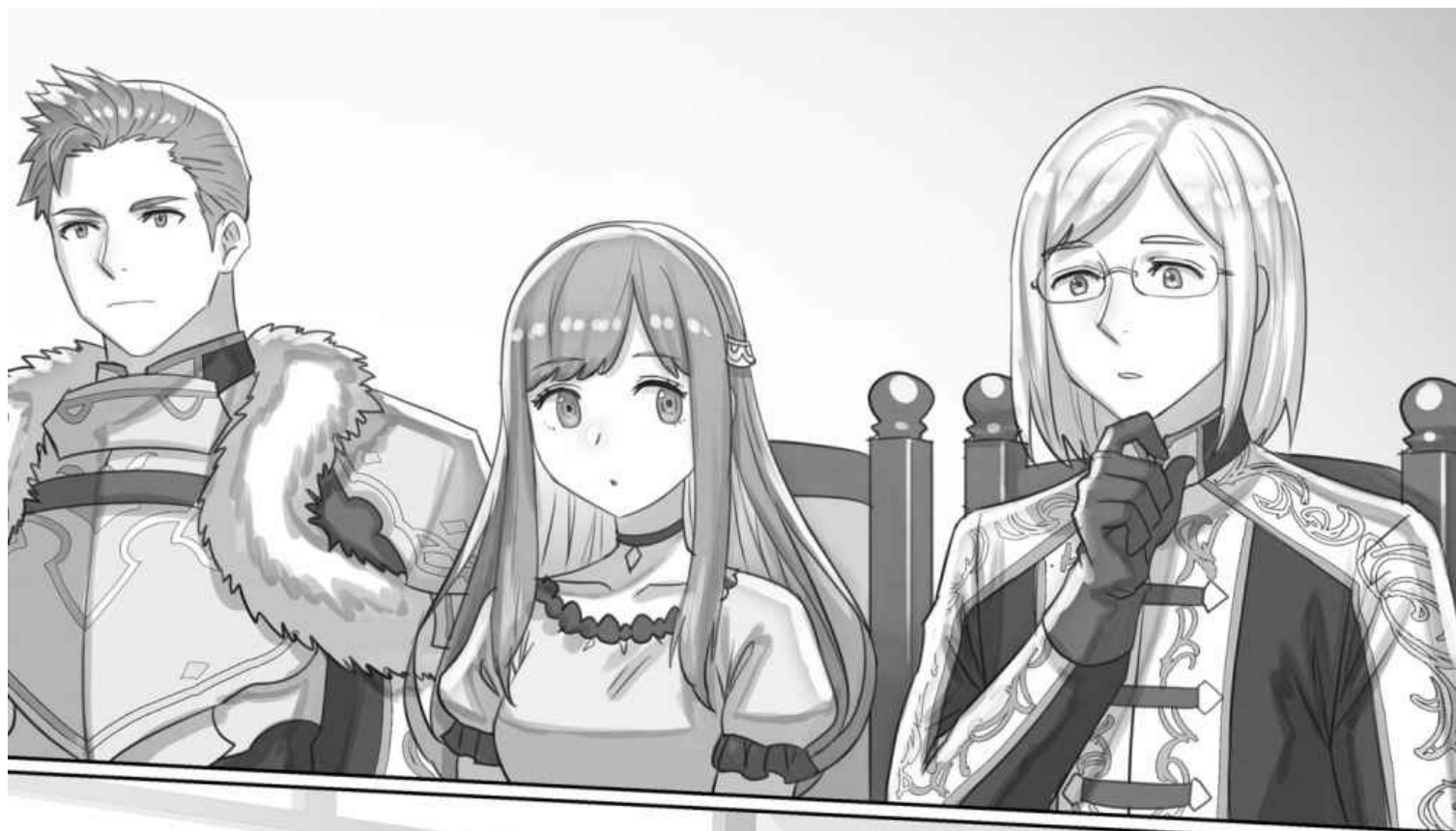
At this juncture, safeguarding my reputation was paramount. Being branded as "the candidate who disastrously failed the second trial" would be a social catastrophe. The repercussions could be so severe that even House Sanchez might suffer, a consequence I needed to avoid at all costs.

Gritting my teeth, I acknowledged the harsh reality: making a deal with this man, the last person with whom I'd ever wished to engage, might be the sacrifice I needed to make in order to save everything from crumbling down around me. Steeling myself, I refocused my gaze on the archbishop, the personification of vile treachery. "Very well. I'll tell you everything. Every detail of what I've discovered."

His reaction was a greasy, unsettling grin, an embodiment of iniquity. A wave of nausea hit me, and I couldn't help but think, *This is the kind of blackguard that miscreant boys grow up to become*.



"Thus, the Princess Carolina is graced with three distinct powers: healing, purification, and amplification. These gifts are what we refer to as Divinity." His Holiness concluded his explanation by taking a poised sip of his tea with no less grace than any member of the aristocracy. He met our gazes across the table, his smile gentle yet sagacious. "The magnitude and potency of her powers are remarkable. This is indicative of God's profound favor."



God's favor... Personally, I found the entire narrative hard to digest. The idea of being a specially chosen child of God seemed far-fetched to me, yet the thought of the Vicar of God himself fabricating such a tale was equally implausible.

Lord Theodore stroked his chin, deep in thought. "Divinity..." he murmured, digesting the information. "I understand its influence as a force in creating Celestia's prosperity, but how is it that Her Highness has remained woefully oblivious to her own abilities until now?"

His Holiness returned Lord Theodore's question with a serene smile. "That is likely because the princess has been unconsciously emanating her power, unaware of its effects."

"Are you saying that she projects her power wholly without intention?" Lord Theodore asked, visibly surprised.

"Yes," affirmed His Holiness. "As I alluded to earlier, the princess is not only endowed with powerful energies, she also possesses them in an extraordinary measure. To put it into perspective: compared to her, my own power might as well be a mere droplet of rain, while hers is akin to a mighty waterfall."

I'm sorry, but did I hear that correctly? It almost sounded like His Holiness was comparing his power to mine and that mine far eclipses his?! If his assuredly formidable power is a "mere droplet" in the face of mine, then what does that make me?!

Meanwhile, His Holiness continued, unaware of my inner turmoil. "And just as a mighty waterfall, Princess Carolina's power is similarly ceaseless, perpetually overflowing with a fathomless amount of energy."

Lord Theodore, clearly awestruck, echoed the sentiment etched into his face with the words that he spoke. "Incredible. But Your Holiness, please, correct me if I'm mistaken—merely 'overflowing' with power doesn't necessarily mean it's being actively used, does it? I understand how it might passively repel mana-beasts, but what about healing, purification, and amplification?"

The high pontiff responded with a kind smile. "That is a wonderful question, my child. Indeed, while healing and amplification require conscious effort and

therefore remain dormant, purification is different. It operates passively, as you said, for what is purity itself but a manifestation of the divine in our world? Though it must be said that if she were to direct it consciously, the effect would be exponentially more potent.”

It certainly made sense that even a fraction of God’s divine power could purify indiscriminately, but if that were true, it would mean that the improvement in Celestia’s public health and agricultural productivity over the past decade and a half had been due to...me. Thinking back, that was perhaps what Lord Theodore had been trying to insinuate over the past few days, but the confirmation of his conclusion was astonishing nonetheless. Even the notable absence of mana-beasts in Celestia had apparently been a result of my efforts. Unconscious efforts, but still... To think that the one keeping Celestia prosperous and safe had been the one they’d denigrated as the “Sanchez family disgrace” all along—the irony was not lost on me. *I wonder how my former countrymen might take this news...* A flicker of a vengeful thought flared within me, but I quickly smothered it before it could spread like a hateful cancer through my mind.

Lord Theodore, ever inquisitive for every detail, pressed on. “Regarding Her Highness’s healing and amplification abilities, how might they be activated? If I recall correctly, there has been one Carolina-centered incident involving healing and two of amplification, all evidently unintentional. Is there a specific condition that must be met for these powers to trigger?”

His Holiness hummed in thought. “Nothing so strict as a condition. Rather, I believe it is more accurate to say they are tied to the princess’s emotional state.”

“Emotional state?” Lord Theodore echoed. “Please, Your Holiness, could you elaborate?”

“For instance, Divinity may react to strong desires such as the desire to save a life, or the desire to not die.”

Lord Theodore nodded in earnest, seeming satisfied that he had grasped the concept. “So when Her Highness’s power manifested yesterday, it was her intense desire to try venison that triggered it?”

L-Lord Theodore, what?! With that serious look on your face, I was expecting a

profound insight, not...not an assumption of carnivorous obsessions on my part!
Flustered, I stumbled over my words. “W-Wait, Lord Theodore. Please, let me explain myself...”

But what could I really say? I *had* been eager to taste venison, and the prospect of catching it ourselves had been exciting, but surely there was a better way to frame it than to present me as a glutton whose powers awakened at the thought of food!

As my internal struggle reached its peak, my cheeks burned with embarrassment. I hung my head low, only to hear Prince Edward’s soft voice beside me. “Sorry, I didn’t realize you were looking forward to it so much. Shall we go on another hunt tomorrow?”

I wanted to vehemently deny it, to assert my dignity, but...

“Y-Yes, let’s...”

In the face of my appetite, I was powerless.

But in my own defense, who wouldn’t have looked forward to the prospect of freshly hunted venison? Surely my anticipation wasn’t unreasonable.

My reflections were interrupted by Lord Theodore. “Your Holiness, your esteemed insight today has been invaluable. With your help, we’ve gained a clear understanding of the nature of Her Highness’s powers.”

“Don’t be so modest, my child,” the high pontiff responded with a touch of humility. “It was your astute comprehension and eloquent questions that facilitated our discussion.”

Lord Theodore brushed aside the compliment with an almost-theatrical wave of his hands and a shake of his head. His lips slipped into the glib smile that I had learned to associate with imminent trouble over the past few months. “One last inquiry, if I may, Your Holiness. How did you discern the outcome of the magical examination so promptly? Can you perhaps perceive Divinity directly?”

That was an intriguing point. His Holiness had indeed arrived with surprising swiftness to confirm the results of my examination. Even if he’d had some sort of divine premonition, the abruptness of his appearance had been remarkable.

His Holiness replied without hesitation, “It was the bright, white light. The intensity was such that it spilled from the room, prompting me to enter.”

Lord Theodore, following up, asked, “That light...was that a malfunction of the device?”

“No, no,” His Holiness replied, shaking his head. “That is no malfunction, but an important and purposeful attribute. The instrument is designed to appraise not only arcane, but divine power as well.”

A wave of astonishment swept through the room. Recovering first from the shock, Lord Theodore adjusted his glasses thoughtfully. “Why, Your Holiness, it almost sounds as though you’re suggesting that the device creates such a powerful burst of bright light *intentionally*?”

“Indeed, it does. A report of such a luminous anomaly is unmistakable and such an account is always bound to reach my attention,” His Holiness explained.

“So, it is a mechanism to ensure that this kind of information will never fail to make its way to your ear, with none the wiser...”

With a nod, His Holiness confirmed Lord Theodore’s deduction. The room seemed to pulsate with a silent and bewildered query: *But why?* In response, the high pontiff’s gaze drifted out the window. I followed his line of sight to see a well-tended garden where children played among the flowers. It was a heartwarming scene. As His Holiness turned away from the idyllic view, his expression became somber. A touch of sadness tinged his words. “It was a necessary precaution. We had no other choice to ensure their protection.”

The melancholy that shrouded His Holiness spoke volumes of the meaning that thrummed in the undercurrent of his words. Individuals endowed with divine power, like myself and the high pontiff, were rare and immensely powerful, which meant they were valuable—and consequently vulnerable. Kidnappers, spies from rival nations—there were no doubt countless parties interested in seizing Divinity for their own benefit. Those in prominent positions like us were shielded by organizations and allies, but what of those less fortunate? What if a newfound bearer of Divinity were a commoner or an orphan, devoid of any safeguard? All kinds of horrible things might happen to them before they could reach the protection of the church. His Holiness’s fear

was singularly logical: these blessed individuals, these favored children of God, could be corrupted and exploited by malevolent forces to wicked ends. That was why the search for these blessed children had to be carried out in such secrecy. Confidentiality was crucial in ensuring an opportunity for a safe and sheltered upbringing away from prying, harmful eyes.

“Divinity can be manipulated to suit myriad agendas and purposes,” His Holiness elaborated. “Even if the power of a blessed individual lacks potency, their mere existence is of incalculable value. The risk of them ending up trafficked in dark markets or exploited for political gains is not one we can afford to ignore. Hence, I must implore your utmost discretion on this matter.”

“Your Holiness, you have our word. The secret will be safeguarded,” Lord Theodore assured him.

The high pontiff bowed his head in a gesture of profound gratitude. “Thank you, my child. Our mutual commitment to confidentiality is crucial to a cause far greater than ourselves.”



As our meeting with the high pontiff concluded, we took our leave and made our way back to the villa. The carriage rocked gently on the journey home, and as we left, the setting sun was already painting the clouds above with orange hues, signaling the end of the day.

Inside the carriage, Lord Theodore, his spectacles perched precisely, was engrossed in a thick stack of freshly inked documents; these were the fruits of our enlightening meeting. “Considering the gravity of what we’ve learned today, I suggest we heed His Holiness’s advice and delay any widespread revelation of Princess Carolina’s newfound powers. The implications are significant, and we need time to appropriately strategize.”

Prince Edward, deep in thought, nodded in agreement. “That sounds prudent. It might be best to wait until the calamities afflicting Celestia have subsided. After all, Carolina is in a way responsible for all of them.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Lord Theodore concurred. “Though Her Highness is in no way at fault, it’s in the best interest of both nations to maintain harmonious relations and avoid stirring unnecessary controversy. We can only hope no

inquiring minds uncover the truth in the meantime.”

Indeed, the possibility of someone exposing the truth before we had a chance to make a well-timed and official announcement was a concerning one. However, I doubted anyone would leap to such a far-fetched conclusion on their own. And even supposing that they did, would they go public with their findings? Would anyone even believe them? Risk ridicule by voicing the absurd truth or remain in silent and lonely understanding—I knew what my choice would be.

Then, Prince Edward asked an interesting question. “Teo, how did you manage to independently deduce the source of Celestia’s troubles?”

I’d been curious myself. While Prince Edward and I had required the high pontiff’s explanations in order to grasp the situation, Lord Theodore seemed to have pieced it together much earlier. His previous outburst was one I would not forget for as long as I lived...

Lord Theodore looked up, knocked on the air, and conjured his storage pocket. From the swirling void, he retrieved two documents. “Like many, I initially suspected Lady Flora Sanchez to be behind the calamities in Celestia. However, I began to question this assumption after reviewing the agricultural data and records of mana-beast encounters from across the empire.”

With that, he handed each of us a document. The one I was offered was an agricultural report. On it was a graph comparing this year’s productivity to the last, and what it painted was a picture of an anomaly beyond what words could describe.

A one hundred and thirty percent boost in output within a single year, with an early harvest by two months?! The weather wasn’t even extraordinary, so how could this have...

The contents of the report were nothing short of miraculous. My curiosity piqued, I glanced over at the report Prince Edward held. It detailed recent mana-beast sightings, or rather, the lack thereof—a dramatic decrease in mana-beast activity, centered on the imperial capital. In fact, to say it was a decrease was an understatement; there were practically no sightings to speak of! While the vastness of Malcosias meant these effects were localized and not universal

across the country as they had been in Celestia, it nonetheless presented a fascinating puzzle. “The timeline... It aligns precisely with my arrival in the empire,” I murmured. “Considering the simultaneous onset of issues in Celestia following my departure, there seems to be no other plausible explanation.”

Prince Edward nodded in agreement. “Not to mention the unexplainable phenomena that have occurred since your arrival. It must’ve led Teo to suspect you possessed some latent power.”

“Quite so, my lord,” affirmed Lord Theodore. “These reports, which I came across in the line of my regular duties, were the breadcrumbs that led me to this conclusion.”

The reports were incontrovertible evidence of the extraordinary occurrences surrounding me. Perhaps Lord Theodore’s concern about others deducing this anomaly might not have been as unfounded as I’d thought.

“Is this why you’ve been acting so strangely?” Prince Edward asked. “I knew you wouldn’t skip out on work to come hunting without good reason.”

“Indeed, I considered that sojourn to be part of my duties as well,” Lord Theodore responded with a hint of humor. “I needed to witness the impact of her power firsthand. After all, the extent of her influence is such that it could significantly alter the future course of our great empire.”

“And to think you snapped back at us for calling you out on it...” the prince mumbled with a tinge of indignation.

Lord Theodore replied with a glib smile. “Rest assured that I took that as a compliment.” He retrieved the documents from us and placed them, as well as the notes he’d take during our audience, back into the storage pocket.

Watching the documents disappear into the magical void, I mused to myself about the conveniences of magic. Divine power might hold more sway over the world, but magic certainly had its practical advantages. *Oh, what I would give to have a storage pocket of my own one day...* Such were the thoughts running through my head as the carriage rolled to a gentle stop outside the villa. The servants were arrayed in a welcoming formation as the coachman opened the coach door. Prince Edward and Lord Theodore alighted first, with Prince Edward then extending his hand back to me. “Carolina, here.”

“Thank you,” I said, accepting his assistance. Hand in hand, we made our way to the building. As we entered the grand hall, I squinted slightly, momentarily blinded by the bright light of the chandelier after spending so long in the rapidly dimming twilight. Ahead of us, Lord Teodore halted and turned to face us. “Prince Edward, Princess Carolina, I must say that this has been a thoroughly enlightening day. I bid you both a good night.”

“Good night, Lord Teodore,” I responded warmly. “And thank you again for your company today.”

“Night, Teo. Don’t stay up too late,” Prince Edward added.

Lord Teodore nodded, a contented smile on his face. “I believe I shall sleep quite soundly tonight. Good night to you both.”

As Lord Teodore offered a graceful bow, he retreated into the dimly lit corridor, his footsteps echoing softly until they faded into silence. Left in the hall, Prince Edward and I shared a glance. “Dinner?” he said. “It should be about time. I’m sure the kitchen’s ready for us.”

“Yes, that sounds lovely. We’ve barely eaten anything today, have we?”

Together, we made our way to the dining room. I noticed a subtle change in my posture; perhaps it was the newfound understanding of my powers, but I found myself walking with renewed confidence, head held high, keeping pace beside the prince.



A delicious meal and a restful night’s sleep later, I found myself on the way to Mount Gespenst once again—this time to hunt in actuality. It seemed that my prince’s promise yesterday had not been idle words. Today, we were determined to secure a deer, come what may.

Well, that was *his* determination, at any rate. I couldn’t say I entirely shared in his enthusiasm. While his conscientiousness was a trait I admired, I found myself wishing that perhaps it could come less to the fore when it involved taking his own wife hunting. That being said, I had resolved to embrace the experience; I was already out here, so I might as well make the most of it. Although Owen followed at a respectful distance, Lord Teodore wasn’t with us

today, and while many uncertainties swirled in my mind, I was strangely unfrightened.

“Aren’t there usually more deer around?” Prince Edward asked as we ventured deeper into our hunt.

“Perhaps our last outing made them a little wary? We did wipe out a whole herd of them, after all,” I replied with a hint of irony.

“Right...” he acknowledged sheepishly.

As we continued, my thoughts wandered to the scorched banks of the pond we had visited previously. Now knowing the true extent of my unwitting role in that devastation, a pang of guilt gnawed at me. We soon arrived at the edge of the same pond, still as ruinous a landscape as it had been two days ago. I wasn’t sure what I had expected; the healing of nature is a process measured in months and years, not days. Still, the sight of the damage, accidental though it had been, tugged at my heartstrings.

I gently lowered my head in contemplation, and a wistful thought crossed my mind: *If only this desolate area could be restored to its former beauty.* And as that desire took root in my heart, a miracle descended upon the earth, overturning all we held to be true.

“What is...happening?!” Prince Edward cried out. “The stripped trees, the burnt grass, the ashen undergrowth—they’re...regenerating?!”

Alarmed by the urgency in his tone, I whipped my head up and saw to my astonishment exactly what he described: life returning to the scorched earth before us. New branches sprouted from barren trunks, fresh grass and undergrowth emerged from the blackened soil, all happening at a pace so rapid, I could only describe it as if time itself was being reversed. My mind raced, trying to comprehend the verdant spectacle. Could this really be another manifestation of my divine powers? Barely able to believe what I was seeing, I managed to utter, “I... I just wished that this area might regain its original splendor...”

“I see,” Prince Edward said softly. “This is your doing.”

Owen, who had been observing silently, spoke up with a tone of reverence.

“Your powers are truly magnificent, Your Highness.”

We reined in our horses, marveling at the miraculous transformation of the landscape. The realization hit me with a mix of awe and disbelief: *This is...my doing?* My will had been carried out right before my very eyes, and yet I had felt no different while it was happening. God’s favor, it seemed, did truly dwell within me.

Owen’s voice jolted me back to the present. “Look alive! Three deer emerging from the brush out yonder! They’re coming this way! The mountain’s regeneration must have piqued their curiosity!”

Prince Edward’s excitement was palpable. “Finally, a stroke of luck. They’re coming right towards us,” he declared. “Owen, Carolina, we’ll take cover in that thicket.” He swiftly guided our horse towards a dense area of greenery nearby, with Owen following. Once there, we dismounted. “This spot is perfect,” Prince Edward whispered.

“I’ll secure the horses a little ways off,” Owen offered.

“Quietly,” Prince Edward instructed, his eyes fixed on the approaching deer. “They’re nearly upon us.”

Owen muttered a word of acknowledgment and led the horses away. Prince Edward and I settled into our hidden vantage point, watching the deer with bated breath. The graceful creatures cautiously approached the pond’s bank, their timidity a stark contrast to the relaxed herd we had encountered previously. Their wariness was understandable, given the recent tragic fate of their brethren, but it added a layer of complexity to our hunt. Mindful of our last hunting mishap, we had opted for bows this time around. We needed to wait for a clear shot.

Prince Edward’s voice was barely audible. “Just a little closer...”

I peered through the foliage. “Do you think they’ve sensed us? They seem reluctant to come any nearer.”

Prince Edward had only brought a shortbow along with him today. With a maximum range of two hundred meters, and an effective range of about only half that, the deer were tantalizingly just beyond this distance. He furrowed his

brow in concentration as he readied his bow. "A rifle would have made short work of this," he muttered, clicking his tongue.

"A shame Lord Teodore forbade it, isn't it?" I said, empathizing with his frustration.

"Would it have killed him to make an exception for his 'no personal use of Order arms' rule, just this once?" Prince Edward shook his head and sighed deeply, the tiniest hint of a pout forming on his lips. "The miser," I heard him mutter under his breath.

Best pretend I didn't hear that.

On one hand, I understood Lord Teodore's stance. Firearms were, for various reasons, rare goods. The Pyreborn had paid a fortune for the privilege to acquire the few they had available for use. It was hardly worth the wear and tear just to break one out for a hunt. On the other hand, I could sympathize with Prince Edward's frustration towards Lord Teodore's sometimes overly stringent nature.

Prince Edward nudged me gently, drawing me back to the moment. "There, one's straying from the group. It's just barely within range. I might *just* make this shot."

"I'll stay quiet to let you focus then," I whispered back. "Good luck!"

With that, I fell into silence, quietly observing Prince Edward and his tense standoff with the deer. The animal started grazing tentatively on the new grass, seemingly still skittish in its new surroundings. A curious thought floated into my mind: what did Divinity-grown grass taste like? Imbued with divine power, might it be unexpectedly delectable?

My whimsical musings aside, the deer became increasingly engrossed in its grazing. The moment it lowered its guard, Prince Edward let fly a razor-sharp arrow. The sound of it slicing through the air hissed in a sharp whisper past my ear. The arrow flew straight and true, embedding itself cleanly into the deer's front leg.

"Nice shot, Your Highness!" I couldn't help but exclaim.

"No, it's too early to celebrate," he said calmly, already nocking another

arrow. I looked at the deer again; it was limping along on one leg, struggling to escape after its peaceful meal had been so violently interrupted.

It dawned on me then: hunting was a game of patience, not a single moment of triumph. By wounding the deer first, Prince Edward was increasing his chances for a successful pursuit, a harsh yet effective tactic. The realization of the brutal nature of the hunt made me grimace in sympathy. I clenched my fist against my chest, observing that the other two deer had deserted their injured companion without so much as a second thought.

“Seems we’ll only bag one today,” Prince Edward muttered, more to himself than me. “Well, I knew that.” He released another arrow, this time striking the deer’s hind leg, further impeding its escape.

I winced at the sight. This was the essence of hunting, the unvarnished truth of what it meant to take a life. I had never contemplated it so deeply before, but it struck me now as a stark and unforgiving reality. This was the fate of all creatures that ended up on our dining table, a thought I had never so directly confronted.

The deer, incapacitated by two arrows, collapsed to the ground. “Here, Carolina, hold this,” Prince Edward said, handing me the hefty bow. Muttering a word of acknowledgment as my hand closed around the smooth wood, I watched as he advanced towards the fallen deer, unsheathing the longsword that hung at his hip.

The deer twitched helplessly on the ground as Prince Edward, without hesitation, brought his weapon down on the animal’s neck. I instinctively recoiled, sinking low, my free hand flying to my mouth to stifle the rising wave of nausea. The image of the deer’s headless form and the blood spraying in the air was one I would not soon forget.

“Deer, we thank you for your life, given for our nourishment. Your blood and flesh shall be our flesh and blood. May we honor your sacrifice and be grateful for the bounty of the Lord.” In stark contrast to my horror, Prince Edward was ever so composed, the prayer of gratitude flowing easily from his lips. He crouched down next to the animal, crossing himself in grave solemnity.

That was my prince. A man who never failed to express his gratitude and

remorse, even in the act of taking the life of an animal.



The remainder of the hunt passed without further incident, and we returned to the villa with our prize. We handed the carcass to the head chef, who skillfully transformed it into a sumptuous full-course dinner. My appetite placated (to perhaps an unhealthy degree), I welcomed the deep sleep that followed.

The next morning greeted me with brisk weather and a light, vegetable-focused breakfast, a choice I found myself silently appreciating. After last night's feast, the thought of additional venison was more than I could stomach.

It wasn't that I had disliked the venison; rather, the vivid memory of the deer's lifeless form had lingered in my mind all through the evening, overshadowing my ability to enjoy the meal. I'd managed to swallow the food, but the lingering nausea made the assuredly exquisite taste difficult to recall.

A moratorium on venison in the foreseeable future, then, I secretly pledged as I carried another spoonful of delightfully light and flavorful vegetable soup to my lips.

"Carolina, what would you like to do today?" Prince Edward's pleasant baritone cut into my thoughts. "If you had nothing particular on your mind, perhaps another hunting trip—"

I nearly choked. "Shopping! Let's go shopping! As much as I enjoyed yesterday, we should give ourselves a break!" I blurted out. The thought of repeating yesterday's experience was more than I could bear. *The sight of the headless deer is not something I am so eager to reexperience!*

"Shopping, eh?" Prince Edward hummed. "This area *is* a hub for foreign trade. Is it the exquisite ceramics and unique accessories you're after?"

Not really, but I jumped on the suggestion, forcing a wide, enthusiastic smile. "Yes. Yes, indeed!"

The truth was, I'd had no idea about this town being any sort of hub for foreign trade; I'd simply spat out the first thing that had come to mind to avoid another day of hunting. Fortunately, it seemed that my impromptu idea had

been well-received.

After breakfast, I returned to my room to prepare myself for the outing ahead. With Marisa's assistance I was soon fully dressed, and Prince Edward and I (accompanied by a few guards) set off to explore the town. Our presence did not go unnoticed; the townspeople's whispers and sidelong glances trailed us wherever we went.

"Who are they with that entourage?"

"I dunno. But they don't look nothing like us, I can tell you that much."

"Don't they seem like proper important people to you?"

"Best stay out of their way, then. Any trouble with them is trouble we can't afford."

Prince Edward leaned in, his voice low. "We seem to be quite the spectacle, do we not?"

"Dressed this time around in our usual attire, I expected we might be," I whispered back.

"Let's find a shop to visit. It might help to disperse some of this crowd."

"This strikes me as an excellent plan," I replied, looking around. "How about there?" I pointed at a charming storefront adorned with the sign "World Jewelry." This was a mercantile establishment known for their exquisite jewels. They even had a flagship store in the capital, which made it a fitting choice for a pair of royals to patronize. In addition, the shop was well-appointed with private rooms in which we could escape the public eye and browse at our leisure.

Prince Edward gave a nod of approval and led the way to the jeweler, unperturbed by the lingering stares. The townsfolk, while visibly curious, kept their distance, wary of getting too close. Their cautious demeanor was understandable—no one wanted to earn the ire of potentially influential figures. As we approached World Jewelry, I gave the rubbernecking onlookers a final shrug of my shoulders, focusing on the elegant facade before us.

"Ready?" Prince Edward said, one hand on the doorknob. I nodded my head,

and with the soft tinkle of a bell to announce our entry, the door swung open. Instantly, two clerks turned to us, but before they could greet us, Prince Edward spoke first. "Call the proprietor of this establishment."

Their expressions shifted as recognition dawned. "Hair of crimson, eyes of gold..." one murmured under their breath.

"And eyes of crimson, hair of ash..." the other added, almost in awe.

"It's Their Imperial Highnesses!" they said together, realization striking them.

With our identities now clear, they sprang into action. One clerk quickly darted towards the back of the store, while the other approached us with a respectful bow. "My sincerest apologies, Your Imperial Highnesses. Please, this way, to your private viewing room!"

Their brisk professionalism shone through their initial surprise. We were escorted to a secluded area near the back of the store, where the other clerk ushered us into a room furnished with plush sofas. We settled in to wait for the proprietor.

"Well, they certainly caught on faster than the townsfolk," Prince Edward remarked.

"It is not as if we were hiding it," I replied. "Perhaps they were briefed about us beforehand. Not at all unusual for a high-end boutique to be informed about notable potential guests."

Besides that, our appearances were unmistakable. The combination of Prince Edward's crimson hair and golden eyes, alongside my ashen and crimson, was a distinctive one to say the least.

"You're probably right. I suppose I just didn't expect *your* details to be circulated so widely already. Word does travel fast," he mused, his voice dropping to a murmur. "'World Jewelry' indeed."

A knock at the door interrupted our thoughts. Prince Edward signaled for them to enter, and a middle-aged man with a neatly trimmed pencil mustache stepped in. "My sincerest apologies for the wait. Prince Edward, Princess Carolina, it is my absolute pleasure to welcome Your Imperial Highnesses to our humble establishment," he said with a warm smile, his words laden with

flattery.

Well, it would be rude to come in, stir up all this trouble and not buy anything, I thought. “Could you show us three of your finest stones?” I asked.

“Absolutely, Your Imperial Highness,” he replied, his mood visibly lifted. With a buoyant hum, he turned and departed. As his footsteps echoed down the hall, I smiled wryly. No doubt he would return with three of his most prized—and most expensive—options. To a merchant, there were no words sweeter than “your finest.”

He was back in less than ten minutes, bearing a tray. “Presenting three of our finest gems, humbly awaiting the honor of your esteemed consideration.” He set the tray down before us. Displayed upon it were the gems he would have us take off his hands: a padparadscha sapphire, tanzanite, and paraiba tourmaline. Each stone shone with a captivating radiance, a beauty universally acknowledged. Yet for me, one stood out in particular loathsomeness.

“The same color as my sister’s eyes...” I found myself saying. My eyes were fixated on the stone that mirrored my sister’s. Her figure vividly invaded my imagination, and my gaze narrowed in visible disgust, as if she were taunting me through the very facets of the stone itself.

“We’ll take the tanzanite and the tourmaline,” I told the proprietor firmly.

“That would be my choice as well,” he said cheerfully. “Would Your Imperial Highnesses prefer to acquire these gems in their current splendor, or might there be a wish for further enhancement? A beautiful setting, designed to set off the stones in all their splendor? For a modest fee, we are privileged to offer the artistry of our distinguished craftsman.”

“Thank you, but we must decline. We’re due to return to the capital tomorrow,” I responded.

“Ah, then forget I said anything. I’ll have these prepared immediately.”

“Please.”

Dipping his head in respect a few more times, the proprietor grabbed the tray and exited the room once again. As the door closed behind him, I exhaled deeply, feeling unexpectedly drained. Was it the mere act of viewing

gemstones, or was it the unintended reminder of my sister that weighed so heavily on me?

Resting a hand over my heart, I sought to still the inner turmoil. The shadow of my sister still loomed over me. I wondered, if I confronted her as Marisa had done with her own sister, would it change anything at all?



With our two newly acquired treasures in possession, we left World Jewelry and continued on our merry way...for only a little while longer. The hubbub we had stirred among the townsfolk had ameliorated little during our jewelry-based sojourn, and so we opted for an early return to our lodgings.

On the villa's terrace, Prince Edward and I enjoyed an elegant tea service as a welcome respite from the morning's bustle. The sky was overcast, creating a contemplative atmosphere that encouraged me to reflect on recent events. The morning market, Lady Marielle, Marisa and Lord Theodore, hunting, the magical examination, the high pontiff, Divinity, and shopping—the more I thought about it, the less of a relaxing vacation it seemed. I'd experienced more surprises and novel experiences in the past week than I'd ever expected to encounter over the course of my entire life. Yet since this was the appointed day that marked the end of our stay, I found myself surprisingly reluctant to leave. There would be no last-minute explorations tomorrow, just a simple routine: wake up, pack, and depart. It all seemed to be concluding far too swiftly.

Well, a leisurely tea time with my husband isn't the worst way to round things off, I thought to myself. It wasn't an extraordinary event, but it was a peaceful one. I let myself enjoy the moment, in no hurry to polish off this delightful cup of black tea. Prince Edward, however, sitting across from me, seemed to have something different in mind rather than ending the week on this relaxed and balmy note. He stared at me intently, then broke the silence with an unexpected question. "Do you hate your sister, Carolina?"

This prying, impertinent question came with so little warning that I nearly choked on my tea. Coughing and sputtering, I asked, "Wh-What made you think of that?"

"Nothing. You seemed unlike yourself, so I thought I'd ask."

“But what gave you the impression that my low spirits were in any way related to my sister?”

“You muttered ‘the same color as my sister’s eyes’ while examining the sapphire at the jeweler’s,” he explained. “It was also the only stone you chose not to buy.”

I opened my mouth to protest, but the words wouldn’t come. Everything he’d said had been uncomfortable in the depth of its accuracy. Yet, despite my momentary speechlessness, I felt a surge of warmth.

Prince Edward—he’d been paying me enough attention to notice.

“To be honest, I’ve been curious about your relationship with your sister for some time,” my husband confessed. “You often speak of your father with great affection, but you rarely mention your sister at all. And when you do, it’s always something superficial, never something intimate that only a sister would know.”

“Well, that’s because...” I trailed off, uncertain of how to explain.

“At first, I thought it might be a feeling of inferiority that influenced your behavior, but after today, I don’t believe that’s the case. You hate her, don’t you?”

A strained grunt was the only sound to escape my lips.

Unfair. How utterly unfair of you, Your Highness. Usually you’re so charmingly oblivious, but this is the one time you choose to display such keen insight!

I stuck to my silence, with neither the courage to open my heart nor to lie.

“Can I take your silence to be an answer in itself?” he pressed, gently but firmly.

His perceptive observations left little room for denial or misinterpretation. Weakly, I nodded. This would be the last time I underestimated his observant eye.

Yet, he didn’t react at all, only continuing to stare at me, his gaze steady and sincere. “Carolina, I can’t think you to be the sort of person to hate someone without just cause. Even less so, when that person is your own sister. Are your reasons something you’d be willing to share with me?”

Unable to stand his earnest gaze any longer, I averted my eyes, letting them fall to the floor. “And what would you do with such information?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“I wouldn’t do anything,” he replied. “I couldn’t, not when she isn’t a subject of my own.”

“Then why would I...!” Frustrated and conflicted, I looked up sharply, ready to challenge him, but his eyes—so gentle and understanding—melted my resolve. My words dissipated into a defeated silence.

“I only wish to know you, Carolina. All of you.”

In that moment, his eyes mirrored only my reflection, as if nothing else in the world mattered.

“I want to know of the life you lived, the experiences that shaped you,” he insisted with a deep sincerity. “I’m curious about how you view the world and why you respond to it the way you do. I want to understand...why you harbor such feelings towards your sister.”

He stood up from his seat, the chair scraping against the tile. He approached me, as if attracted by some invisible force, and stood right before me. His gaze bore relentlessly down upon me, his imposing figure towering over mine.

“I seek to know you, so I can understand you—more deeply than anyone else.”

Then, he knelt before me. Looking up, he gently took my hands in his. His touch was so warm, so comforting.

“So please, Carolina, tell me about you—all of you.”

His words were not an order, not a command, but a plea. A plea so earnest, so precious, it shook the foundations of my very soul. Had there ever been anyone who’d sought to know me so deeply, to look at me with such sincere interest, to hold me with such kindness?

No, of course not, for therein lay the unique depth of Prince Edward’s appeal. My heart swelled, my fingers entwined his, and I let flow the emotions that had long coiled themselves in deepest secrecy around my heart. “I... I hate Flora. I

despise her with every fiber of my being.” My confession emerged as a strangled whisper, a tenuous thread of sound.

At my feet, there was a silent nod, an unspoken understanding in the eyes that bore into my own.

“She paraded herself around as the doting older sister, yet in private, it was she who was my harshest and cruelest critic. The ‘Sanchez family disgrace’; the ‘stain on the tapestry of our family tree’; these were just some of the insults she would use to disparage me!”

With each word, his expression grew more empathetic, yet he remained quiet, allowing me to speak.

“Can you fathom the torment, the sheer ignominy of being publicly championed by the very person who reviles you in private? And then, the patronizing compliments—‘this was Carolina’s best,’ or ‘we can’t fault her for trying, can we?’ Always with that backhanded, insidious praise!”

Another nod, a gentle encouragement to continue, to release the long-suppressed feelings that had been gnawing at me.

“I loathe, loathe, *loathe* her, more than anything in this world! She, who used me like a tool, a mere stepping stone on the path to her own ambitions. She, who would not, could not, leave me to a moment’s peace!”

As I expelled the darkest of my inner thoughts, Prince Edward did not interrupt me. He only listened silently, attentively.

When was the last time I’d so loudly proclaimed my resentment for any one person? A silly question, as I knew this to be the first time in my life. I’d always trodden so carefully, so fearfully. It only took one misstep to seal one’s fate as a pariah in high society. It was perhaps for this exact reason that being listened to for who I truly was felt so liberating, so incredibly freeing.

Finally, Prince Edward spoke. “You’ve endured much and come so far.” His eyes, filled with kindness and sympathy, met mine, full to brimming with tears. From his kneeling position, he straightened his back, instantly closing the distance between us. “Thank you, Carolina. Thank you for walking that harsh path into my arms to become my wife. But that’s it. It’s over now. That burden

isn't yours to shoulder any longer. I swear this oath to you, Carolina: from this moment onwards, you shall never be alone. I shall stand as your shield, so please, you needn't hold it back any longer."

He squeezed my hands ever so gently.

"It's okay," he said softly. "You can let it all out."

With that tender assurance, I broke down. The dam of emotions I had held back for so long burst forth, tears flowing uncontrollably. In a reflex to defend my vulnerability, I pulled my hands away from his and covered my face, overwhelmed by the intensity of my own release.

I had never been strong. I'd always wanted nothing more than to have someone to protect me, to shield me, someone who would whisper to me, "It's all right," and allow me to let down my guard, to be vulnerable without consequence. A part of me had almost given up hope, resigned to the belief that such a person would never come into my life.

But now, overcome with an intense feeling of happiness, I realized that the person I had longed for was finally here—he'd been here all along. My body sagged into a cathartic release of the tension I'd barely known suffused my body, a lifetime of it, and I surrendered to the tears, crying with a freedom I hadn't previously experienced. Prince Edward caught me, pulling me into a heartfelt embrace.



“I only wish...I could have met you sooner, Your Highness,” I managed between sobs.

“And I you, Carolina. And I you.”

Our words hung in the air, a single step short of a confession of love, yet one that was far beyond words of mere comfort. It felt as though we were deliberately holding back from voicing those three pivotal words, choosing instead to savor the delicate, undefined nature of our relationship for just a little longer.

On this occasion, I chose to blame my reluctance to give a perspicuous voice to my feelings on the abundance of my tears.



After such an emotionally draining day, I succumbed to a restful sleep and awoke refreshed the next morning. Following a quick breakfast, the five of us who had traveled here via Lord Theodore’s teleportation magic returned to the royal capital in the selfsame manner. Once home, I had barely settled back into my chambers in the Emerald Palace when I was abruptly summoned to the royal castle to meet with the emperor and empress, with Prince Edward and Lord Theodore at my side.

I hadn’t expected much of anything to happen so soon after our return, much less a direct audience with Their Majesties. In “Meeting Room Three,” Prince Edward and I sat on one of a set of opposing sofas, Lord Theodore standing behind us, facing a relaxed pair of monarchs enthroned upon the other couch. This was hardly a gathering of the usual suspects, so their presence in this context piqued my curiosity. *If they wished to be debriefed on our summer retreat, wouldn’t a written report have sufficed? I can hardly understand the need to have this meeting in person,* I mused as Lord Theodore interrupted the silence with a pointed clear of his throat.

“We are somewhat ahead of schedule, but I’d like to get started, if you would be so gracious,” he announced with perfect decorum. “I, Theodore Garcia, shall preside over this assembly in the capacity of chairman. I extend my thanks to Your Majesties and Your Highnesses for gracing this meeting with your esteemed presence.”

With a graceful bow from Lord Theodore and a nod from Their Majesties, the meeting officially began. “As we have all surely surmised, the matter at hand concerns Princess Carolina’s newly discovered ‘Divinity,’” Lord Theodore explained.

I had to bite back the impulse to clap a hand over my forehead at my foolishness. How could I have forgotten? Of course, the revelation of my Divinity would be of great interest to Their Majesties, especially seeing as the magnitude of my power was evidently such that it could potentially impact the trajectory of the empire as a whole.

As I grappled with private embarrassment at my oversight, Lord Theodore continued, adjusting his glasses thoughtfully. “In my preliminary correspondence with Their Majesties, I outlined only the basics. Today’s discussion will thus delve deeper into the implications of this discovery and its potential effects on the empire. To start, regarding Her Highness Carolina’s Divinity, His Holiness has confirmed that Her Highness possesses not only powerful energies but additionally does so in an extraordinary measure. Regarding this matter...”

Lord Theodore launched at once into a comprehensive explanation of everything we had learned about my Divinity. Throughout his detailed account, Their Majesties listened with unwavering attention. Their expressions gave away little, leaving me to wonder what thoughts and concerns might be brewing behind the composed facades of their faces. When Lord Theodore concluded his briefing, the emperor was the first to respond. “I see. So Carolina has been the force behind the recent phenomenon in our empire.”

The empress echoed his sentiment. “The timeline certainly supports that theory. His Holiness’s confirmation only strengthens it.”

There was a brief pause as both the emperor and empress seemed to reflect upon this revelation. After a moment, they turned to each other, a shared spark of understanding leaping between them. “Oh, darling,” they said in unison, their voices harmonizing perfectly. “Isn’t our daughter just extraordinary?”

My eyes widened with surprise as I glanced at Prince Edward. He sat beside me, nodding in quiet agreement with his parents’ assessment. As their proud

reactions washed over me, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. It seemed I'd been more terrified than I'd realized of the idea that they might reject my power as an unwanted nuisance.

"Our dear daughter, endowed with Divinity! My pride knows no bounds, Vanessa," the emperor continued with a warm smile.

"Though, of course, we would be proud of her regardless of her powers, wouldn't we, darling?" the empress added thoughtfully.

"She deserves recognition for her contributions, even if they were inadvertent. Her positive effect upon the empire has been significant," the emperor mused.

"Indeed, but an ordinary reward wouldn't suffice, for Carolina's divine energies shall flow unceasingly."

"In that case, perhaps we could confer onto her a unique title?"

A... A new title, bestowed only upon me? I could hardly think of something I could possibly deserve less! Especially since I've been unconscious of my efforts this whole time!

Overwhelmed by the idea, I could hardly pay attention to Their Majesties' conversation as they talked about this reward or that. I had half a mind to interject and stop them before they got too carried away, but the words wouldn't come. Fortunately, Lord Theodore was a far more assertive person than I. He cleared his throat emphatically, redirecting the conversation. "Your Majesties, I hate to disrupt your *spirited* debate, but we have more matters to discuss."

The emperor, momentarily caught off guard, quickly refocused his attention. "Ah, yes, of course. My apologies. Please continue."

The empress echoed his apology. "Go ahead, Theodore. We'll discuss this later on our own time."

"Thank you, Your Majesties." Bowing again with his hand over his heart, Lord Theodore carried on with his agenda. "Now that we are all well acquainted with the breadth of Princess Carolina's power, we must next discuss our plans for disclosure. In my humble opinion, I believe it prudent to align the public

announcement with the granting of the new title that Your Majesties have just so eagerly discussed.”

The emperor hummed in thought. “That certainly would establish her standing and prevent any undesirable parties from entertaining any misguided notions.”

“You mustn’t forget she’s a foreigner,” the empress added. “She’s fighting an uphill battle and needs all the help she can get. While I concur with Teodore’s suggestion, we still need to determine the most opportune moment for the announcement.” She pondered the matter, her hand resting thoughtfully on her chin.

In the meeting room, a sense of uncertainty seemed to hover over all of us as we grappled with the intricacies of the situation. It was Lord Teodore who broke the silence. “The announcement of Princess Carolina’s Divinity should ideally come after the resolution of the events in Celestia. Announcing it any time before would only serve to reignite tensions between our nations.”

The emperor replied first. “I agree with the intent, but...”

“...how are we to keep her powers concealed until such a time?” finished the empress.

The crux of the issue lay there. Personally, I doubted our ability to keep my powers a secret for much longer. The evidence was already accessible for those who wished to seek it, and unless we actively falsified public records, the truth seemed bound to emerge at some point.

“Given the circumstantial nature of the evidence, I believe we can get by sticking to the tried-and-true methods of obfuscation and misdirection,” Lord Teodore suggested, then quickly amended: “Until more concrete proof presents itself, that is.”

“I suppose you’re right,” the emperor replied. “And should anyone still seek to press the issue, we can always invoke charges of lèse-majesté to silence them.”

The empress then turned her attention to the prince. “Edward, it falls upon you to safeguard Carolina.”

“Of course,” he responded with a decisive nod. “Carolina is precious to me. I will protect her with everything I have.”

The impassive mother and son duo exchanged glances and nodded at one another, and although their expressions were unreadable, I nevertheless had the impression that they were sharing a deeper—perhaps even tender—moment.

The meeting appeared to be drawing to a close, and Lord Theodore looked around the room. “I believe we’ve covered all of the necessary points for now. We’ll monitor the situation in Celestia closely. Do any present have final questions or concerns to share?”

I hesitated momentarily before raising my hand. “Um, if I may.”

“Yes, Your Highness, what is it?” Lord Theodore responded, turning his attention to me.

Feeling the weight of the collective gaze of everyone in the room, I gathered my courage to say, “Could my power...not be used to help Prince Gilbert with his illness?”

The room fell into a stunned silence, the expressions of everyone present twisting into a mix of surprise and contemplation.

Surely I couldn’t have been the only one to consider this?

I knew that Prince Gilbert had previously received some relief from his symptoms through a “blessing” from His Holiness, a blessing that we now knew to be rooted in Divinity. Although His Holiness couldn’t cure Prince Gilbert completely, he had managed to alleviate the symptoms enough for him to make the occasional public appearance. His Holiness, however, did not have the time to attend to Prince Gilbert regularly—but I did. My reasoning was that with regular treatment, even if I wasn’t as skilled, we might improve Prince Gilbert’s condition significantly. And perhaps, with enough care, a full recovery might even be possible. Such an outcome could potentially resolve the ongoing factional strife, as Prince Gilbert’s illness was at the heart of the conflict. Addressing his condition might inspire peace among his supporters while at the same time quelling the activities of extremists. This might at last offer a resolution beneficial to all.

But even as I entertained these fanciful notions in my head, I was forced to admit that I was overlooking a most critical flaw in this plan—I had no idea how to control this immense power within me.

Chapter Four

A week after the meeting with Their Majesties, I found myself deep in the throes of training under Lord Teodore's tutelage in the Pyreborn headquarters.

"Concentrate. Feel your energy, let it gather in the palms of your hands, and then transfer it into the cactus," he instructed, referencing documents sent by His Holiness.

As my guide in the ways of spellcasting, Lord Teodore patiently explained the process of manipulating divine energy. He'd assured me that the process was very similar to harnessing arcane energy, but since I was someone who had experience in neither, his words of reassurance fell somewhat flat. I squeaked out a timid acquiescence and outstretched my palms for the umpteenth time, trying to focus the energy that was supposedly going to pour out from me and into them. I hadn't been any closer to accomplishing this goal in my last attempt than I had been in my first, and frankly, the frustration was getting to me. The deciphering of ancient languages seemed a more appealing challenge at this point.

In the past week, I had managed to learn to sense the energy around me, but controlling it was another matter entirely. I wondered just how true a maxim it was that divine energy reacted to the bearer's emotional state, because it certainly wasn't responding to my strong desire to have it gather in my hands! It was a task so nebulous and abstract that I could only liken it to trying to concentrate perfume that had already been sprayed back into its bottle.

With a furrowed brow and an audible groan, I strained to summon even the smallest measure of divine power into my hands. Lord Teodore, meanwhile, seemed more engrossed in his paperwork than my struggles. "Lord Teodore, I can't seem to gather more than a tiny amount of divine energy," I admitted—only a little petulantly—hoping for a reprieve.

Lord Teodore looked up from his work and flashed me another one of his terrifying smiles. "Remember for whom you are doing this, Your Highness. This

training is crucial for resolving Prince Gilbert's— I mean, to spare Prince Edward from this conflict. Please, persevere."

Biting back a slight resentment for his underhanded appeal, I nodded in silent agreement. I was three hours into today's training without a single break; I wasn't sure how much longer my focus would last. This was not to say that I disagreed with Lord Theodore's sentiment. In fact, I rather saw eye to eye with him—there was now a swift and clear resolution to the Malcosian factional strife, and it lay squarely on my shoulders. I would work tirelessly for Prince Edward's sake...but I still felt I deserved a chance to grumble about it every now and then.

Exhausted, I let out a sigh. "If only conventional healing magic would work on Prince Gilbert," I muttered under my breath.

"What was that, Your Highness?"

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all," I squeaked. *Just how sharp are his ears?* I flashed a forced smile in response to his calculated one and returned to my thankless task. *Better shut up before my big mouth earns me additional homework.*

Lord Theodore leaned back in his chair, his expression contemplative. "It's not as if I don't sympathize with Your Highness. I, too, find myself fervently wishing that you could heal Prince Gilbert in a more straightforward manner, but alas, reality is rarely so convenient. If a direct infusion of divine energy alone is the key to His Highness's salvation, then it is to that end we must endeavor."

This "direct infusion of divine energy" of which Lord Theodore spoke was a method of treatment developed by His Holiness as the most effective way of bringing relief to the prince. It was a method that temporarily alleviated Prince Gilbert's symptoms by saturating his optic nerves with divine energy. Because the divine energy dissipated with time, this form of treatment necessitated frequent rounds of infusion, a level of care His Holiness had not been equipped to provide. And while His Holiness had never been able to fully cure Prince Gilbert, he had hinted that it might not be beyond my reach, given my near-constant availability to the prince and the sheer scale of my power. The primary stumbling block was the advanced stage of Prince Gilbert's illness; every second lost reduced the chances of recovery. Of course, that was the most pressing

reason Lord Theodore was pushing me to such lengths.

“I sometimes feel that the prodigious volume of Divinity within me is more of a hindrance than a help,” I mused aloud.

“I should think you would, Your Highness, given the extraordinary amount of energy that ‘overflows’ from you continuously,” Lord Theodore agreed.

“That’s just it. I’m not so much trying to summon energy as I am trying to harness what’s already there, radiating from me,” I explained.

“An exceedingly difficult feat, if I may say so. Though arcane and divine energies differ quite dramatically, I believe I’m in a rather unique position to sympathize with you.”

A rather unprecedented acknowledgment of the difficulty of my task from Lord Theodore. It made me wonder if what I was attempting was indeed entirely as challenging as it felt.

“I’m not seeing enough movement, Your Highness.”

Lord Theodore’s warning snapped me out of my thoughts. I murmured an apology and again held out my hands. Concentrating intently, I could feel the wisps of energy slowly start to coil in my outstretched palms, until finally, I sensed that I had gathered enough to fill both palms. “Lord Theodore, I did it, I did it!”

He glanced up, a hint of surprise in his eyes. “Already? That’s quicker than you managed yesterday. Now, please infuse the cactus with your energy.”

Following his instructions, I held my hands above the baby cactus on the table and directed the energy into it. The tiny nub of a plant grew slightly larger in an instant, and it even sprouted buds. A strange sense of pride washed over me as I looked at its verdant growth. This little cactus was just an unwitting companion on my journey, but I found myself growing rather attached. *Perhaps I’ll put it in my chambers if it continues to thrive.*

“Comparable growth to yesterday, but achieved more swiftly,” Lord Theodore observed. “Is Your Highness perhaps more motivated today?”

I shrugged off his question. “I’m not sure.”

“No matter. An improvement is still an improvement. Well done.” Standing up, Lord Teodore announced, “Let us conclude for now. We shall resume in the afternoon.”

“Thank you, Lord Teodore, for your guidance,” I said, standing as well.

He acknowledged my gratitude with a nod and then left the room. As the door closed behind him, I let out a deep breath and finally let my shoulders relax.



My afternoon session with Lord Teodore proceeded smoothly, and soon enough, it was over. After a satisfying dinner and a refreshing bath, I found myself quite prepared for sleep, nestled comfortably under warm covers. It had almost been a perfect comfortable evening routine, save for one detail—I wasn't in my own bed. Tonight, as part of our effort to maintain appearances, I was staying in Prince Edward's room. We intended nothing more than sleep, of course. Lying on my side, I stole a glance at the prince. He was absorbed in paperwork at his desk, the candlelight casting a soft glow on his face, the stark shadows accentuating the tiredness under his eyes. Lord Teodore had him on a tight leash postvacation, pushing him to work through the backlog that had built up.

Well, a week's worth of missed work will do that to you, I thought to myself wryly. *Especially when the retreat itself hadn't even been planned in the first place.* As I gazed at him in a moment of silent empathy, he glanced up, and our eyes suddenly met. I could see the image of my leisurely posture clearly reflected in his golden eyes.

“You were awake?” he asked softly.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to bother you, Your Highness,” I replied.

“No bother at all; it's simply that you need your rest. You've had a long day, haven't you?”

Not any longer than yours, I silently pointed out, but I was appreciative of his concern nonetheless. It was a concern, however, that I felt would be better spent on him right now. “I'm not sure I have the right to acknowledge the

length of my activities today when I'm the one already tucked in bed. You should rest soon; you look quite weary."

"I'm fine," he replied curtly. "I've got stamina, if nothing else."

"Your Highness..." I said with a hint of a pout. I was determined to be a little stubborn. No matter how resilient one might be, rest was essential to combat fatigue.

Prince Edward paused, then turned in his chair to face me. "All right. How about this? Keep me company for a bit. Your presence would make this work less tedious. Besides, I'd love to hear about how you're getting on. But don't worry, I won't keep you up all night."

"That doesn't exactly help you rest sooner, does it?" I pointed out.

"I suppose not. But I have until tomorrow to finish these documents and only this one night with you." His lips slipped into a tender smile. "Would you indulge me?"

Twist my arm, why don't you? His request, so gently spoken, was hard to refuse. If staying up a while longer could ease his workload, then perhaps it was my duty as his wife to support him. "All right, I'll keep you company. But the moment you finish, we're both off to sleep. Agreed?"

"Agreed," he said with a nod.

As he returned to his paperwork, I gathered my thoughts, my attention lingering upon his focused profile. "How I've been getting on... I suppose I should start with my lessons? Lord Theodore is an excellent teacher, but he doesn't let me rest until I've reached the day's goal. It's terribly draining, but perhaps the results speak for themselves. My proficiency is ever-increasing, but I do wish he could be a bit more lenient."

Prince Edward's lips curled into a half smile. "I can relate. Teo's been that way since we were kids."

"Really? He was your teacher as well? You didn't retain a royal tutor?"

"I did have a tutor at first, a brilliant scholar from the magical academy, but my father switched him for Teo midway through the process of my education. I

believe he said I was to learn from him and make a friend at the same time. After it became evident that Teo was far more skilled than my tutor, the man was dismissed.”

“That poor tutor...”

To rise through the ranks of the magical academy and secure a position with the royal family, only to be replaced by a mere child must have been a bitter pill to swallow... *Well, another line in Lord Teodore’s ledger of prodigal feats, I suppose.*

“Have you always gotten along with Lord Teodore? I heard that the two of you have been friends since childhood,” I asked.

“I wouldn’t say so. In fact, we clashed quite a bit at the start. I used to skip out on many of my lessons. All of them, in fact, save for the practicals. Teo often chased me all around the castle grounds to drag me back for lectures.”

Prince Edward’s eyes narrowed fondly as spoke about the past. For some reason, the story seemed familiar. Was it Owen that had once mentioned Prince Edward’s disdain for study and love for the sword?

“Gratuitous use of magic is frowned upon on the castle grounds, so he had to catch me using nothing but his own athleticism, such as it was. Needless to say, he did not think highly of me.”

“That is hard to imagine given your current camaraderie,” I observed. “Something must have happened to bring about this change?”

“There wasn’t any single thing...” He considered. “Perhaps the time we worked together to defeat a foreign assassin who had been sent to kill me? A bond forged in battle—you know how it is.”

I most certainly do not know how it is! Two children facing down an assassin, and successfully at that, was well beyond the realm of what I considered ordinary. “Male friendships certainly bloom in unexpected ways,” I remarked, still processing the gravity of this story and what seemed to have been a most thrilling childhood for my prince.

“Really?” He shrugged. “Seemed normal enough to me.”

No, it definitely is not normal for children to bond over life-threatening events!
I did not say this aloud, instead masking it over with a harmless smile.

“In any case, let me know if Teo’s pushing you too hard,” Prince Edward offered. “He’s a bit eager, let’s say, to finally put an end to the succession conflict. I had a feeling he might do something like this, but if it becomes overwhelming, please lean on me.”

“I most certainly will, Your Highness. That day may just come sooner than you think.”

“I’ll be ready whenever you need me,” he assured me with a decisive nod.

Finishing up his paperwork, Prince Edward scribbled a final note on the document he was reading and added it to the completed stack. He stretched broadly, releasing the tension of the long day. “That’s it for tonight,” he announced, a note of relief in his voice.

“You’ve done well today, Your Highness,” I commended him.

“Thanks, Carolina,” he replied, offering me a warm smile. Picking up the blanket nearby, he leaned towards the candle flickering on his desk. “I’m going to put out the candle now.”

“Good night, Your Highness,” I said softly.

“Good night, and sweet dreams,” he whispered back.

With the soft puff of his breath, the candlelight was extinguished, casting the room into darkness. Lying there in the quiet, I was struck by a sudden sense of loneliness. The realization that this would be one of our last nights together for a while lingered in my heart, making the darkness seem a little more profound than it otherwise might have been.



For three weeks, I dedicated myself to training, gradually improving my control over my divine power. As the height of summer approached, another day brought me to Meeting Room One for my tutelage with Lord Theodore. I entered and found him with his elbows on the table, hands clasped, exuding an air of seriousness. His eyes, gleaming deviously behind his spectacles, hinted at

a significant announcement. “Your Highness, allow me to be brief. Starting today, you are to commence treatment for Prince Gilbert.”

I could scarcely believe my ears. “Today?!” I blurted out. I managed to keep myself from giving voice to my next flustered thought. Instead, I stammered, “This is quite a lot to take in so suddenly, Lord Teodore...”

His gaze softened slightly. “As it was for me. You see, I myself just learned of this moments ago.” He let out a sigh, and his eyes seemed to drift off into the distance. Whatever it was, he was not happy about it. “This morning, I received a message from His Majesty. ‘Minister to Prince Gilbert, then have him teleported to the Kingdom of San,’ he wrote.” He let out another sigh. “Just what does he take me for, really,” he muttered under his breath.

Well, that certainly changes things, I thought as I looked upon Lord Teodore in sympathy. If it were a direct order from the emperor, then his hand was as forced as mine. While I would have appreciated more practice, there must’ve been a significant reason behind the emperor’s urgency. If showcasing Prince Gilbert’s improved condition to the public was his goal, then a high-profile event in a foreign kingdom would certainly be a way of achieving it. “His Majesty certainly has great expectations for Prince Gilbert’s recovery, doesn’t he?” I murmured.

Lord Teodore sighed, a rare note of frankness in his voice. “If only those great expectations didn’t translate directly to heavier burdens for you and me.”

Seeing his deflated posture behind the heaps of papers on his desk, I chose not to acknowledge the impropriety of his bluntness. More than likely, he was currently scrambling to get the coordinates ready for the teleport. I was well aware of his normal workload. To expect him to fit in a sudden request for a teleportation spell on top of all of his other tasks bordered on inhuman.

Perhaps being competent isn’t all it’s cut out to be...

“Fortunately, Your Highness’s control over your power has improved to the point where I think the procedure shall be a success,” Lord Teodore continued. “A gradual success, perhaps, but a success nonetheless.”

“I could only wish I shared in your optimism,” I murmured sheepishly, shrinking back into myself. My progress had been steady in the perception and

manipulation of divine energy, but the actual process of infusing it—the critical step of the treatment—remained as of yet untested. My previous exercises with the cactus had not been infusion of divine energy per se, but a mere sprinkling of it.

A direct infusion of power involved using my internal energies, a process that would (theoretically) transform the raw, unchecked energy that overflowed from me into a controlled, directed stream. It was a task fraught with risks, one during which a misstep could lead to the imperilment of my own health. To mitigate this risk, Lord Theodore and His Holiness had devised a strategy: I was to first reintroduce energy that had previously flowed from me back into my body. Only then would I use this reclaimed energy to attempt the crucial infusion. In theory, this method would shield me from any potentially negative repercussions. It was for this very purpose that I'd so intently focused on energy manipulation.

"I'm not sure where that confidence of yours comes from, Lord Theodore. I haven't successfully completed the uptake and infusion steps even once," I said, shaking my head in doubt.

Without looking up from his work, Lord Theodore responded, "On the contrary, Your Highness—why do you lack even the smallest amount of confidence in this regard? Need I remind you that you mastered energy manipulation in just one month? This is a feat not even His Holiness is able to claim."

With a flourish of his pen, he rounded out whatever he had been writing and looked up at me. "Uptake and infusion should be manageable challenges to one who has achieved so much in so little time. If you won't believe in yourself, Your Highness, then at least believe in me."

Then, he stood and crossed his hand over his chest in a gesture of solemn assurance. "I, Theodore Garcia, give you my word, Princess Carolina. You will succeed today. I am certain of it."

It was a rare display of sincerity, a proclamation free of any trace of irony from a man notorious for his sharp tongue. It wasn't the same sort of comforting reassurance of "it's okay to fail" that Prince Edward might offer, but a personal endorsement from Lord Theodore, the prodigy among prodigies, was

an authoritative recognition of my potential and capabilities. “If anyone can do it, it’s you,” seemed to be the message he was trying to convey.

Believe in his words, Carolina. Trust in them, and think of nothing else.

His confidence was infectious, igniting a spark of self-assurance within me. “Thanks, Lord Theodore. I think I can do this.”

“You think so, Your Highness. I know so,” Lord Theodore declared, his grin confident. “Now, let us make our way to the Diamond Palace. I’ll take you to the entrance to the grounds. From there, Collett will accompany you the rest of the way. Lord knows what might happen if I dare step into those sterile halls.”

I stood, ready to face the challenge ahead. “Understood. Lead the way, Lord Theodore.”

Evidently, the soiree that Prince Gilbert is to attend in San is scheduled to begin at eight. Even considering the instantaneous mode of transport, we’re on a tight schedule. The prince surely has his own preparations to make, so everything will have to be completed before nightfall!

Spurred on by that sense of duty, I followed Lord Theodore out of the meeting room.



As Lord Theodore and I approached the Diamond Palace, Collett was waiting to greet us. His friendly demeanor and enthusiastic salutation eased the knot in my stomach. The palace itself caught my attention immediately. It was generously adorned with sparkling windows, and an almost imperceptible dome of energy enveloped it. This must have been the mana-repellent barrier I’d heard so much about.

Lord Theodore addressed me with a respectful nod. “This is as far as I can take you, Your Highness. Collett will escort you from here. Please heed his guidance for your safety.”

“Of course. Thank you for taking me all this way, Lord Theodore,” I replied.

He appeared a little dejected at my words, shoulders drooping slightly. “I only wish I could accompany you further, but...”

I shook my head. “I understand the restrictions regarding magical individuals in the Diamond Palace. You’ve done everything you could to support me, and for that, I’m grateful.”

His expression lightened somewhat at my words. “You honor me, Your Highness,” he said, smiling gently. “Now, off you go. His Highness is expecting you.”

“Farewell, Lord Theodore.”

“Take care, Your Highness.”

Returning his bow with a slight nod, I left his side and joined Collett, stepping into the Diamond Palace proper. As we strolled down its grand halls, I noticed the curious glances from the attendants. They weren’t disrespectful by any means, but it was clear that our presence registered an anomaly. *I suppose a visitation by the wife of the second prince in the first prince’s domain is bound to raise a few eyebrows.*

That being said, it wasn’t the glances themselves that bothered me, but the sheer quantity of them. There seemed to be far more staff here than in my own Emerald Palace, or even in Prince Edward’s Garnet Palace for that matter. The palaces all seemed comparable in size, so I wondered if there was any special reason for this. “Is it just me, or are there more staff assigned here than is strictly usual?” I whispered to Collett as we passed another group.

“There is! And that’s because all personnel here are nonmagical!” Collett explained. “Magic is a force multiplier, you see, so given the restrictions placed on the Diamond Palace, more attendants are needed to maintain the same level of service.”

“I see...” I muttered with as much indifference I could muster. I had not been aware that most palace attendants used magic in their work, and I was a little too embarrassed to admit my ignorance. Then again, how could I have known, when most of their work was performed out of my line of sight?

Collett abruptly came to a halt in front of a door. “Ah, here we are; Prince Gilbert’s room.” Embedded in the surface of the portal were diamonds, in much the same manner as the emerald-studded one in my own residence. *Truly, the coffers of the imperial family know no bounds...*

“Thank you, Collett. Would you kindly wait outside for me”—I paused and then corrected myself—“is what I would like to say, but perhaps in this situation, it would be better if you joined me inside?”

“Indeed, Your Highness! Lord Teodore specifically instructed me to accompany you inside so that no untoward rumors could possibly be spread!” Collett said with a crisp salute and a toothy smile.

“Oh, very good,” I replied, a little surprised, but mostly relieved by this arrangement. Approaching the door, I knocked three times, feeling a surge of nerves.

“Enter,” came the muffled and somewhat familiar voice from within.

Excusing myself, I pushed open the ornate doors and stepped inside. The room was filled with books and papers in a state of disarray that reminded me of Lord Teodore’s office. Prince Gilbert, with his striking golden eyes and pastel-blue hair, sat serenely amid the clutter. He appeared as poised and composed (not to mention beautiful) as he had been at the Fete, a sight that eased my concerns about his current state of health.

Realizing I had been lost in observation, I quickly curtsied and greeted him. “Prince Gilbert, it’s been some time. How have you been?”

“Very well, thank you,” he replied. “It has indeed been a long while, hasn’t it? Since the Fete if I’m not mistaken. How have you found life now that you are espoused to my dear brother?”

“Prince Edward has been nothing but kind. Every day with him is a joy,” I replied, somewhat perfunctorily.

“You don’t say,” he replied with a lighthearted chuckle. “Well, that’s good to hear.”

After exchanging the initial pleasantries, I released the fabric of my skirt and hesitantly met his gaze. His features were adorned with the most benign smile, making him as difficult to read as his younger brother, just in the completely opposite manner. I couldn’t discern his true thoughts, but he appeared to be friendly, though perhaps a bit indifferent towards my presence.

“I believe you’re already aware of the reason for my visit, Your Highness,” I

began, gently steering the conversation towards the purpose of my presence. “Would it be all right if we started immediately?”

“Please, by all means,” he replied with grace. “I’m sure you’re as busy a person as I. What would you have me do?”

“For now, nothing. I need a moment to prepare. But as part of the procedure, I will need to hold your hand, so if you would kindly be aware of that, or prepare yourself if necessary.”

He responded with an impish little giggle, “Oh, dear heavens, physical contact! I shall brace myself for the ordeal.” But then, catching himself, he added more seriously, “And please. Should you need anything in this room, feel free. I wouldn’t want you asking permission for every little thing.”

“Thank you. That will be helpful,” I acknowledged.

Flashing me one final smile, he took up the book he had lying nearby. “All right. Well, I’ll be here reading until you’re ready for me.” He then reimmersed himself in the words before him without so much as a second thought. *His attention flits about like a capricious young butterfly, doesn’t it?*

Our conversation had been nothing but cordial and functional, yet I already felt unexpectedly drained. Perhaps it was the effort of trying to read his unforthcoming smile? I was always on my guard when interacting with someone I couldn’t read, a bad habit of mine from which I wished I could extricate myself.

To steady my nerves, I placed my hands on my chest and took several deep breaths. Calming my racing heart, I focused inwardly, reminding myself of the task at hand. *You’re all right, Carolina*, I reassured myself. *You can feel it, can’t you? That overwhelming sensation, the torrential flow of power—that is you. That is all part of who you are.*

Whispering to myself, I confirmed, “Perception of divine energy, check. Now, onto manipulation.”

Keeping the sensation that I had worked so hard to recognize vivid in my mind, I focused on bending even a minute fraction of my power to my will. His Holiness had advised that a modest quantity (he’d enjoined me to visualize

about half a cup's worth of divine energy) would suffice for Prince Gilbert. The potency of my power was so great that any more might prove harmful.

I entered a state akin to a deep meditation, gradually amassing the energy within my palms. Soon enough, I felt that I had the necessary amount. So far, so good. But this had been the extent to which I'd practiced. The next step was the reabsorption of this energy. Here, I called out for Prince Gilbert's assistance. "Your Highness, I wonder if you would kindly come closer? I would move myself, but I'm a bit preoccupied."

It flew in the face of every form of etiquette I knew to make demands of a sovereign prince, but the delicate balance of this situation left no room for such niceties. I couldn't risk losing the energy I had so painstakingly gathered.

Thankfully, Prince Gilbert seemed more than willing to accommodate. "Not a problem. Where do you need me? Right in front of you?"

"Yes, if Your Highness wouldn't mind."

"Of course."

Negotiations were short and sweet. Prince Gilbert closed his book with a snap and stood up. I'd expected a bit more regal pride at being ordered around by a noble, but I...supposed that I was royalty now too.

He walked up to stand directly in front of me. "How's this? Or shall I get even closer?"

"That is perfect, Your Highness. Your cooperation is most appreciated."

He chuckled. "My cooperation. You're a funny one, aren't you? As if all of this was a favor I was doing for you and not entirely the other way around."

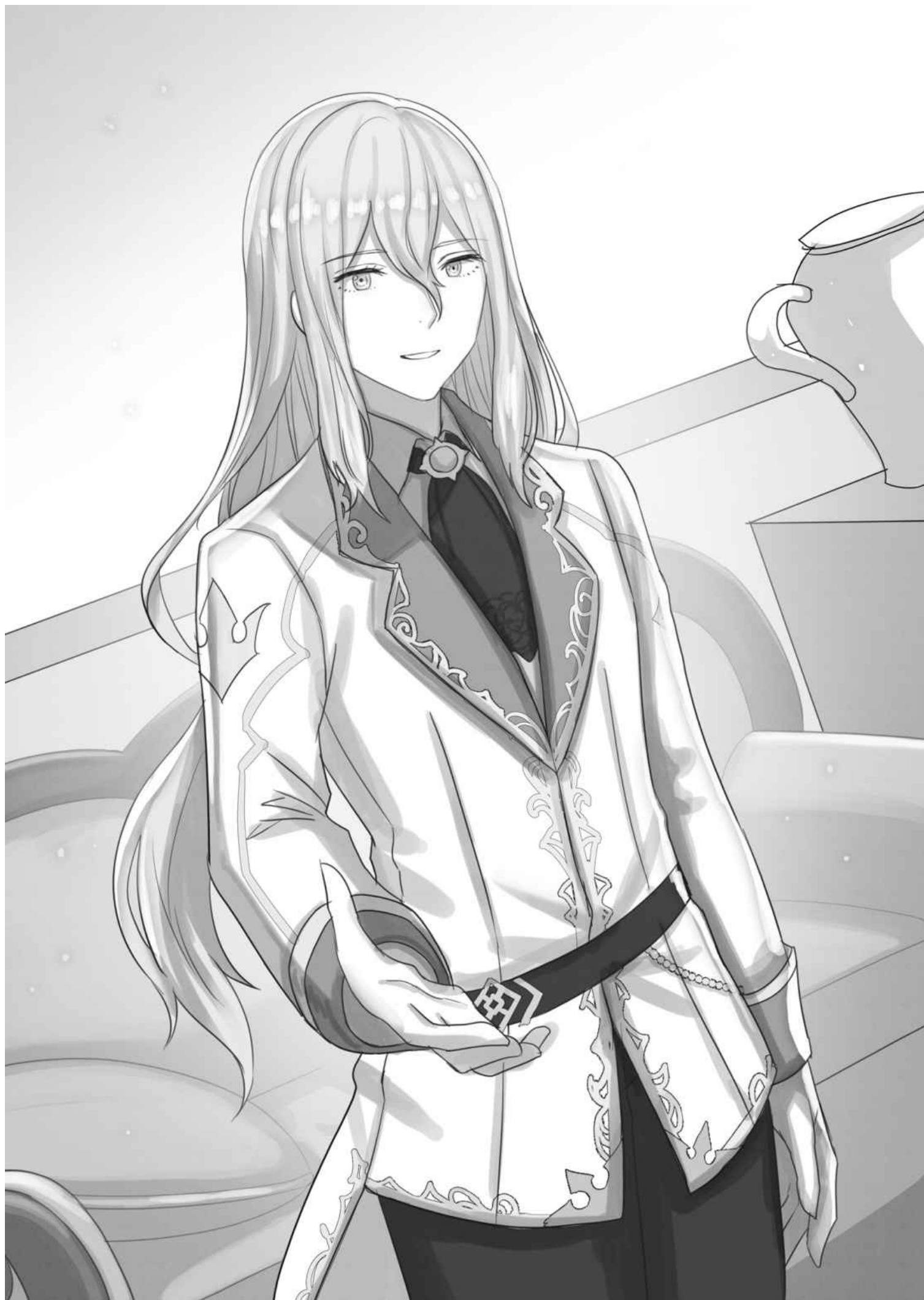
The source of his amusement was a mystery to me, but I found his relaxed demeanor to be helpful. But there was no time to dwell on such things; it was time to get on with the procedure. "Your Highness, may I lay my hands on you?"

"Yes, of course. I am prepared for your physical contact, as requested," he replied, still with a hint of laughter.

"Then," I said, taking a deep and steadying breath, "please excuse my

forwardness...”

Ignoring Prince Gilbert’s strange and seemingly constant state of amusement, I gently took his hand and cradled it between my own; it was slender and pale, as delicately formed as my own. I drew a deep breath, then pursed my lips shut in stubborn concentration.



You can do this, Carolina, I reassured myself. Lord Teodore gave you his word. Trust in his belief in you. Just relax and focus.

With each practiced, controlled inhalation, I felt my body unwind, the sensation of the energy within me growing sharper and sharper. As it reached a peak, I let my eyes drift shut.

I am but a conduit, I chanted in my mind. A vessel for divine energy, and nothing more. Do not force the energy to bend to your will. Simply create a path and let it flow. My focus honed in on the connection between my hand and Prince Gilbert's. *There!* I sensed it—the pathway leading directly to his optic nerve, a channel that had already been cultivated by His Holiness. The hardest part of the process had already been accomplished. All that was left for me to do was create a bridge of sorts, joining the channel within me to his.

I bent my mind to the task, coaxing that intangible pathway within me to contort and shift. Suddenly, a sharp pain surged through my arms; I stifled a sharp cry, managing to mute it to a strained grunt instead. The discomfort was intense, a clear sign of my body's resistance to the energy manipulation. Despite the pain, I felt a surge of triumph. *Yes, I did it! The connection is made! Now all that's left is to let the power flow!*

The excitement of my success threatened to disrupt my concentration, but I knew I had to remain composed. I returned to my controlled breathing, calming the rush of emotions and refocusing on the delicate balance of energy transfer.

With my eyes still closed, I informed Prince Gilbert of the next step. "I'm about to begin the infusion, Your Highness," I said softly.

"Please do," was his reply.

Acknowledging his response with a slight nod, I refocused inwardly. My concentration was entirely on directing the energy into the established channel. Gradually, I felt the divine power begin its journey from my body, through our connected hands, and into Prince Gilbert. I allowed my eyes to open, keeping them unfocused on anything in particular, but I could see a faint glow emanating from our arms. *A visible sign of the energy transfer, perhaps?* I remained focused, unwilling to spoil my efforts with a premature celebration. Prince Gilbert seemed to be handling the influx of power without issue. *Well,*

this is but one infusion out of Lord knows how many I'd have to do. Better to not celebrate at all.

"Incredible," he murmured, breaking the silence. "Compared to His Holiness's, your energy is on an entirely different plane."

I felt my brow knit slightly in a twinge of annoyance. "While I appreciate the kind words, Your Highness, it would be remiss of me to not suggest that you might be somewhat more guarded in any expressions of criticism regarding His Holiness."

He chuckled yet again. "Oh dear. My foot has become acquainted with my mouth, I see. I'll be more mindful in the future."

I shrugged off his slight against His Holiness as well as the manner in which he laughed off my word of caution, and I refocused my attention on the procedure. I breathed a sigh of relief—it seemed to be working. Evidently Lord Theodore's word *was* actually good for something. As I felt the last of the energy flow from me, I gently withdrew my hands and opened my eyes. "The procedure is complete, Your Highness. How do you feel?"

Prince Gilbert's eyes had drifted closed, his expression slack and relaxed, as if he were on the receiving end of something rather pleasurable. Slowly, he fluttered open his eyes, a serene, satisfied smile gracing his face. "I feel...just fine. Surprisingly fine, in fact? Not just physically, but there's a sudden lightness to my mood as well."

While his subjective account of his current state did provide some level of assurance, I still had to verify the effectiveness of the treatment in an appropriately objective manner. Luckily, I'd been provided the tool with which I could do exactly that. Rummaging through my pocket, I retrieved the item given to me by Lord Theodore. "Please use this, Your Highness."

The item was a small magical device, one compact enough to fit in my palm. A single press of its button could magically cleanse anything at all, be it skin or fabric. A convenient tool, to be certain, but as scarce as hen's teeth, found only in the most affluent royal and noble homes. Its purpose and value, however, were irrelevant. Its only use today was to trigger Prince Gilbert's condition, if the effects of his illness yet lingered.

“What must I do?” he inquired, eyeing the mechanism. “Just press here?”

“Yes, depress the button, and the instrument will activate,” I replied.

Seemingly satisfied with my quick explanation, Prince Gilbert positioned his finger over the button. There was an air of apprehension about him as he gave me one final look. “All right, then. Here goes nothing.”

“Whenever Your Highness is ready,” I assured him.

He stared down the instrument for another moment, mustering the courage, before finally pressing the button. A burst of light instantly enveloped him, and when it dissipated, the prince’s attire and skin were immaculately clean. *My word! I marveled. Imperial technology at its finest, even erasing the ink stains on his fingers with ease!*

But my fascination was cut short by Prince Gilbert’s reaction. He stood statuesque in his shock. He blinked in surprise, then stared at the device in his hand, a look of incredulity spreading across his face. “I can’t feel it... I can’t feel it at all...” he murmured, his voice heavy with disbelief.

Then suddenly, he turned to me, his eyes wide with realization. He reached out—and grasped my shoulders with alarming force.

I was completely taken aback as Prince Gilbert exploded into joy as if he were a little child. “Is this what it’s like to live without the constant presence of mana oppressing you wherever you go? I see none of it, not a trace! Never have I felt like this before. Never!”

“Your Highness?” I attempted to interject, the sharp grip of his nails digging into the fabric of my dress.

“Even His Holiness couldn’t suppress my symptoms like this!”

“Prince Gilbert, compose yourself!” I urged, my tone louder and more forceful this time, but my voice was still lost in his exhilaration.

“Carolina, can I call you ‘Mistress of the Divine’?” His words burst forth in an ebullient torrent. “You don’t mind, do you? Do you?! And, of course, call me Gilbert!”

I sputtered my words in short, staccato bursts. “Wh-What?! ‘Mistress’?”

‘Gilbert’?”

He shook my shoulders vigorously, his newfound energy showing no signs of subsiding. His golden eyes seemed to glimmer ever more brightly under the light, his cheeks flushed with excitement. “Oh, where have you been all my life, Mistress? You are my...my patron saint, truly!”

“P-Patron saint? Your Highness, that is too much!” I protested, my words tumbling out in an attempt to temper his relentless fervor. I shook my head in firm disapproval, desperately trying to coax some moderation from him. In an effort to create a physical buffer, I arched backwards and averted my face, but this only seemed to encourage him to lean in closer still.

“No, no, no, because that is precisely what you are—my savior!” Prince Gilbert insisted with a profound earnestness. “You’ve delivered me from a life of confinement, clearing the path for me to become emperor once again! What is that, I ask you, if not the work of a saint?”

Overwhelmed by Prince Gilbert’s intensity, I finally reached my limit. I whipped my face away from him. “Your Highness, please—back away. You’re crowding me!” My plea emerged as a squeak, betraying my struggle to maintain any sense of decorum in the presence of such brazen familiarity.

Prince Gilbert was so close to me that it was impossible to imagine that he couldn’t hear the desperation in my voice, no matter how quietly I spoke. Startled, he quickly withdrew his hands from my shoulders and raised them in a gesture of remorseful placation. “Oh, my sincerest apologies, Carolina, I seem to have lost my composure.” He backed away and gracefully settled himself onto a nearby sofa, crossing his legs and exhaling deeply, as if releasing to the ether the zeal that had hitherto possessed him.

I finally allowed myself to relax, feeling the tension dissipate from the room. Sneaking a glance at Collett by the door, I noticed his tense and uncertain expression had also eased. Within this new atmosphere of calm, Prince Gilbert cleared his throat, his demeanor becoming more pensive. “My sincerest apologies if my...enthusiasm just now was...distressing to you, but I meant what I said. Every word.” He flashed me a smile tinged with a deep and well-versed melancholy, conveying a depth of emotion that went beyond mere gratitude for

what I had done for him today. “Just between us, Carolina, I...had nearly lost all hope of becoming emperor.”

(Prince Gilbert)

Long before the very word “emperor” had held even a modicum of meaning in my young mind, my destiny had been inseparable from that very title. I was meticulously sculpted to fulfill this role, and I embraced it with fervor, immersing myself in learning the requisite knowledge and conduct. Thus, when I crossed the threshold of my twelfth year and my symptoms of mana hypersensitivity not only persisted but intensified, the reality of my situation descended upon me with a crushing, inexorable weight.



The malady that ensnared me was a slow and unyielding hunter. Early on in my life, the presence of mana had been a mere sensation, a tickle in the back of my mind. By the age of seven, the force of magic manifested before my eyes, and by twelve, the swirling streams and delicate threads of mana were as tangible as the material world itself. The symptoms only escalated from there, culminating in episodes where my consciousness would succumb utterly, completely inundated by the overwhelming deluge of sensory information.

As the affliction intensified, my world shrank around me. Sequestered from the vibrant life beyond the safe confines of my palace walls, I watched as the once-loyal aristocracy drifted away. My father, the stoic figure that he was, commenced his somber preparations to sequester me. Amid the turmoil of the establishment of my refuge, a maelstrom of emotions raged within me. Confusion, fear, and a profound sense of betrayal—not directed at any one soul (for there was no singular culprit), yet I could not stop the anger coursing through me. I felt a desperate need to express my fury. Could anyone fault me for this? From birth, I had been molded for a singular, exalted purpose, and now that purpose, my very essence, was being eroded, bit by agonizing bit.

I was engineered to be emperor. Every soul in my orbit had affirmed that this was my unalterable destiny. It was an expectation I yearned to fulfill with every fiber of my being, and to say that I could simply pack up and walk away from it all, choose an alternate course for my life? It seemed cruel. Heartless.

In the midst of my early bouts with despair, it had been the thought of my

dear baby brother that provided me a sliver of solace. Our direct interactions had been regrettably sparse, but we corresponded often. He had remained a beacon of hope, the solitary pillar supporting my withered, forsaken heart in a world that had turned its back on me.

It must be admitted that such an assertion rings with a hint of self-indulgence, perhaps providing an overly dramatic rewriting of the truth. For in reality, it wasn't Edward *himself* that had become my salvation, but rather his unwavering disinterest in the throne. Time and time again, he would assert, "*I harbor no ambition for the crown. It is you, Brother, who are more worthy of it.*" The sincerity of his words were sweet and intoxicating, and I drank of them greedily; they were nectar to a starved bee. Reflecting upon it now, I recognized the repugnant truth of my nature—I was a despicable and self-serving elder brother.

Regardless of the selfishness of my nature, it was undeniably Edward's reassurance that anchored me, preventing an early descent into madness. However, this borrowed time, this fragile extension of hope, came to an abrupt end when my mother visited me the day before the most recent Founder's Day Fete.

His Holiness had just finished his blessing of me, temporarily dulling my perception of mana. It was during this tenuous reprieve that my mother silently glided into my chamber—her first visit in the span of many desolate months.

"Gilbert, darling, how are you faring? You appear well; that brings some solace to my heart," she said kindly. Her veneer of composed concern was almost believable.

"Hello, Mother. I'm glad to see that you, as well, seem to remain ever unchanging," I responded, observing her ageless beauty. Her presence always carried an air of eternal elegance, a grace that time and the onus of two children seemed reluctant to ravage.

She floated over and settled onto the sofa. Her eyes met mine, a depth of seriousness lurking under their usual calm. "I have something to tell you, Gilbert," she announced with a gravity that was uncharacteristic, even for her.

“Something important enough to warrant your coming here personally?” I asked, the hint of a rueful smile playing on my lips.

“Yes. Something that will forever alter the course of our great empire. Listen closely, Gilbert,” she implored. The solemnity in her voice seemed to anchor me in place. The phrase “alter the course of our great empire” echoed ominously in my mind, the harbinger of a revelation I had long dreaded.

It’s all right, Mother. I’ve had years to come to terms with it. I understand, so please, don’t let your mask falter.

Your usual impenetrable facade—it’s fracturing.

A rare glimpse of distress flickered across her face as she averted her gaze, drawing a deep, steadying breath. Regaining a semblance of her customary composure, she turned her face to me once more. Her lips, betraying the faintest quiver, parted to deliver her message. “Your father will determine who is to be the next emperor by the year’s end. The official announcement will be made next spring.”

As she struggled through the final words, her voice quavered, each syllable laden with a heartrending tremor. The Frost Witch, so stoic and impassive, now stood on the brink of an emotional surrender, tears brimming in her eyes as she tightly pursed her lips, a dam that strained to hold back a flood of maternal sorrow.

So the day has finally come. A mere half year remains for me—a fleeting window of opportunity, a final grasp at hope.

In such a limited span, the prospect of a miraculous recovery was nothing short of a fool’s dream. Mother’s unspoken implication was clear: Edward was destined to ascend the throne. I couldn’t protest; no matter how often he insisted that he was ill-suited for the throne, he was undeniably more fit for the role than a bedridden recluse.

A spark of resentment ignited within me, and with a trace of bitterness, I remarked, “Is this his final act of mercy? A six-month stay of execution?”

Mother’s gaze snapped up, locking onto mine with an intensity that belied her usual composure. “No—no! Your father merely wished to offer you additional

time! One last chance,” she protested.

Her words struck me as painfully insensitive. “One last chance, Mother? A last chance to what? Hope for a miraculous cure within this impossibly brief period?”

She faced me, her shoulders trembling, as a solitary tear traced a path from one perfect, emerald eye down the side of her porcelain cheek. “I’m sorry, Gilbert,” she whispered, her voice a fragile shadow of its usual firm timbre. “I’m sorry.”

My heart broke; regret gnawed at me for not reining in my emotions, and yet, I couldn’t help but question the true nature of her apology. Was she regretful for her thoughtless words, or for the flawed constitution with which I had been born?

“Don’t cry, Mother,” I crooned, my tone gentle. I chose to leave the truth at the heart of her remorse unexamined and unspoken, and instead I moved to sit beside her. Her body shuddered under my tentative touch as she sobbed quietly into her hands. I caressed her back, feeling each quiver and shake. “I’m all right, Mother. I’m all right.”

It took me all I had to give voice to that unconvincing lie.



“...so you see, my aspirations of becoming emperor had all but withered away.”

The image of my mother’s tear-streaked face resurfaced in my mind, prompting me to lower my gaze momentarily. Lifting my eyes to meet Carolina’s, which brimmed with empathy, I offered a bittersweet smile. “I’m all right now,” I whispered. “Thanks to you, a flicker of hope has reignited within me, and for that, I am profoundly grateful, Mistress.”

Carolina, this girl who stood before me, was my last hope. If my dream of ascending to the throne was ever to materialize, she would have to serve as the bridge over the yawning chasm of my illness. And should she, too, find herself at a loss to aid me, then I was prepared to plunge into that abyss of despair.

“I’m honored, truly,” Carolina began, her voice trembling with a note of

apprehension. “But I would urge you to temper your expectations. There is the possibility that if we continue this course of treatment, you will be cured, but it is only that: a possibility. In a situation such as this, absolutes can be harmful.”

I nodded at her, sighing heavily. “Believe me, I am acutely aware of that, more than you could possibly fathom. But I do wonder: do you know what it’s like to live without hope?”

I understood Carolina’s intentions—she sought to shield herself, to prevent me from harboring unrealistic expectations that might lead to resentment if unfulfilled. Yet I also believed that she was unaware of the profound impact her presence had made. After fumbling around in the darkness for as long as I had, even the faintest glimmer of light seemed like a blazing sun.

I could never resent you, Carolina, not even if you fail to heal me, not even if I never claim the throne. You have bestowed upon me the gift of hope, and for that, I am eternally thankful.

Oblivious to the solemn vow I had silently made to myself, Carolina appeared lost in contemplation for a brief moment. Then, lifting her eyes to meet mine, she spoke with a newfound resolve. “I suppose when confronted with the choice of utter despair and the faintest sliver of hope, the wiser choice is to gamble on hope. Despite my lingering doubts about my capabilities, and the apprehension I feel at the level of trust you’ve placed in me, I assure you, Your Highness, I will spare no effort in aiding you.”

Her gaze was unwavering, her fists clenched in a show of determination and strength that was almost palpable. My heart skipped a beat at her display of conviction. I found myself momentarily paralyzed, and a surge of intense emotion welled up within me, gripping my heart with an intensity I hadn’t anticipated. This woman, with her earnestness, her formidable spirit, was unlike anyone I had ever encountered—I felt compelled to make her mine.

What I felt was far deeper and more intense than a sense of gratitude and admiration owed to someone who had extended a helping hand. This feeling far surpassed the appropriate bounds of obligation. It coursed through my veins like a poison, muddling my senses and transforming my heart into a swirling mass of venomous desire.

(Carolina)

Excusing myself from Prince Gilbert's chamber under the guise of allowing him to prepare for his upcoming public appearance, I retreated to the solace of the Emerald Palace. Settling into the familiar embrace of my own sofa, I began to transcribe the details of the day's procedure into a report.

As my pen scratched across the page, my mind traced the arc of Prince Gilbert's anecdotes as well as the looming succession crisis. While I'd anticipated the heart-wrenching nature of his tale, it had still filled my soul with sympathy to hear the story narrated in his own voice. There had been, however, one piece of information that I had *not* anticipated: the question of the succession would be determined within the year. Suddenly, the urgency of Lord Theodore's devotion to my training crystallized into clarity—time was a luxury we scarcely had.

"The situation is more pressing than I'd initially thought," I muttered to no one in particular. Stilling my pen midsentence, I leaned back, releasing a deep, contemplative sigh.

Just do everything within your power, Carolina. Strive so that in the end, you harbor no regrets about what more could have been done.

My thoughts drifted to the impending announcement of the identity of the crown prince, the metaphorical die thrown by the hand of fate, the result of its roll still shrouded in uncertainty. Another prolonged breath escaped my lips as I considered the myriad uncertainties and challenges that loomed in my immediate future. It was amid this internal whirlwind of contemplation that a figure draped in shades of black and white drifted into my awareness at the edge of my peripheral vision.

"Chamomile tea, Your Highness," announced the familiar voice of my devoted handmaiden. "To help you unwind."

"How thoughtful of you, Marisa," I replied with genuine gratitude. "Please, just place it on the table."

"As you wish, Your Highness," she responded with her characteristic

deference.

The sight of the steaming cup of tea, perched invitingly at the table's edge, enticed me to momentarily abandon my writing.

Marisa took the time to prepare this for me—might as well take a break!

Although the hands of the clock were ever marching forward in the matter of Prince Gilbert's treatment, the extent of my obligation was more forgiving when it came to completing this report.

I stretched luxuriously, feeling the satisfying release of tension in my neck. Grasping the delicate handle of the cup, I brought it to my lips, inhaling the distinctive, soothing aroma of chamomile before taking a sip. "Mm, delightful," I murmured appreciatively. "You spoil me with your tea, Marisa, you truly do."

"You always flatter me beyond my humble efforts, Your Highness," she replied, ever so modest.

Inwardly, I chuckled at her humility. Marisa's talent in the art of tea-making was undeniable, and I wished she could recognize her own skill. "I truly mean it, Marisa, it's exceptional," I began, when an unexpected knock at the door interrupted us.

We had no scheduled guests; I shot a glance at Owen by the wall, his unspoken presence a constant comfort; he only returned a nod, a silent assurance of no impending danger. "Come in," I called out.

"Pardon me," came a familiar tenor I knew all too well. Lord Teodore had graced us with his unplanned presence. "Your Highness, I trust my sudden arrival isn't too disconcerting," he said apologetically.

"Not at all, Lord Teodore. Just surprising, given the typical bustle of your all-too-hectic agenda. How may I be of help to you?"

At my question, Lord Teodore blinked slowly, as if there was a slight delay in his ability to comprehend my question. Behind his spectacles, a veil of fatigue was drawn over the usual sparkle of his peridot eyes. "I'm here merely to convey a message from His Majesty. Prince Gilbert has safely arrived in San. They're en route to the soiree as we speak."

“My! That’s good news,” I expressed, genuinely pleased. “The treatment took a little longer than I had anticipated, so it’s heartening to know he arrived on time despite this.”

“On the contrary, Your Highness, your efficiency surpassed my expectations,” Lord Teodore interjected with earnest admiration. “You completed the treatment so swiftly that not only did he make it to the party, but he also had time to share a few moments with the rest of the family. I’m at a loss for words—well done.”

I felt a flush of warmth spread across my cheeks, the unreserved praise catching me off guard. In a way, Lord Teodore’s genuine commendation was the most gratifying accolade for which I might have wished.

“Your Highness, I extend our gratitude, on behalf of myself and the royal family, for your exceptional work. At last, we stand on the threshold of resolving this succession crisis.” He conveyed this collective expression of thanks with a deep sincerity.

“Your words are an honor, Lord Teodore. Whether my efforts contribute to the resolution of the crisis or not, I pledge my wholehearted commitment to Prince Gilbert’s cause,” I assured him with conviction.

“I have no doubt of that, Your Highness,” Lord Teodore affirmed. “And rest assured, I will be supporting you every step of the way.”

Our exchange concluded with a mutual nod, a silent understanding passing between us. Unspoken was the sentiment that bound us, and yet the depth of our resolve was clear—every action, every decision, was for the welfare of the empire and of Prince Edward Ruby Martinez.

Chapter Five

As Prince Gilbert basked in the limelight of his triumphant reemergence into high society, I found myself engulfed in the less glamorous task of finalizing my report, a task that ended up consuming the entirety of my night. The next morning, an enormous yawn barely stifled, I trudged towards the Diamond Palace, squinting my eyes against the harsh glare of the morning sun.

Consecutive days of divine infusion—honestly, it was beginning to take its toll. My mind felt shrouded in a fog, the clarity of my thoughts dulled by the lack of sleep.

My mood was anything but light as I approached the grand, diamond-encrusted door of Prince Gilbert's chambers. Exhaling a weary sigh, I composed myself with a deep breath and rapped on the door three times. No query of "who is it," no hesitation—the door swung open as if the room's occupant had been waiting for me; my knuckles had barely had a chance to leave the surface of the door.

"Good morning, Mistress," the familiar voice sang out. "Please, come in. I'm overjoyed at your arrival. Would you care for some tea? I've already rung for it—do stay a while."

There was no point in belaboring the identity of the man I'd come to see. Prince Gilbert appeared from within the confines of his room, the corners of his lips curling up into a cheerful smile. *At least one of us is in a good mood...* I thought grumpily. Despite my hope that a night's rest might have dampened the degree of his exuberance, it seemed that both his high spirits and his term of "endearment" for me were to be permanent fixtures in my life.

I moved into his room almost mechanically, my expression vacant as I pondered how I ought to comport myself while in his presence. Oddly enough, the array of writing materials and books that had cluttered the room the day before were now conspicuously absent. "Tidied up a bit, have you, Your Highness?" I inquired with mild curiosity.

“Hm?” Prince Gilbert seemed momentarily puzzled before understanding dawned on him. “Ah, yes, in preparation for your visit. It would hardly be fitting to welcome my mistress into a disheveled space, now would it?”

Like you did yesterday? I thought sardonically. Pushing the thought aside, I responded with a noncommittal, “Is that so?”

Prince Gilbert’s effervescent enthusiasm followed me relentlessly as he escorted me into his room, not resting until I was comfortably settled. “Please, take a seat. Would you like some tea? Crumpets?” Both proffered refreshments awaited me, along with an assortment of other baked goods. “If there’s anything else you desire, just let me know and I’ll—”

At that moment, my patience reached its breaking point. Raising my hand to signal him to halt, I firmly interjected, “Prince Gilbert, that is quite enough!”

Surrounded by mouthwatering treats, aromatic cups of tea, and the charming prince himself, my professional resolve was being tested. “I am here to administer treatment for Your Highness’s condition, not to partake in a tea party! We can discuss the possibility of leisure activities after the procedure, but until then—”

To my surprise, Prince Gilbert cut me off. “There’ll be no need for that today.”

“What?” I whispered back, thrown off-balance. *No need for what? The treatment?*

My sleep-deprived mind scrambled to grasp the particulars of the situation unfolding before me. My confusion only deepened as Prince Gilbert stood and retrieved a small, rectangular box from his pocket, reminiscent of a music box. “Look here, Mistress. This is a magical item, one whose energies are constantly active. Through the wonders of mana, one can peep within this box and observe an enchanting butterfly contained within, fluttering about just as it might do out in the wild. My ability to gaze upon it without discomfort is proof enough that your divine energy yet lingers within me. Hence, no further treatment is necessary today.”

Alarm surged through me, and I slammed my hands onto the table. “No need for... Are you serious, Your Highness? What if the tempering effect wears off suddenly? Do you realize the danger to which you are choosing to expose

yourself?”

In response to my genuine concerns for his safety, Prince Gilbert merely laughed. He had the temerity to *laugh* in the face of my worry as he dared to bring the box closer to his eyes. As he did so, I too caught a glimpse of a delicate butterfly fluttering inside the magical trinket. “Danger? What danger, Mistress? An object like this emits only a trivial amount of mana. Even without your treatments, it wouldn’t pose a problem for me. It’s not the mana itself that is troublesome, but rather the sensory overload it triggers.”

“Even so, Your Highness, I must strongly object,” I replied, my voice firm and unwavering in my stance.

“You worry too much,” Prince Gilbert chided with a playful giggle. With an air of nonchalance, he dropped the box on the table, its landing accompanied by a soft clatter. Lifting his gaze to mine, his golden eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief. “You disapprove, all right. Then what if we strike a bargain? In order to shield me from any possible ill effects, I will entrust this magical item to your care...on the condition that you join me for tea. Rest assured, I won’t seek out any new mana sources with which to torment myself either. The responsibility of monitoring the residual energy in me, I leave to your expertise. How does that sound?” With a flourish, he gracefully lifted a delicate teacup in a toast to me, his smile widening.

I wasn’t aware that we were engaged in negotiations... This was a thought I masked behind a rueful smile. I had no obligation to entertain his antics; I could simply inform Lord Theodore of the prince’s behavior, and that would be the end of it, but that route seemed to lack a certain finesse. After all, Prince Gilbert was my brother-in-law, and maintaining cordial family relations necessitated some concessions on my part. Besides, sharing tea and conversation wasn’t entirely against my interests—it presented an opportunity to further our rapport, which would, in turn, bolster my ability to provide treatment for his condition.

Resolving my internal debate, I allowed my smile to soften slightly. “Very well, Your Highness, we have an agreement.” Despite the quiet voice in the back of my mind cautioning me against this course of action, insisting I was in error to indulge him, I chose to proceed.

A triumphant grin spread across Prince Gilbert's face. He was clearly pleased with having swayed the situation in his favor.



After a tea time filled with shared tales of relatable past failures and amusing childhood anecdotes, I returned to the Emerald Palace. As I strolled down its halls alongside Owen (who had taken over from Collett in escorting me as soon as I'd left the premises of the Diamond Palace), my mind replayed the conversations I had shared with the first prince.

The tea session had begun abruptly, without rhyme or reason, and for this reason, I had been quite resistant to the idea. At first, I'd been committed to partaking in only in a perfunctory nature, but as the impromptu affair had unfolded, I'd found the experience to be unexpectedly valuable. Prince Gilbert had regaled me with tales of Prince Edward and Lord Theodore's younger days, and he'd shed light on nuances of Malcosian high society that had been previously unknown to me. Of course, this information wasn't without its cost—I'd had to answer his inquisitive questions about my own life, trading stories in a kind of verbal dance. His inquiries were probing, yet not so personal that I regretted striking a deal to liberate Prince Gilbert of his whimsical little box.

Fishing my prize out of my pocket, I observed the butterfly within, its erratic flight patterns somehow reminiscent of the capricious young prince. Lost in thought, I hardly noticed as I arrived at my door. Pushing it open automatically with one hand, I entered my room without taking my eyes off the delicate creature. "Marisa, sorry to trouble you already, but could you prepare some...tea?" I began, only to halt midsentence as my gaze finally lifted from the box.

Instead of the expected raven-haired handmaiden, I was greeted by the sight of a fiery-haired, golden-eyed presence that had eluded me these past weeks. "P-Prince Edward!" I exclaimed, surprised, as I tried to gather my composure. "What a pleasant surprise."

"Apologies for entering your room unannounced, Carolina, but your servants led me here rather than to the drawing room," Prince Edward explained, his tone apologetic. "I assume that this is normal etiquette when it comes to one's

spouse? It didn't feel right to correct them, so I waited here. I hope you don't mind."

Of course, I didn't mind. He hadn't intruded out of any ill intent, and I was about to express as much, but my response was momentarily delayed as I beheld him. His expression, marked with genuine contrition as if he had committed a grave error, was such a refreshing change of pace after my earlier encounter with his mercurial brother. Regaining my composure, I shook my head and softly assured him, "Of course not," before settling down on the sofa.

"So, Your Highness," I began, finding my voice again, "What brings you here today?"

"Nothing much," he answered casually, "I just wanted to come and talk to you, see how you were doing."

"Really? Well, I'm very glad," I responded, a subtle warmth suffusing my voice. "I trust your duties can spare you for a little while?"

"I managed to clear most of the backlog, which means I'll likely be back to my regular duties tomorrow. That's why I requested the afternoon off from Teo, to see you," he said, allowing the papers he had been holding to flutter onto the table. In a softer tone, he confided, "It's been hell, these past few weeks." He took a seat and gathered his thoughts for a moment before his gaze returned to me. "Are you free, Carolina? I'd love to catch up with you about my brother's progress. And yours, of course."

"I don't mind in the least, but are you certain you want to fritter away your hard-earned afternoon off in my company?" I asked hesitantly. While I appreciated his desire to spend time with me, I couldn't help but feel that spending time with his bed might better serve him. His attempts at maintaining a composed exterior couldn't mask the telltale signs of exhaustion. The crow's feet, hollow cheeks, and dark circles under his eyes caused me to feel overcome with concern, but I held back from voicing it, knowing as I did his obstinate pride in regards to his stamina.

"Hard-earned," he echoed. "That's precisely why I don't want to squander it. I'd much prefer spending it with you rather than sleeping it away. You wouldn't waste my efforts, would you, Carolina?" His eyes, gentle and pleading, gazed at

me with all the heartrending adoration of a hopeful puppy.

Faced with such earnestness, how could I refuse? “Very well. I can spare some time.”

A soft “thank you” escaped his lips, which had curled up into a gentle smile. His fatigue seemed to make him more forthcoming with his emotions.

His first question was about Prince Gilbert. “How’s my brother faring in his treatment? Teo tells me it’s progressing well, but I’d like to hear about it from you.”

“Lord Theodore’s assessment is accurate, I’d say,” I replied thoughtfully. “Although we’re only just beginning, Prince Gilbert is responding positively to the treatment. He claims we’ve managed to completely suppress his symptoms.”

A surprised “oh!” escaped Prince Edward. “That’s heartening to hear. Perhaps a full recovery truly isn’t out of the question, then.” He lapsed into silence, hand resting thoughtfully on his chin. Initially, I imagined that he must be pondering the prospect of a Prince Gilbert restored to health, but his expression suggested deeper, more solemn contemplations. “But perhaps we shouldn’t speak on such things quite yet. How are you getting on with my brother?”

His question took me aback. “I, um, well, I suppose,” I managed, unable to meet his gaze as I fumbled through a response.

My relationship with the elder prince certainly wasn’t bad; I might even go so far as to say it was quite a positive one. Prince Gilbert had indeed been making a considerable (perhaps, I was forced to admit, a little *too* considerable) effort to foster a good rapport between us. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that he had developed a fondness for me, rather than describing this as a mutual affection, but that was a thought I chose to keep to myself.

Prince Edward regarded me with a hint of concern. “Are you sure? You two aren’t having any disagreements, are you?”

“No. Not with him, no.”

“Then his servants? Are they giving you a hard time?”

“No, heavens, no!” I protested. “I haven’t even exchanged so much as a word with his staff!”

“Then what’s behind that troubled expression? I’m here to listen, if you’d like to talk about it.”

His earnestness, the genuine concern shining in his golden eyes, made it difficult for me to maintain my facade. I didn’t want to burden him with my troubles, but I couldn’t hide anything from him—not when he cared for me this much.

Maybe I could stand to gain something by sharing my thoughts. With that hesitant resolve, I began to speak. “The truth is, Prince Gilbert seems quite taken with my power and the effects of my treatment on his condition. He has started calling me ‘Mistress’ and seems to idolize me in a way that I find rather...singular.”

I chose my words carefully, aiming for diplomacy while still attempting to convey the essence of my discomfort, but Prince Edward’s reaction was one of surprise nonetheless. “He calls you ‘Mistress’? Idolizes you?”

I nodded. “It’s true, although I rather wish it wasn’t. Collett can attest to it if you have any doubts.”

“No, it’s not that I doubt the veracity of your words, Carolina, it’s just that... I don’t understand.” He fell into silence again, his eyes flitting back and forth. “But I see. He reveres you to the extent of calling you ‘Mistress’...” His voice trailed off as he pondered over this revelation.

Thinking on it again, it dawned on me why Prince Edward might find this so startling. Prince Gilbert was a prince, after all, so would it truly be proper for him to call someone “Mistress” and show such obsequious reverence? Perhaps I shouldn’t have been as forthcoming in my admittances to Prince Edward? If a newcomer to the family like myself was already overwhelmed by Prince Gilbert’s conduct, it should have occurred to me to empathize with how the knowledge of this behavior might affect someone who had known the first prince all his life.

“Carolina.” Prince Edward’s voice suddenly interrupted my thoughts.

“Yes, Your Highness?” I responded, prompting him to continue despite his obvious hesitation.

“My brother...he calls you ‘Mistress’ solely because he respects your power, correct? There’s nothing more to it?” His voice wavered slightly, revealing what I could only imagine to be insecurity, but...for what reason? Confronted with his searching, uncertain gaze, I found myself at a loss. *Nothing more to it?* The ambiguity of his question left me puzzled. What was he implying?

I paused, considering the nature of his query, while opposite me sat a prince whose expression was growing increasingly troubled. Finally, I chose honesty. “I apologize, Your Highness, but I cannot claim to know Prince Gilbert’s thoughts. We aren’t close enough for me to understand his motivations fully.”

That didn’t seem to be the answer he was looking for. But while it might have been a vague statement, it was the truth. His face darkened, a shadow of concern crossing his face. Had I said something wrong?

“Carolina, let me ask you one final question,” he said, his gaze intensifying with a seriousness that bordered on intimidating. “Whose wife are you?”

My first thought was, *He must be joking*. Why would he otherwise ask something to which the answer was so blatantly obvious? However, as I met his intense stare, I realized the gravity of the moment, the weight of his need for a clear and unequivocal answer. Pushing aside the questions bubbling within me, I responded with firm conviction, my expression unyielding. “I am the wife of Prince Edward Ruby Martinez,” I declared with clarity and pride.

As I declared my allegiance to my husband, the tension that had been simmering in Prince Edward’s demeanor seemed to dissolve instantly. I swore I could almost hear the pressure escape the room. “Good. It appears you still remember that you’re *my* wife,” he murmured, seemingly more to himself than to me. With a heavy *fwump*, he sank back into the cushions of the sofa, remaining there for a long moment in a contemplative silence. Then he rose abruptly, muttering something about an urgent matter needing his attention, and swiftly exited the room.

What...was that? The atmosphere had been undeniably tense, but surely it hadn’t been dire enough to warrant such a precipitous departure? Gazing at the

divot in the cushions that had borne Prince Edward's weight just moments ago, I exhaled a deep sigh. There had been no clarification, no elaboration on his cryptic final remark—just a brusque exit. I could only surmise that his odd behavior was somehow linked to Prince Gilbert, but anything more specific eluded me.

“And here I thought he would've been glad to see me after all this time,” I murmured. “Instead, we part on *that* note...”

A haze began to settle over my heart. In a rare moment of disregard for decorum, I stretched my legs out and sank deeper into the cushions, abandoning any pretense of my usual ladylike posture. My gaze fixed on the ethereal hues of the sky outside as I absently twirled a strand of my hair between my fingers.

Prince Edward had once said he sought to know me more deeply than anyone else, and I felt the same. I wanted to know all of him, understand all of him, forge an emotional connection that transcended the superficial...

“But how am I supposed to do that when you won't ever tell me what's wrong?” I whispered into the stillness of my room.

My words echoed softly in the empty space, hanging in the air before dissipating into the silence, leaving me with no answers, only the relentless reverberation of my own unspoken concerns.



A night's rest did little to banish the haze from my heart, and I made my way to the Diamond Palace the next morning feeling as heavy as I had when Prince Edward had stormed from my room. Cloaked in a gloom that seemed almost tangible, I entered Prince Gilbert's room for another checkup, my senses immediately overwhelmed by his unflaggingly spirited demeanor.

“Back again so soon, Mistress?” he greeted me with a playful lilt.

“Good morning to you too, Your Highness,” I replied, striving to sound as neutral as I could despite my annoyance. The room today was as spotless as it had been yesterday, not a speck of dust to be seen. *If only my heart could be so immaculate*, I mused wryly. *Does there exist a handmaiden who performs deep*

cleansings of the soul?

These whimsical thoughts were all I had to distract me as Prince Gilbert, once again lingering uncomfortably close, led me into his room. As we settled into our respective seats, he motioned towards one of his maids and signaled for tea. A moment later, surrounded by the aroma of freshly brewed black tea, we resumed our conversation.

“Penny for your thoughts? You seem a bit down. I’m here to listen, if you’ll have me,” he offered.

“Thank you, Your Highness, but I must respectfully decline,” I responded flatly.

He let out a light, three-syllable chuckle. “You don’t mince words, do you, Mistress? But please don’t think I mind your speaking to me in this way—I quite admire it.”

“Your words are appreciated. Now, please—let us proceed with the day’s agenda.” My approach lacked finesse as I worked to keep the conversation on the topic at hand, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Dropping my eyes to the documents provided by Lord Theodore, I reviewed the treatment protocol that he had drawn up for us.

The first order of business for every visit was the examination, which was to consist of two steps. To begin, I was to assess the amount of divine energy remaining within Prince Gilbert, a process that relied on my energy-perception abilities. While I was no machine, and therefore unable to provide precise numerical data or concrete figures, that wouldn’t be necessary. All I had to do was determine the presence or absence of divine energy.

The second task required me to chart the progression of his disease. Assuming that no divine energy remained, I would ask Prince Gilbert to interact with a magical instrument and then provide his subjective feedback upon the experience. In my opinion, this approach seemed somewhat cruel, yet it had been deemed necessary for an accurate assessment. These tests were scheduled to be conducted weekly, adapting as needed based on the findings. Today marked the initial trial, which would set the precedent for my responsibilities in the coming weeks.

“Are those the documents we received this morning?” Prince Gilbert asked.

“The ones that outline the updated plan for treatment, yes,” I confirmed, maintaining my tone of professional neutrality.

He let out a sulky harrumph. “Indeed? Well, then let’s get on with the examination posthaste. It’s getting in the way of the most vital part of your visits—our most engaging and lively conversation.”

Conversation? I thought, holding myself back from raising a skeptical eyebrow. *I’m not sure what your plans are, Your Highness, but I’ll be going home immediately after we finish here. It doesn’t reflect well on a married woman to be dillydallying in the quarters of a bachelor, even with a chaperone present.*

Pointedly ignoring his comment, I muttered a strained “let’s begin,” and I launched into the first part of the examination: the assessment of remaining energy. Centering myself, I reached out with my senses, feeling for the subtle flows and currents of divine energy around us. Immediately, the first thing to hit me was the deafening roar of the energy that perpetually cascaded from my own self. Keeping the sensation alive in my head, I redirected my attention towards Prince Gilbert.

“It appears there is no divine energy remaining within you, Your Highness,” I murmured after a moment of concentration.

His reaction was nonchalant, a mere shrug, as if he had anticipated this outcome. “Not surprising, given that it’s been several days since the last infusion.”

On to part two of the examination. Though it went against my instincts, it was a necessary step. Retrieving the magical instrument from my pocket—the very same box containing the butterfly that I had confiscated from him the day prior—I presented it to Prince Gilbert. “Now, Your Highness, on to the next part of the examination. Please look here.”

His eyes widened a touch before breaking out into a knowing grin. “Why, Mistress, I do believe this is not the same device that I see indicated in the briefing.”

I wasn't certain of his intentions in pointing this out, but to preempt any misconceptions, I quickly explained, "This emits less mana than the device initially proposed. I sought and received Lord Theodore's approval to use it instead." I hoped this clarification would deter any further speculation about my choice of instrument.

He uttered a low chuckle. "In other words, you made a special request for my sake. How very kind of you."

"I am most glad to hear that it meets your approval. Now, please concentrate on the device. Tell me how you feel," I instructed, steering the focus back to the examination.

Not even he could sidestep such a straightforward question. As he scrutinized the device, I was overcome with a wave of anxiety. But he shifted his gaze after just a moment, his expression sobering. "To be honest, I don't see much improvement. The mana is still perceptible, just perhaps a bit less intense. It's still as visible as ever to me."

Hearing this, my heart sank, perhaps more than it should have. Albeit I had provided only one round of treatment, so realistically, how much could his condition have truly improved? *Of course*, I thought as the realization dawned on me, a wry, self-deprecating smile tugging at my lips. *A part of me fancied myself capable enough to resolve Prince Gilbert's chronic ailment in one fell swoop.* Chastising myself for such naive optimism, I gently tucked the device back into my pocket, my thoughts still lingering on my newfound sense of humility.

Prince Gilbert's next words took me by surprise. "We're only one round of treatment in; it's much too early to be disappointed. If it's any comfort to you, I certainly wasn't expecting any major changes this quickly." His words, gentle and understanding, made me look up. He offered me a warm smile, and in that moment, I realized I had been so absorbed in my own thoughts that I had actually hung my head in dismay.

Ah, I did it again, I admonished myself. There I'd been, succumbing to self-doubt once again. Mortifyingly, it had been Prince Gilbert, the one actually battling the disease, who'd comforted me in my moment of weakness. A

resigned sigh escaped my lips, but I resolved it would be the last that I breathed in Prince Gilbert's presence. With a surge of renewed determination, I met his gaze squarely. "Quite right, Your Highness. It's premature to expect dramatic results so soon. We must focus on the path ahead and on continuing the treatment one step at a time. Please give me a moment to prepare for the infusion."

I squeezed my fists tightly, mentally bracing myself for the taxing labor of harnessing divine energy in the next phase of today's session. Caught up in my efforts, I was only dimly aware of the wide, almost scheming smile that danced upon the young prince's lips.



I held fast to that moment of resolve to focus on the future as the weeks flew by, and on a day like any other I found myself once again in the Diamond Palace, conducting another routine examination on Prince Gilbert.

As usual, I extended my senses to assess the presence of divine energy within him. "It appears that no more divine energy remains. Now, on to the next step," I announced mechanically. Blinking my concentration away, I retrieved the familiar magical box and placed it before Prince Gilbert. "How do you feel, Your Highness? Any signs of improvement?"

Prince Gilbert didn't respond immediately. He just continued to gaze at the box, his expression a blend of confusion and surprise.

"Your Highness?" I prodded, growing concerned.

Still no reply. This was unusual; he was typically quick to report his symptoms, but now he was oddly quiet—and frozen. A nagging worry crept into my mind. Had his condition deteriorated? Despite my regular visits and treatments, there hadn't been any notable progress, but what if his condition had actually worsened? Panic set in at the thought that the butterfly box might be exacerbating his symptoms. *I need to get this magical item out of his sight!*

I shot a hand out towards the instrument, but Prince Gilbert stopped me. "Wait! Don't touch it!"

I paused, my fingers grasping at air, torn between my instinct to remove the

potential trigger and my equally strong desire to respect his request. Could this really be safe? *He won't collapse or anything, right?*

My heart racing with anxiety, I watched as Prince Gilbert continued his intense scrutiny of the box. Then, abruptly, he looked up, his expression unusually grave. Clearing his throat, he began, "Mistress, I don't want you to get carried away, but listen carefully. The symptoms—I believe they've lessened."

I gasped in astonishment, my eyes widening in disbelief. My gaze darted between the magical box and Prince Gilbert. "Are you certain?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper, hardly daring to believe that we might have at long last achieved a meaningful breakthrough in his treatment.

"I'm quite certain," he responded, his voice trembling with a barely restrained excitement. "At first, I thought it might've been my imagination, but no matter how long I look at the device, the symptoms aren't appearing as they did before..."

So that was the reason behind his intense focus on the box... I hurriedly picked up a pen to convert that mental note into a physical one. "Could you elaborate, Your Highness? Which specific manifestations of the condition have diminished, and which remain?"

"Yes, of course. As a general description, I'd say that the mana is less visible now. Translucent, perhaps is the best word? The streams of mana that were once so vividly clear to me seem to be...fading away."

Even as he stumbled over his words, searching for the right descriptors, the excitement in his voice was palpable. His expression seemed somewhat neutral, but everything else about him betrayed an undeniable sense of joy.

"I see," I mused, diligently noting down his account. "Is that it? What about the range of your perception? Do you still see mana everywhere, or is the scope of your perceptions getting smaller?"

He hummed in thought. "Considering the low levels of mana in the palace, I'm not sure I can give a fair assessment."

Ah, yes, the Diamond Palace was protected by a barrier shielding it from the

influence of external mana—I had almost forgotten that crucial fact.

“So, for a fair assessment, we would either need to introduce a significant amount of mana to you here in your chambers or take you outside the palace,” I thought aloud. “Both options seem perhaps too perilous.”

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained,” he countered, before deferring demurely. “But perhaps the decision is not ours to make.”

“I’ll discuss it with Lord Teodore and see what he advises.”

“Much appreciated.”

With a final nod from him, I appended “consider examination in more mana-rich environment” to the report. After a cursory review of my notes, I set the pen aside. “Some answers may still elude us, but the reduction in the severity of your symptoms is a promising sign. It brings us closer to the possibility of a full recovery,” I concluded.

Prince Gilbert chuckled. “Thanks to your dedication, Mistress. And, as you know, dedication must be—”

“Do hold off on any elaborate protestations, Your Highness.”

That had come out a bit more assertive than either of us had expected. His expression shifted to a blend of mild surprise and a hint of admiration at my uncharacteristic boldness.

“Let’s save any talk of gratitude or reward until after your full recovery, Your Highness,” I continued in a milder tone. “Receiving thanks for an undertaking that is yet incomplete seems premature.”

“I shall await your satisfaction, Mistress,” he promised gaily, before sobering slightly and asking with a curious edge to his voice, “But if I don’t fully recover?”

“Then Your Highness’s gratitude would not be necessary,” I responded firmly. “I am not so presumptuous as to seek praise for a duty unfulfilled.”

Prince Gilbert covered his mouth to hide another chuckle. “You expect great things, don’t you? But only from yourself. I suspect that trait has brought you its share of troubles.”

His words, though playful, carried an undercurrent of sincerity. It was difficult

to fully discern the thoughts behind his polished exterior, but his smile, at least, seemed genuinely affectionate. And what was that about my predilections bringing me my fair share of troubles? Was he teasing me about my tendency towards perfectionism?

Suddenly, his laughter filled the room. “Oh, don’t look so annoyed, Carolina. I wasn’t mocking you. I genuinely find you...quite wonderful.”

“Wonderful?” I echoed, somewhat taken aback.

“You’ve earned my deepest respect, Mistress. Your approach to your life impresses me every day. It’s rare to meet someone so unambitious yet so diligent in their work.” With a snap of his fingers and a wink, he seemed to almost sparkle under the light. I fancied that I could see a tangled wall of roses blooming behind him, giving off an imagined perfume so heady that I doubted my own perceptions for half a heartbeat. It was as though his mere presence had the power to conjure a scene straight out of a fairy tale.

So that is the princely charm of one who has managed to capture hearts innumerable. It was a fearsome sight to behold, in more ways than one. Despite my best efforts to remain impervious, a part of me responded to that charismatic wink. I silently reprimanded myself—such reactions were unbecoming of a married woman, especially for someone like me. Accustomed as I was to the company of beautiful men like Lord Theodore and Prince Edward, Prince Gilbert’s flirtatious overtures ought not to affect me in the least.

“So this is what makes you so bewitching,” I muttered under my breath.

Prince Gilbert’s sharp ears caught the murmur of my voice. “What was that? You were mumbling.”

“Nothing important,” I answered quickly, hoping to sidestep the discussion in its entirety.

His gaze lingered on me, a hint of suspicion in his eyes. “Really?” he queried.

It seemed overt tactics like these didn’t work nearly as well on Prince Gilbert as they did upon his brother. I fumbled for a change of topic before I could dig myself yet deeper. “That concludes the examination. As for the day’s infusion —”

“It won’t be carried out because His Holiness is paying me a visit tomorrow, correct?”

I blinked; frankly, I hadn’t expected him to have made that connection. “Yes, exactly,” I said after a beat.

Prince Gilbert puffed out his chest with a smile that seemed to communicate, *I read my briefings as well, you know.*

Tomorrow’s appointment with His Holiness was indeed a significant event. Given his wealth of knowledge in Divinity, his consultation had the potential to reveal insights that we might have overlooked. I would also be allowed to observe as he attended to Prince Gilbert, which I found to be an exciting and invaluable proposition.

Invigorated by the opportunity to meet His Holiness once again, I felt my stomach clench in eager anticipation.



A day later, I found myself once again in the Diamond Palace’s drawing room, alongside not only Prince Gilbert but also His Holiness himself.

His Holiness, adorned in his sacred vestments, completed his review of the reports and then turned to me with a generous smile. “To see such progress in just a scant few weeks... Well done, Princess Carolina. You’re already well on your way towards surpassing me.”

Caught off guard by his lofty praise, I quickly tried to deflect. “S-Surpass Your Holiness? I couldn’t possibly...”

“There’s no need for such modesty, my child. Your work is worthy of recognition,” he persisted gently. “You should hold yourself in higher esteem.”

“I’ll... I’ll try my best.”

I scolded myself for my inability to take His Holiness’s praise in the sincere spirit in which it had been given, but I managed to hide my self-flagellation under a polite smile. The pontiff’s expression, as he regarded my hesitation, was not one of irritation but instead one of deep understanding. To me, “the Sanchez family disgrace,” there seemed to be no greater trial than to hold my

head high. Even though I appeared to be turning out to not be the disgrace I'd long been labeled as, the aftereffects of that upbringing still lingered within me.

Sensing the gloomy atmosphere, Prince Gilbert clapped his hands together and maneuvered for a change in topic—undoubtedly out of consideration for me. “Shall we proceed? His Holiness has a busy schedule, after all.”

His Holiness nodded. “Quite right, my child. Let us begin with the examination. Prince Gilbert, would you come closer to me? My old age is at odds with my sense of propriety, and alas, old age wins out when it comes to standing for too long.”

“Certainly, Your Holiness,” Prince Gilbert replied, moving with dignified ease. “I wouldn't want to cause you any discomfort.”

With a warm chuckle and words of appreciation from His Holiness, the atmosphere of the room reclaimed some modicum of its earlier levity. Prince Gilbert approached and positioned himself within reach of His Holiness. “Is this all right?” he asked.

“That will do just fine,” His Holiness confirmed. “My apologies, but could Your Highness incline yourself towards me?”

“How about if I sit next to you instead?” the prince suggested. “That would make it easier for the both of us, I would think.”

“By all means, Your Highness.”

Accepting Prince Gilbert's proposal, His Holiness shifted over to the far side of the sofa in order to make space. Prince Gilbert muttered a word of thanks and settled down beside him.

“Now, I'll begin the examination,” announced His Holiness.

“I await the good news,” Prince Gilbert replied with a glib optimism.

“Pardon my imposition,” His Holiness said as he extended his hand and allowed it to hover just above Prince Gilbert's eyes. Accustomed to the procedure, Prince Gilbert closed his eyes, allowing His Holiness to proceed.



I watched intently, curious about His Holiness's methodology. His technique differed markedly from mine, focusing on a close inspection of the area around Prince Gilbert's eyes. I gathered it was to sense the energy surrounding his optic nerve, but I wondered about the specifics of what he was observing and how it might contribute to our larger understanding of Prince Gilbert's condition.

"Hmm... Interesting..." His Holiness murmured, a mere moment into the examination. He withdrew his hand. Sensing the movement, Prince Gilbert opened his eyes.

Only a minute or two has gone by. What could His Holiness have learned in such a short amount of time? My curiosity overcame my usual restraint. "What have you discovered, Your Holiness?" I asked eagerly.

His Holiness turned to me, his eyes crinkling in a warm smile. "I've discovered a great deal—a great deal indeed. Allow me to share my findings one by one," he said, waiting for Prince Gilbert to resettle into his original seat before elaborating further. "First, my observations align with the reports. Prince Gilbert is responding positively to the treatment. With continued progress, a full recovery is certainly within the realm of possibility."

I couldn't contain my surprise. "My goodness! That's incredible news!"

"Indeed, it is. Prince Gilbert's optic nerves, previously hypersensitive to the utmost degree, have been soothed by a ceaseless flow of divine energy. His Highness is on the mend." Here, His Holiness paused as if he wanted to speak further, but then the smile slid away from his lips. "He is on the mend, but..."

Bad news? But how? If Prince Gilbert was convalescing, possibly on the cusp of a full recovery, what ominous cloud could yet be lurking? *Ah! A complication arising from the treatment, perhaps? A dire side effect? That might explain the hesitation in His Holiness's demeanor.*

"Your Holiness, please," Prince Gilbert urged in a solemn voice. "Do not think it a mercy to withhold information from me. No matter how grave the news, I wish to know. Spare me no detail." His gaze was steadfast, his fists clenched, and he trembled with barely contained emotion.

How brave he is... No doubt fear gripped his heart—we spoke in soberest

terms of his health, his future. Yet he stood unflinching, demanding the unvarnished truth, regardless of the pain it might bring.

Touched by the prince's valor, His Holiness raised his head, his face tinged with a trace of guilt for his earlier hesitance. "Then I shall convey my thoughts openly."

Silence enveloped the room, so profound that I fancied that, were I to drop a single one of my embroidery needles, the sound of it striking the floor would reverberate like a church bell. Waiting for the mood to settle, His Holiness spoke again. "While it is probable that Your Highness will overcome his Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome, there remains a chance it might instead merely enter remission."

R-Remission? The word struck me like a lightning bolt. *Does His Holiness mean the disease might then reappear at any time? But how?* This was Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome; a second occurrence of the disease would be unprecedented...

But then again, everything about Prince Gilbert's case was unprecedented, so perhaps His Holiness's speculation deserved more consideration than doubt. Frustration knit my brows. The idea of Prince Gilbert living with the ever-present threat of a reemergence of his symptoms was disheartening indeed. All the progress we had made, the hope we had fostered—it now seemed overshadowed by this new uncertainty.

"Remission. I see," Prince Gilbert echoed the term with a hint of resignation. "May I inquire about the basis for Your Holiness's conclusion?"

His Holiness nodded. "To put it bluntly, Your Highness, it's your excruciatingly sharp vision that has led me to my hypothesis," he said, tapping at his own temples. "As previously discussed, I believe the core of your ailment is rooted in the extraordinary overdevelopment of your optic nerve. I have two distinct points of evidence for this supposition: firstly, the fact that your symptoms manifest in vision and vision only, and secondly, the extreme sensitivity of the optic nerve itself."

"Yes, I recall your theory," Prince Gilbert interjected, "about how the overly sensitive mechanism by which my eyes observe light and color has in addition

become attuned to the perception of mana?”

“Precisely, my child. Though that is all it is: a theory. Our understanding of Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome is rudimentary at best.”

As I pieced together the implications of their conversation, I found myself becoming fascinated by the idea that mana sensitivity might in fact be an advanced form of sensory sensitivity. Admittedly, this all sounded very outlandish, but despite my skepticism, I was entirely aware that I myself lacked the evidence or the education to challenge this notion.

His Holiness continued, “Given the exceptional state of your optic nerve, and the unfortunate certitude that our current approach does not address this fundamental issue, it is conceivable that mana hypersensitivity may spontaneously manifest again, as it did for you the first time.”

“I see your point,” Prince Gilbert added, his tone reflective. “And should my symptoms reoccur, what will become of me? Will it be worse than it is now? Will there suddenly come a day on which mana becomes visible to me once more?”

“I don’t anticipate anything so immediate or severe,” the high pontiff reassured him. “Naturally, neglecting your treatments would almost assuredly lead to progressive worsening, but initially, it would likely reappear subtly, as it did at first. However, I must admit that my conclusions are speculative at best.” His brow furrowed slightly, betraying a sense of regret for his inability to provide a more definitive answer.

Noticing His Holiness’s discomfort, Prince Gilbert responded with his characteristic understanding, “That’s quite all right, Your Holiness. I know better than anyone that in a case as complex as mine, certainties are a luxury. I sought your informed judgment, and that is exactly what you have given me.” He regained his composure, shifting the conversation forward. “Thank you for your insights. Were there any other points or observations you wished to share?”

“I believe that this conversation has encompassed all that I can surmise, Your Highness,” His Holiness replied, with a subtle shake of his head that signaled the end of the discussion.

Prince Gilbert acknowledged this with a nod and slowly rose to his feet. “Then

I believe we have concluded our meeting for today. My thanks to both of you for this enlightening exchange,” he announced, drawing the curtain on the day’s investigation into the curious case of Prince Gilbert.

Chapter Six

A week after my audience with His Holiness, a summons from Lord Teodore drew me to his office in the Pyreborn headquarters. Lord Teodore sat behind his desk, looking markedly better than when I had last seen him. The glow of recovered health tinged his cheeks, perhaps an indication of some much-needed rest reclaimed from his endless days of overworking.

“Your Highness,” he began, his voice a low echo in the spacious room, “I must beg forgiveness for the abrupt nature of this meeting.” His head bowed low in apology, a dance of shadows playing across his face.

“There’s no need, Lord Teodore,” I reassured with a shake of my head. I knew that Lord Teodore would not call unless it was important, and considering that Prince Gilbert’s treatment had lately been the sole item on my agenda, I had time available for an impromptu meeting or two.

“I’m grateful for your understanding,” Lord Teodore responded, his tone appreciative yet colored with urgency. “Forgive my directness, but may we proceed to the matter at hand?”

How strangely formal of him, I thought, but now that I observed him with more attention, I noticed the undercurrent of restlessness in his demeanor. Sensing that the issue was pressing indeed, I encouraged him to continue, a sense of apprehension beginning to stir within me.

Adjusting his spectacles, Lord Teodore opened the documents resting on his lap. “To begin with, an update on the internal factions: the situation is improving, particularly with Prince Gilbert’s return to the public eye, which has, as we had hoped, somewhat subdued the extremists. However...” He hesitated, his eyes momentarily averting from mine, the furrows on his brow betraying the gravity of his next words. “We have encountered a security breach within the royal castle. It has come to our attention that your frequent visits to the Diamond Palace have become common knowledge among the aristocracy, and this has in turn caused rumors to circulate which cast Your Highness in a

rather...unfavorable light.”

What...? His revelation left me speechless, my eyes widening in shock. Sensing my astonishment, Lord Teodore quickly added, “We have initiated an investigation to uncover the origin of this unfortunate gossip.”

So this was the reason for today’s sudden meeting... Lord Teodore’s report of rumors casting me in a “unfavorable light” was indirect in its phrasing, yet the implication was clear. The whispers were likely about an alleged affair between myself and Prince Gilbert, the sort of scandal upon which the nobility thrived. “It’s no surprise that they jumped to such conclusions,” I murmured. “Given the secrecy of my visits, what else *could* they think?”

It was the sort of rumor that was liable to change the nobility’s impression of me an instant (and negatively, needless to say). “Seductress of princes,” “the brazen harlot who swindled her way into the royal castle”... I shuddered to think of what they might be saying about me at that very instant.

A sigh of frustration escaped me. I had naively assumed that the confidentiality regarding the affairs of the royal castle was an impenetrable fortress. The age-old adage “the walls have ears” should have been at the forefront of my mind at all times, but I’d let my guard drop.

As I slumped in disillusionment, Lord Teodore clutched at his temples as if to stave off a severe headache. “We’ve been careless,” he admitted ruefully. “I can’t fathom how these details about your daily activities leaked, but that’s no excuse. I offer my deepest apologies, Your Highness.”

“Not at all,” I said with a resigned shake of my head. “I share in the responsibility. But instead of assigning culpability, let’s focus on the way forward.”

Indeed, to wallow in despondence would get us nowhere. There would always be time for regret and reflection, but immediate action was needed now in order to contain the situation. While Lord Teodore and his team could hunt for the informant, my most pressing concern was addressing the rumors. Ideally, we might quash the gossip by revealing the truth about the nature of my Divinity and the character of Prince Gilbert’s condition, but unfortunately, such transparency was unthinkable. I’d sooner be falsely accused of rankest sin and

die in ignominy than create another diplomatic rift between Malcosias and Celestia. And if we couldn't do that, then I saw no straightforward course of action.

"I have a lead on the source of the leaked intelligence, which will soon be stoppered," Lord Teodore informed me. "As for countering the rumors, we could frame your visits as compassionate gestures to a suffering relative. But that's hardly a comparatively compelling narrative."

"As in, it lacks the necessary spectacle?" I questioned.

"Precisely," he concurred. "Nobles are creatures who thrive on intrigue. They'd sooner cling on to the scandal of it all than accept the mundane truth. To divert their attention, we need to introduce a more captivating rumor, something that overshadows the current gossip." His expression was strained, his peridot eyes reflecting his mental turmoil through his glasses.

I understood his frustration. Celestia had once been rampant with similarly garrulous nobles—an emphasis on *had*. Whenever Flora became the topic of their gossip, those nobles soon found themselves pariahs, ostracized from high society. Flora, who valued her reputation above all, was meticulous in digging up the roots of any rumor about her, no matter how trivial. While perhaps I could stand to learn from my sister's example, the situation here in Malcosias was a different beast altogether. The Celestian nobility might as well be the salon of a provincial merchant when compared to the scope of the Malcosian aristocracy. It would take a lifetime to silence every dissenting noble that spoke out against me.

What would Flora do? I found myself pondering this unlooked-for question.

After a moment of tensely contemplative silence, Lord Teodore offered me a blessed escape. "Your Highness, please do not burden yourself with this matter. I will handle it. Continue your focus on Prince Gilbert's treatment."

I nodded, appreciative of his support. "Thank you, Lord Teodore."

Without missing a beat, he swerved towards a new topic. "Regarding your ongoing examination of Prince Gilbert, there is one alteration I'd like to propose."

“An alteration?” I echoed, caught off guard.

He met my gaze squarely, affirming his intention. “Indeed. Do you recall a specific suggestion you made in one of your reports?”

“You don’t mean...” I took a deep breath. “The one about taking Prince Gilbert outside the palace to assess the extent of his mana perception?”

“Exactly that,” Lord Theodore confirmed. “After consulting with His Holiness, we believe it’s feasible to take Prince Gilbert outside in his current condition. I haven’t asked the prince himself for his consent yet, but I wanted to seek your opinion first, Your Highness.”

Lord Theodore gazed at me steadily, his face devoid of any expectation, displaying only a calm patience as he waited for my response. Truthfully, the idea of taking Prince Gilbert outside made me uneasy, but I knew that it was a bridge we must cross eventually. I suppose there was no point in delaying it further. If his condition were to suddenly deteriorate, I could always administer to him divine energy then and there.

“Very well, let us sally forth. Prince Gilbert has my unwavering support,” I declared, my determination evident, fists clenched in resolve.

To my confusion, my firm stance seemed to trigger an odd reaction in Lord Theodore. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then hesitated, his features briefly clouded by concern. He quickly masked it with a smile.

“Is there something on your mind?” I inquired, sensing his unease.

“No, it was nothing. Just a fleeting thought, please forgive my distraction.”

A bold-faced lie, propped up by an even falser smile. I was left with a lingering sense of doubt, but he offered no avenue for me to probe more deeply. Abruptly, he stood up. “That is all for today’s discussion. Please keep in mind what we spoke of earlier. Now, if you’ll excuse me, some additional matters with the Pyreborn demand my attention.”

Before I could respond, Lord Theodore moved swiftly towards the door. His abrupt departure and evasive behavior only fueled my suspicion. He paused at the door, his gaze fixed upon it for a prolonged moment, as if studying the grain of the wood. Then, turning sharply, he addressed me with an unexpected

caution. “Your Highness, I hope you won’t find this too impertinent of me, but I must advise you: refrain from getting too close to Prince Gilbert. There are individuals who would be deeply hurt by such a development.”

“Hurt? To whom are you referring?” I questioned, puzzled.

“That is all I can say. Please think upon my words,” he replied cryptically.

With that final, enigmatic utterance, Lord Teodore departed, leaving me alone in the quiet of his now vacant office, immersed in a whirlpool of unanswered questions and deep disconcertment.



The night that followed and the ensuing morning did little to suggest any answers to the enigmatical problems left to me by Lord Teodore. Storm-filled clouds lowered upon my heart as I walked down one of the grand halls of the Diamond Palace.

Refrain from getting too close to Prince Gilbert? Lord Teodore’s warning nagged at me relentlessly. Why would he suggest such a thing? There seemed no logical reason to avoid getting closer to my brother-in-law. In fact, given the frequency of our meetings, developing a rapport seemed inevitable. Was I expected to act coldly and rebuff his conversational overtures deliberately? The prospect seemed terribly rude.

And then there were the “individuals who would be deeply hurt” by my closeness with the first prince. I couldn’t fathom how my actions could be perceived as harmful. Was it a reference to Prince Gilbert’s admirers, possibly upset by our growing bond, fueled in their ire by the circulating rumors?

But why would Lord Teodore feel compelled to caution me about such a matter? And supposing this was indeed his concern, why not be more forthright about it? Why not simply tell me, “Prince Gilbert’s admirers can be quite indefatigable, so I advise you to not get too close to him.” What was wrong with that?

Lost in these spiraling thoughts, I murmured aloud as I approached a corner, “The more I think about it, the less sense it makes...”

“Think about what?”

An exasperated sigh escaped me. This was the last voice I'd wanted to hear at this moment. I rounded the corner, and there he was: Prince Gilbert in all his pastel-blue glory.

He flashed me a smile. "You seem awfully pensive today, Mistress. Something on your mind?"

"Good morning, Your Highness," I replied, my tone carrying only the barest hint of courtesy. "It's nothing so important as to demand your concern. Forgive my forwardness, but is it truly wise for you to be wandering the halls?"

I eyed him warily as he approached; more warily still as he took my hand with a flourish. "I wanted to come and personally greet you upon your arrival. Only...you arrived a little earlier than I had expected, resulting in this...awkward encounter. I shall take your remarkable punctuality into account for the future."

"That's quite all right, Your Highness," I assured him as politely as I could. "Please rest instead of troubling yourself over me."

He giggled. "Your concern is touching, as always, but I won't collapse strolling down these corridors. You have my solemn word."

"While I respect your *opinion*, Your Highness, it would do you well to remember you are still a patient."

I could only hope the forcefulness in my words would have the desired impact, but one look at the glib smile that had floated onto his face suggested otherwise. *I will continue to welcome you into my home as I please*, his silence seemed to suggest.

Exasperated, I sighed deeply and pinched the bridge of my nose.

He chuckled again, his voice tinged with amusement. "You seem especially world-weary today."

"I just might be," I conceded quietly, more to myself than to him.

"Really?" Prince Gilbert responded with a hint of surprise. "Now *that* I wasn't expecting. How unusually candid of you."

I didn't answer his unspoken question. I shot him one final sidelong glance before I resumed making my way down the corridor. Ignoring his gaze burning

into my profile and the unctuous presence of his hand on mine, I sighed again—but silently this time.

“Well, that means you must be *very* tired,” he continued. “Are you certain you’re up to the task?”

“Rest assured, Your Highness, that I will not falter in your examination or treatment if that’s what you are asking.”

“That’s...not quite what I was getting at, but it is nonetheless good to hear. Just do let me know if you’re feeling unwell in any way.”

“Thank you, I appreciate your concern.”

I nodded at him out of politeness, and he nodded back at me, seemingly satisfied that I had accepted his concern, and that seemed to signal the end of our little interaction. At last we reached his room. Prince Gilbert opened the door, still holding my hand, and guided me inside. I settled into my usual seat and waited for him to get comfortable before initiating the conversation. “First, I’d like to confirm our plans for tomorrow. We will venture outside the palace when the divine energy within you has been depleted in order that we might observe your symptoms. Is this in line with what you’ve been informed?”

“Indeed,” he replied.

“Excellent,” I continued briskly. “Then I assume you’re also aware that members of the Pyreborn will accompany us during the outing?”

“Of course. The Pyreborn’s finest nonmagical swordsmen, correct?”

“Very good,” I replied, feeling a weight lift off my chest. Just aligning our understanding of the plan had seemed like it might have been a task unto itself, but thankfully, we seemed to be on the same page. Tomorrow was a pivotal day in the course of Prince Gilbert’s treatment, and I needed to be at my best. There was no room for error in what lay ahead.

Pursing my lips tight, I marshaled my thoughts once again. “With the expectation that your condition will take a turn, medical staff will be on standby. It is imperative that you inform us immediately should you feel any discomfort, Your Highness. While there are no recorded cases of Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome causing severe injury or death, we cannot be too

careful. I beg your cooperation in this matter.”

His response was yet another glib chuckle. “You needn’t beg for my cooperation, Carolina; I shall always give it to you willingly.”

“Your recent behavior inclines me to believe otherwise,” I admonished. “If you truly wish to reassure me, Your Highness, please avoid further actions that cause concern.”

Another noncommittal laugh. “No promises.”

Wonderful. He hasn’t learned a single thing. How was I to approach tomorrow with any inkling of confidence if his attitude was to remain so utterly facile? Though perhaps I should remind myself that this was the same man who’d walked around holding his greatest vulnerability in his willing hands with barely a care in the world. I would be a fool to think I could afford any lapse in vigilance around him.

My frustration escaped me in another sigh. “That is all we need discuss regarding the preparations for tomorrow. Now, let us proceed with the examination. Please remain seated; I’ll come to you.”

With that, I focused inward, summoning the sensation of divine energy, a force that I might at this point almost call a familiar friend. As quickly as possible, I finished with the procedure, declined his offer for tea, and returned to the Emerald Palace. With the impending experimental outing looming before me, I chose an early night, and before I knew it, morning had arrived.

Dressed and ready for the day, with an efficient alacrity courtesy of Marisa, I found myself outside the Diamond Palace once again, Collett by my side. A few other members of the Pyreborn were already assembled, their armor glinting in the morning light. I greeted them warmly. “Good morning, everyone. Your presence today is most reassuring.”

They snapped to attention, their gazes fixed forward, their eyes deliberately sliding away from mine—not quite the reaction I expected.

“G-Good morning, Your Highness!” one stuttered, his cracking voice betraying his nervousness.

“It-It is an honor!” another chimed in.

“Your Highnesses’ safety is our highest priority!” added the third with a fervent tone.

My, it seems that we have a few skittish knights in our mix this morning, I thought, thoroughly amused. There was an innocent, almost charming quality to their anxiousness, and I had to restrain myself from breaking into a smile that might seem out of place. It dawned on me that I might have been unfairly projecting Prince Edward’s widely publicized image as a “fearsome warrior” onto all members of the Pyreborn alike. The members were, of course, all individuals, each with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies, behind the identical helmets and armor. “Thank you. I’m counting on each and every one of you,” I replied, unable to completely suppress the giggle that escaped my lips.

My amusement did not go unnoticed, and the knights responded with sheepish smiles, quickly averting their eyes. *Oops, I suppose that wasn’t very royal-like of me, was it?*

However, my moment of levity was brief, unceremoniously interrupted by a familiar, languid voice. “Well, well, well, what do we have here? Starting the festivities without me, I see.” Prince Gilbert sailed gaily towards us, his hair flowing in the gentle breeze. Sidling up next to me, he slipped into his easy smile. “Hello, Mistress, how do you fare today? And to the Pyreborn members, a warm greeting; Carolina and I are grateful for your protection.”

I responded to him with a stiff and formal curtsy, grasping my skirt delicately. It felt like an overly ceremonial gesture, considering my familiarity with the prince, but propriety demanded it in the presence of others. “Good morning, Your Highness. It’s a pleasure to see you as well.”

Prince Gilbert acknowledged my greeting with a courteous nod before turning his attention to the knights. At his presence, they instantly knelt, bowing their heads in a display of deep respect.

The most senior knight among the small unit declared with fervor, “At the Vice Commander’s order, we have come. We shall protect Your Highness with our lives!”

“Very good,” Prince Gilbert replied somewhat perfunctorily.

Simultaneously, the three knights responded with a resounding, “Hah!”

The earlier lighthearted atmosphere vanished, replaced by a palpable sense of solemnity that put everyone on edge. With all the pieces in place, it was time to proceed with Prince Gilbert's most critical examination yet. "Your Highness, are you prepared?" I inquired.

"Ready whenever you are," he answered with his usual ease, a relaxed smile curling onto his lips. However, his nonchalant demeanor belied an underlying tension that I could palpably sense.

Observing the subtle tremor in his hands, I gathered my resolve. This was the moment for which we had meticulously prepared. The knights were at the ready to intervene at a moment's notice; we would never be more ready than this. "All right," I said, trying to sound as confident as possible. "Open the doors."

At my command, the grand doors of the Diamond Palace began to creak open, letting in a cool autumn breeze. As they swung wide, revealing the ordinary world outside, I wondered what Prince Gilbert was perceiving in this moment.

My attention snapped towards him. His face was contorted in discomfort, eyes squinting as though in pain. "I can handle this, divine energy or not," he muttered to himself. One hand clutched his chest, the other raised as if to shield his eyes from an intense glare. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Your Highness, are you all right?!" I couldn't help but raise my voice in concern.

"I'm fine. I am in pain, but it is manageable," he replied through clenched teeth.

I reached out to lay a supportive hand on his back, alarmed. "That doesn't sound 'fine' at all. We need to close the doors. Call off the test!"

But Prince Gilbert would not acknowledge my warning, instead stepping away from my supporting hand and standing on his own. His determination was undeniable, and nothing short of courageous to be sure, but at what cost?

"No," he managed to say. "I won't crumble before even starting. All these preparations, the measures taken for my safety, and yet I'd falter now? I won't

allow it.”

“Your Highness, I understand you feel a duty to follow through with this experiment, but there is no need for you to push yourself like this!” I insisted. “If you’re harmed as part of this process, then all our efforts will be in vain.”

A chuckle escaped him, although this time through gritted teeth. “You really do worry too much,” he gasped. “But believe me, I’m fine. I’m just not used to seeing such large amounts of mana after so long. I’ll adapt.”

“You will, but gradually, over time! Not all at once so suddenly!”

My pleas fell on deaf ears. “I’m all right,” he repeated, almost like a mantra. I couldn’t comprehend his relentless drive to continue this test, but it was clear that he had made his decision. And Prince Gilbert was, as I had learned, distressingly stubborn once his mind was set upon something. Any further attempts to dissuade him would likely be futile. Even if I called off the test, he might very well attempt it alone, unsupervised. Faced with the choice of conducting this experiment under controlled conditions or risking him striking out on his own, the safer option was clear, albeit not my preferred one.

With a heavy heart, I swallowed my protests. Instead, I exhaled a resigned sigh. “Very well. The test will proceed,” I declared, stepping back and raising my hands in a gesture that signaled my reluctant acquiescence.

Prince Gilbert’s expression instantly brightened at my words. He reached out and gently clasped my hands in his, a gesture that visibly puzzled the knights. “Thank you, Mistress—truly,” he said with heartfelt gratitude.

I cut him off. “Provided you agree to my terms.”

His chuckle, initially filled with enthusiasm, faded as he sensed the seriousness of my tone. Reluctantly releasing my hands, he slumped slightly. “I should have known you’d have your terms. Go ahead, name them.”

I held out two fingers. “Firstly, do not ignore any discomfort. Pay attention to the signals that your body sends to you. If you feel that you’re nearing your limit, I expect you to inform us well in advance.”

“I promise to be completely honest about how I feel,” he replied promptly. “And the second condition?”

“The second,” I continued, “is that you will return to the palace by nine-thirty. Regardless of how well you feel, you must be back in your room by that very moment, with no exceptions. The strain of this new experience, both mentally and physically, should not be underestimated. I want you to return to safety before it becomes too much.”

“Nine-thirty,” he repeated, pausing to consider. “So I have essentially a mere half hour of freedom?”

“That’s correct,” I nodded. Originally, the excursion had been intended to last an hour, but given that Prince Gilbert had already admitted to being unaccustomed to the exposure, it would be poor judgment on my part to let things continue as long as we had originally planned.

Prince Gilbert stroked his chin, pondering my proposition for a moment. The second of my terms must have come as a disappointment to him, but...

“Very well, I accept your conditions. Reluctantly.”

Truthfully, there had been no need for him to specify his reluctance; the unwillingness was etched into every inch of his face. “Thank you, Your Highness,” I said with as much grace as I could muster. “Now, onward with the test.”

(Prince Edward)

At the very moment my brother was taking his first steps into the wider world, Teo and I sheltered from the wintry weather in the Pyreborn headquarters, working our way through our latest mountain of paperwork. After signing off on yet another document, I set it aside and reached for the next, simultaneously posing the same three questions to Teo that I found myself asking him every day. “Teo, what’s Carolina’s schedule like today? Do you think we’re overburdening her? Oh, and tell me—has she seemed troubled lately?”

Teo nonchalantly shrugged off my inquiries. “Why don’t you ask her yourself, Your Highness? Since you certainly have the time to do so, why haven’t you seen her yourself lately?”

I felt a tinge of embarrassment. “Time isn’t the issue. It’s just that our last interaction was a bit...awkward. I doubt she’s eager to see me right now...”

“It’s wonderful that you’re so considerate of her, Your Highness, but what about *me*, having to field these same interminably dull questions daily? Perhaps you are genuinely not aware of this, so allow me to spell it out to you with clarity: I am not her personal secretary, and I’m certainly not privy to every detail of her life.” He closed his book with a definite snap. “I might know her schedule, but that is the extent of what I know.” His body language seemed to append, *So please, spare me the rest.*

I was acutely aware that my incessant questioning was becoming a nuisance to Teo. I also knew I should speak directly to Carolina to clear any misunderstandings. But the thought of her and my brother together was...more than I could handle. I couldn’t risk confronting her while I was still struggling so much to contain these turbulent emotions. The mere thought of unintentionally hurting her held me back.

“You don’t understand, Teo,” I confessed. “She’s the closest thing I have to a heart. I can’t— I won’t hurt her.”

Teo had always been the one person to whom I could express my deepest

thoughts and insecurities. He listened to me, not with judgment or irritation, but with a calm, analytical gaze. It was the same way he had looked at me since our childhood—not as a prince to be revered, but as a friend to be understood.

In this instance, he looked at me for a good while, and when he spoke next, his voice carried a candidness, a joviality that harkened back to our childhood days, a time when rank and status had been inconsequential. “I understand that you don’t want to hurt her. But I also want you to know that sometimes the longer you wait, the deeper the truth will cut.”

His tone transported me back to a simpler time, reigniting a sense of deep nostalgia. In his usual insightful manner, Teo had offered the guidance I sorely needed. He continued, “If she truly means as much to you as you claim, then she, of all people, deserves your honesty, no matter how painful it may be.”

I sat there, stunned, as his words shattered a long-held belief of mine. The principle of never harming those important to me in the least degree, a guiding rule of my life, suddenly seemed flawed.

Teo delivered his final coup de grâce with a roll of his eyes. “When will you realize, you big, dumb oaf, that your so-called sacrifices don’t always save others?”

Rising from his seat, he slid a piece of paper across the desk towards me. It detailed Carolina’s schedule for the day. Today, she would be accompanying my brother on an excursion outside the Diamond Palace. A plan began to crystallize in my mind. I might be lagging behind in my efforts, but better late than never. I looked up at Teo, feeling my resolve grow firmer. “Thanks, Teo. I’m heading to the Diamond Palace. I know now what I need to do.”

Leaping up, I strode swiftly to the window, a boyhood shortcut in the forefront of my mind. Without a moment’s hesitation, I vaulted over the sill, landing safely and transitioning into a brisk sprint.

“Godspeed, Edward,” Teo called out after me, leaning out of the office window, his expression a mix of amused resignation and deep understanding.

Buoyed by his encouragement, I quickened my pace, dashing away from the Pyreborn headquarters and into the royal castle grounds beyond. Soon enough, I arrived in front of the Diamond Palace. My brother’s security was unusually

heightened, undoubtedly due to his outing. The stakes were high, but I felt more than ready to confront what awaited me. I was the second prince of Malcosias, the “Bloodthirsty Prince” himself, and yet I found myself surreptitiously maneuvering through the grounds of my brother’s palace like a common thief. Why? Because I was a beacon of pure magical energy. I knew with certainty that my presence wouldn’t be welcome, especially on this day of all days. Why I hadn’t chosen to wait until after my brother’s excursion to meet with Carolina was admittedly beyond me, and there I was, darting from bush to tree, trying to reach her side without notice.

Then, I spotted them—a line of knights, and there! Carolina and Gilbert—locked in an intimate embrace.

“What?” I whispered to myself, baffled. “Why is he in her arms? And why aren’t my men intervening?”

In that moment, my shock overcame my discipline, and I stepped on a branch, which snapped loudly underfoot. Thankfully, only one person noticed my presence—Gilbert. He looked straight at me, his lips curling into a sly, almost malicious grin.

He mouthed a message to me: *She’s mine now, brother.*

That look, those smug golden eyes, what was he...? Overwhelmed by anger, I stepped out from my hiding place. My voice, when it came out, was icier than I expected. “Carolina, come here—now.”

She looked startled. “Prince Edward? What are you doing here?!”

I could barely contain my anger. “Surprised to see me? What are you doing with—”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. My brother, seeing my approach, tightened his grip on Carolina, which provoked me yet further.

“Take your goddamn hands off my wife!” I roared, my voice echoing through the open space. In a blind rage, I charged at them, colliding into Gilbert, sending him sprawling away from Carolina and into the waiting arms of my knights.

“Your Highness!” Carolina shrieked. After confirming that my brother was unharmed, I heard her let out a sigh of relief, something that only served to fuel

my growing rage. *Why is she more concerned about him? Is my brother more important to her than me? Could she possibly love him more?*

“Damn it!” I spat, grabbing her by the arm. “Carolina, come here—now!” I demanded.

“P-Prince Edward, please wait! I haven’t finished Prince Gilbert’s examination!” she protested.

“You’re still thinking of him... You do nothing but think of him!” I jerked her by the arm, leading her away from the scene. A small voice in my head urged me that I ought to be gentle, but it was lost in the overwhelming torrent of anger and hurt that stormed in the sea of my heart.

“Your Highness, where are we going?” Carolina asked, her voice laced with distress.

I couldn’t respond. I was afraid that anything I said would only inflict more pain.

“Please, if I’ve done something wrong, let’s stop and talk about it,” she pleaded.

A reasonable request. But in my rage, I lashed out. “Enough!”

In this moment of blind fury, my hand acted on its own. Carolina was sent flying, stopped short when her back slammed against a nearby tree. The expression of pain on her face brought me back to reality. Seeing the red mark on her arm, a stark manifestation of the rough way I’d held her, filled me with horror.

No... What have I done? This hadn’t been my intention at all. I’d never wanted to *hurt* her. I had wanted to treat her with kindness, respect, to make her happy, not this... I had sworn to be her protector, yet here I was, causing her pain and fear, forcing her into an untenable position.

Confused and tormented by the stark and ugly contrast between my intentions and actions, my mind went blank. “I... I...” My voice broke, the realization of the extent of my poor choices hitting me with full force. The shame and regret threatened to overwhelm me.

“Are you unwell, Your Highness? Please, calm down. Don’t blame yourself.” Carolina’s soothing voice pierced through my chaotic thoughts. She was the innocent and undeserving recipient of my rage, and yet she spoke with such kindness. Her voice was like a balm to the sting of my agitated state.

Tears began to well up in my eyes. “How... How can you be so kind, even after what I’ve done to you?”

I couldn’t bring myself to meet her gaze, but her voice was steady and clear. “If you’re referring to how you grabbed my arm and pushed me against a tree...well, fortunately for the both of us, Your Highness, I am a wielder of Divinity.”

I looked up, unable to believe her words, and I was met with an unbelievable sight. Carolina stood before me, enveloped in a radiant white light. Simply beholding its gentle glow seemed to calm my troubled heart. When the light faded, the red marks on her arm, the evidence of my rough treatment of her, had vanished utterly.

“You see? I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt. So please, Your Highness.” She stepped closer, cupping my chin in her hands. “Stop making that face. You look far more hurt than I could ever be.”

I look...far more hurt than...? Just what kind of face was I making at that moment?

“Let’s put all of this behind us,” she continued. “I won’t bring it up again. But in return, I want you to share your thoughts with me. Just like you sought to understand me, I want to understand you, more than anyone else in the world.”

How could she be so earnest and kind, even in the face of a situation that more than warranted her righteous fury? In that moment, those beautiful ruby red eyes seemed to shimmer with unshakable trust and resolve. For Carolina to seek to understand me... I had never even considered the notion. My approach had been one-sided from the onset. As long as I could understand Carolina...I had assumed that this would be enough; I had never even considered her perspective. Just how ignorant and self-absorbed could one man be?

“All right,” I murmured, barely audible. “I’ll tell you everything—my whole truth. But first, answer me this: why did I find you and my brother locked in an

embrace?”

“Locked in an...?” she echoed, before her eyes widened. “Y-You misunderstand, Your Highness! Prince Gilbert felt faint and I was merely assisting him. It might have appeared from a distance to resemble an embrace, but I assure you, my intentions were entirely appropriate!” She gestured animatedly, and her lucid red eyes conveyed the deep sincerity of her words.

So that was why none of my knights had reacted—because the situation had not at all been what I had perceived. I still wouldn’t put it past my brother to feign a fainting spell to find comfort in Carolina’s arms, but that was a suspicion to examine at another time. The key realization was that Carolina herself had done nothing wrong. “I thought for sure that you embraced him willingly,” I admitted, my shamefast eyes cast downwards.

“I would never do such a thing, especially as I am married to you!” she responded immediately.

My heart sank. I had made some truly terrible assumptions. In my anger, I had acted without all the facts, allowing my impulsive nature to lead to a whole slew of regrettable actions. As a knight—as a person—I had disgraced myself. “I’m so sorry, Carolina,” I managed to say, the remorse weighing heavy in my voice. “I hurt you because I acted without thinking.”

“It’s all right, Your Highness. This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t been careless about the manner in which others might perceive my actions,” she said, clearly doing her best to ease my guilt.

“No, that’s not it at all—”

“But, Your Highness,” she interjected, “is there another reason for your outburst today? Something else that you haven’t told me?”

She looked so determined, so resolute in shifting the conversation away from my stammered apologies to the true heart of the matter. Faced with her earnest gaze, imploring—nay, begging for the truth, I hesitated.

The true reason—where would I even start? The unease I felt about her relationship with Gilbert? My recent avoidance of her? No, because underneath all of that lay the core truth, the impetus behind all the rest...

“Carolina—I love you.”

Naming of the emotion I felt for her, the one that fed the fire of everything else I felt—that was the place from which I needed to start. As I spoke, I placed my hands gently over hers, which were still cupping my face, holding them as if I couldn’t bear to let go. “I love you, Carolina. But how can three tiny words fully capture all that I feel? When I see you with another man, I’m consumed by fear and jealousy, afraid of losing you—even when that man is my own brother.”

Carolina stood there in silence, absorbing the raw intensity of my confession. I continued, my voice softer but no less fervent. “The thought of my brother winning your affections... It left me torn, anxious, and filled with rage. I was furious with him for possibly exploiting your trust, and with you for not seeing through his act. I behaved like a child, unable to control my emotions, and so I lashed out in anger and frustration.”

“What?” I heard her whisper.

“I’ve been avoiding you, Carolina, because I’m afraid of what I might do in your presence. My love for you is so profound, so overwhelming, that the mere thought of losing control and causing you harm terrifies me.”

As I spoke these words, my expression twisted with the pain of these realizations. Carolina only looked at me with pity and with confusion.

Love. The more I spoke of it, the more I began to feel a dark sense of self-loathing. How could I claim to love her when my actions spoke so clearly to the contrary? I felt deserving of her utmost contempt, disdain, or any other unpleasant sentiment she might wish to hurl my way after what I’d put her through. I could not bring myself to ask her forgiveness. No, I had built this house of despair, and within its lonely walls I would dwell.

“I’ve wronged you deeply, Carolina,” I said bleakly. “Being swept up by my passions is no excuse. If it’s my brother you prefer, then I’ll accept that. I don’t deserve you. If you wish for a divorce, I won’t oppose it.”

“Y-Your Highness, wait—!” she sputtered.

“But know this...”

I pulled her into my arms as tightly as I dared without risk of causing her

discomfort. I savored the sensation of her within my embrace—her warmth, the scent of her hair, the softness of her still-protesting voice. I committed every detail to memory.

“It is I who loves you more than anyone else, not my brother, not anyone. That is the truth—the whole truth,” I professed fervently. “Knowing this, will you still choose him over me? Please, say you won’t—tell me you won’t!”

In that moment, as I held her, my heart poured out its deepest feelings, striving to convey even a fraction of the immense love I felt for her. If I could make her understand even the merest fraction of my affection, it would be worth every effort.

Carolina squirmed slightly in my embrace, her voice quivering with emotion. “Y-Your Highness! I... I had no idea you felt this way. The truth is...I also have a confession to make.”

Her cheeks flushed a vivid pink, and she looked up at me with an expression that was both pleading and endearing. I hoped she could sense the sincerity of my feelings and the fervent beating of my heart.

Her mouth fluttered open, her blush spreading in a deep pink from her nose all the way to the tips of her ears. “I love you, Prince Edward! I have adored you for quite some time!”



She paused momentarily, seemingly gathering her thoughts, then continued with renewed intensity, “You are a man without pretense, a leader who puts his men first. Your honesty, your earnestness—these qualities are what made me fall for you. I wanted to tell you so, so much sooner, but I was scared of jeopardizing the nature of the relationship that had already blossomed between us. Thank you for being brave enough to express your feelings first. Now, I can finally proclaim my affections for you without any fear!”

She was almost out of breath by the end of her passionate and heartfelt declaration. But she’d accepted my love—oh, had she ever accepted it! I stood there, momentarily stunned, as her words sank into my consciousness. Finally, I regained my senses and looked deeply into her eyes. “Y-You... Really?!”

“Really!” she affirmed with conviction. “I would never dream of jesting about something so important!”

“You loved me,” I whispered, my voice trailing away. “I never even thought it possible...”

“And neither did I imagine my feelings would ever be reciprocated,” she added, her voice tinged with wonder.

So, we’ve both been harboring feelings for one another, yet each mistakenly believed they were unrequited? It was a bittersweet realization, and my shoulders drooped at the thought. “I should’ve spoken up sooner. Think of the time we’ve lost...”

One fleeting regret—that was all I allowed myself before I dived back into the intimacy of the moment, tenderly stroking my wife’s hair. “Carolina, would you call me Ed from now on? ‘Your Highness,’ ‘Prince Edward,’ I don’t want to hear such formality from you any longer. I want us to be a real and outwardly affectionate couple.”

“Of course, Your—” She corrected herself with a little smile. “I mean, yes, Ed. And please, call me Lina.”

“Lina,” I repeated, feeling the naturalness of such intimate familiarity on my lips.

Our faces instinctively drew closer, as if drawn by a force much larger than

ourselves.

“I love you, Lina,” I said softly.

“I love you, Ed,” she responded.

And with that, the passionate exchange of our mutual confessions, we sealed the declaration of our love with a kiss. Intoxicating, passionate, and filled with the sweetness of perfect honesty, it was a flawless second kiss.

In that moment, my heart overflowed with gratitude. *Thank you for choosing me, Lina*, I thought silently. I thanked the Heavenly Father above for leading us to each other. Our journey might have been a needlessly meandering and tumultuous one, but it had been rooted in love. And that’s all that mattered.

(Prince Gilbert)

As I watched my brother leading Carolina away, I found myself leaning against the wall of the Diamond Palace for support, a rueful smile playing across my lips.

Such fervor... Perhaps I'd provoked my younger brother just a bit too much. But when I'd glimpsed that helpless look on his face, I'd simply been unable to help myself. I had never truly intended to steal Carolina from his clumsy embrace, I'd only wanted to rile him up a little, make it known to him that at least for these few hours every day, she was mine and only mine. It had been an admittedly childish and immature notion, but what else could I do when I was so acutely aware that her heart could never truly be mine?

As I stared after them, a large magical circle suddenly materialized before me. I squinted against the harsh light; the knights standing next to me tensely gripped their swords.

"You've had your fun, Your Highness. Now it's time to pay the piper." His voice reached me before the light faded, revealing a blond man as familiar as he was beautiful. The wind playfully tousled his locks as he performed a subtle adjustment to the glasses that always sat so perfectly upon his face.

"Teo, how dare you appear like this in front of me. Does the delicacy of my condition mean so little to you?" I scolded with mock indignation.

"How dare I, indeed," he replied, his tone as dry as ever.

"No apology?" I tutted. "Such gall to think you might teleport right in front of me without due recompense."

"Consider it comeuppance for your antics today. When you don't play nice, I'm forced to intervene. Not to mention..." he gestured at the knights, who promptly began to disperse. Whatever he was about to say next was clearly meant for my ears only. "You're practically cured, aren't you? You might fool the princess and my knights, but don't think you can trick me."

I couldn't hide my reaction; a flicker of surprise betrayed me as he sighed, a look of mild disappointment crossing his face.

I swore to myself that this would be the last time I would underestimate him. With a forced smile, I played along. “Cured? Whatever could you be talking about?”

“Feign ignorance all you like, Your Highness. I teleported right in your face and you barely reacted. Do you expect me to believe that someone who used to get faint from the ambient mana of a conjured candle flame could endure the intensity of a high-level teleportation spell?”

I’d almost forgotten how impressive and slightly unsettling Teo’s perception was. I felt like a child caught in a lie by an all-knowing adult. I surrendered, raising my hands in a gesture of defeat. “All right, you’ve caught me. But who’s to say I didn’t want to have my little ruse discovered? When did you figure it out?”

“Just now, but I’ve had my suspicions ever since His Holiness’s report. Your recovery seemed unusually slow for someone whose optic nerve was, and I quote, ‘almost completely resolved.’”

“Ah, that,” I murmured. The inconsistency between His Holiness’s diagnosis and my own reports had been my undoing. In my fixation on Carolina’s treatment and her reliance on my subjective experiences, I hadn’t considered the potential for suspicion.

“I’ll overlook the reports you’ve embellished thus far, but please, no more. You’re monopolizing the princess’s time, and that’s not fair, now is it?”

Oh, Theodore, always so self-assured and patronizing, lecturing me as if you were emperor. I shot him an annoyed glance. “And if I told you that was exactly why I’ve been falsifying my accounts?”

“Huh?”

Hah, now there’s a reaction I wasn’t expecting. Delighted that I’d managed to finally flummox him on at least one count, I couldn’t help but giggle. I then turned away, knowing it would pique his curiosity even more.

“Tell me you didn’t develop genuine feelings for the princess?” the blond lordling pressed. “It was all just an act to stir your brother, no?”

I shrugged. “You know, I’m not quite so sure myself anymore.”

“What?” Teodore muttered, sounding utterly baffled.

“Oh, but I do respect her, very much indeed,” I assured him with my usual glibness. “I’m just saying that whether that respect has evolved into something deeper, I can’t be certain.”

My thoughts about Carolina were indeed fond ones, but I was forced to question the exact nature of those feelings. Was it love, affection, or something far less romantic, something more like a child’s pettish greed, wanting the bauble held in the hands of another?

Teo’s peridot gaze grew more thoughtful as he analyzed my words. “So you’re unsure of how you feel yourself. That would explain the recent discrepancies in your actions.”

“Discrepancies?” I asked, my brow arching in curiosity.

“You show interest in Carolina but never pursue her earnestly. Today, you had a chance to create a meaningful moment with her, but instead you chose to provoke your brother. If that isn’t discrepant, I don’t know what is.” His gaze was sharp, as if to underline the irregularity of my behavior. “Not to mention that the one who spread the rumors regarding Princess Carolina’s visits to the Diamond Palace...it was you, was it not?”

Hah. Well done, Teodore. Or perhaps, as expected, I should say. He posed it as a question, but his expression communicated that he held no doubts. Facing his direct gaze, I offered a smile with as little bitterness as I could muster. I’d known that Teo would figure it out eventually, but I was forced to admit my surprise that he’d done it so quickly. And what did it matter if he had? After all, I had stated mere facts: my dear sister-in-law visited me daily. How could he fault me for simply repeating the truth?

“Yes, I was the one who started those rumors,” I conceded. “But tell me this: how did you piece it together so quickly?”

Teo’s answer was prompt and pointed. “Who else but you would do so, Your Highness?”

His choice of words caught my attention. “*Would*, you say? Not *could*?”

“Yes, *would*,” he reiterated. “It is a question of motive. Supposing that

someone else knew about these visits, why would they choose to disseminate such knowledge? Which side of the conflict stands to gain anything from such a rumor?"

Motive, eh? Perhaps he was right. Why would anyone, at the risk of becoming a pariah, care to spread a rumor that would serve no real benefit to either my supporters or to Edward's? Possibly the neutral faction... Surely they wouldn't give a damn no matter how the conflict played out, and might they not enjoy the chaos and distress that such a rumor might cause to both parties? But, no... I suppose they would fear retaliation from the extremists. *In that case, I truly am the only suspect.*

Teo continued, analyzing my reactions. "I saw two possible motives: either you wanted to disrupt their marriage and claim the princess for yourself, or you aimed to provoke your brother into confronting his feelings. Your actions were unpredictable, your motives complex. Discrepant, indeed."

"Unpredictable and discrepant, eh?" I echoed, a hint of self-awareness creeping into my tone. "I suppose acting on uncertain emotions tends to have that effect."

Confronting this truth was uncomfortable yet unavoidable. I sighed heavily, reflecting on my actions. What *had* been my true intent? The desire I felt for her was undeniable, but the underlying reasons for it were murky. What purpose did it serve? The answer seemed more elusive than ever.

Oh well, none of that matters now.

"Teo, a request."

"Yes, Your Highness?"

"Pass on a message for me, will you? To Edward. Tell him to stay vigilant. Tell him that if he gives me even a sliver of a chance, I'll steal Carolina from him without a second thought. Can you do that for me?"

One final act as the dastardly elder brother to provide an appropriate ending to this little tale. I wondered if Teo understood my intentions. His mouth fluttered open, then closed; a puff of resigned frustration escaped his nose. "Very well, Your Highness. I'll advise him to cherish Her Highness with all his

heart.”

There should have never been any question in my mind that he would understand my desires. “Teo, didn’t your parents ever teach you not to read too deeply into another man’s words? Now you’ve taken away my chance to lose gracefully.”

“Grace?” he retorted. “You forfeited any claim to grace the moment you entertained the thought of pursuing your brother’s wife.”

“What a blow was there given! I almost forgot how little you mince your words.”

Teodore Garcia, with his unyielding candor, was perhaps the only person capable of leaving me feeling so sour. He gazed off in the direction Edward and Carolina had disappeared, a satisfied air about him.

“Well, all’s well that ends well,” he murmured, seemingly to himself.

Watching Teo, I realized everything had unfolded according to his design. Carolina and Edward had finally confessed their feelings for one another, and it was he who had brought them together in order to do that. Teo, the puppet master, had everyone dancing on the palm of his hand. Edward emerged as the hero, Carolina as the heroine, and I as the unwitting antagonist, helping to unite them despite myself.

Oh, Teo...

“I deeply despise your very being.”

My words were delivered with a rueful smile, but they were ultimately lost in the wintry breeze, never reaching the ears of the man for whom they were meant.

(Carolina)

The next morning, I headed to the Pyreborn headquarters to answer a summons from Lord Teodore, still enveloped in the warm afterglow of the excitement of the previous day. He had mentioned that the meeting was to be about my upcoming schedule, but he had left the details vague. Arriving in his office, I found Lord Teodore (as I had expected), and Prince...no, *Ed* (an unexpected surprise).

“Good morning, Ed, Lord Teodore,” I greeted them.

“Good morning,” responded Ed in his familiar baritone.

“Good morning, Your Highness. It’s heartening to know that yesterday’s actions committed by a certain ogre of a prince—who shall of course remain unnamed—haven’t deterred you from our presence completely,” Lord Teodore said, rising at my entrance.

“Hey! Who’s an ogre of a prince?” Ed protested, though Lord Teodore’s unflappable demeanor paid the retort no mind. It felt like an eternity since I’d last been witness to their usual back-and-forth, and the familiarity was enough to bring a tear to my eye.

“Your darling wife is right here, and yet you’re choosing to spar with me?” Lord Teodore asked by way of riposte. “I’m flattered, but I believe she’d prefer your attention now, wouldn’t she?” His eyes narrowed pointedly. “You ogre.”

“Y-You...” Ed sputtered, before growling in frustration. “Whatever; we’ll talk about this later!”

He quickly rose from his seat and stalked over to me, a flicker of annoyance still shadowing his features. Flashing him an understanding smile, I took his hand and let him lead me further into the room, a safe distance away from Lord Teodore’s verbal barbs. It was hardly the first time he’d escorted me by the hand, but my heart elected to treat it as an affair of note, almost beating out of my chest. *The effect of acknowledged love on one’s perception is truly profound*, I mused.

“Sit, Lina, sit,” he urged, pulling out a chair for me.

“Thank you, Ed,” I murmured, still savoring the fond ease with which his name rolled off my tongue.

Seated next to Ed, we both turned our attention to Lord Theodore, who evidently had a matter of great import on his mind. “Before we delve into the main topic, there’s a matter I’d like to address,” he said, slipping into another one of his practiced smiles.

I panicked a little. “What is it?”

“I would ask of you, Your Highness, a favor.”

I swallowed nervously. “Please, go on...”

“It’s a request only you can fulfill.”

My mind raced. A request only I could fulfill? Was it something related to my own divine abilities? But what could Lord Theodore, the all-powerful mage, possibly need from me?

His expression grew serious. “My request, Your Highness, is that you treat me like one of your subjects.”

“Huh?” I squeaked, my eyelashes fluttering in my surprise.

His eyes narrowed in delight. “Because that is what I am. A subject of the royal family. Given your new status, it would be inappropriate to continue treating me as you have been. I’ve overlooked it so far, but that must change now.”

I had neglected to consider it, but Lord Theodore was right. It was an affront by proxy to the majesty of the Martinez name to continue to refer to the son of a baron as “Lord.” One question, however, gnawed at me, and so I voiced it: “Why didn’t you mention this earlier? Why allow me to continue in my faux pas if you considered this formality so important?” The inquiry had left my lips before I realized my mistake in interrogating his choices. I covered my face with my hands. “I’m sorry, I should have realized it myself. I didn’t mean to imply it was your responsibility.”

Caught between embarrassment and curiosity, I peeked at Theodore through my fingers. He responded with a nonchalant shrug and a half smile, as if to set

at ease my awkwardness surrounding the situation. Then, his gaze shifted to Ed, carrying a hint of playful accusation. “I’ve mentioned it before. Several times, actually. But this man,” he gestured towards Ed, “insisted otherwise. ‘She can’t address you casually until she does me.’” He mimicked Ed’s deep voice with a touch of humor. “So, due to His Highness’s stubbornness, I had no choice but to let the matter slide.”

Ed fidgeted uncomfortably. “I, um, have no excuse,” he admitted.

“No excuse, but no regrets either, eh?” Theodore pressed.

Teodore’s pointed question elicited a subtle dip of my prince’s head, a silent admission of “no regrets” (although I noted a trace of shame shining through his stoic demeanor). *How interesting*, I thought to myself. I’d never have imagined him to be one to dictate Theodore’s behavior in the background. Just how fearsome of a green-eyed monster had he been harboring in his heart all along? It was a wonder he’d managed to hide it, considering his inability to lie.

Determined to address the situation with a touch of royal authority, I raised my chin. “Very well, I understand the situation now,” I declared. “I’ll overlook this lapse in courtesy, as I share some blame for my inattention to the matter.”

Ed’s eyes widened, and he began to protest, “But Lina!”

I raised a finger to halt him, adopting a scolding tone. “But don’t think I’ll overlook such a slight again. We do not make trouble for others, is that clear?”

He seemed taken aback, the ostensibly tense moment dragging on for a moment before...

“I... Yes. It won’t happen again—I promise,” he conceded.

My my, a promise! I hadn’t been expecting that, nor had I asked for it, but it definitely wasn’t an unwelcome development. He seemed to have recognized the embarrassment he had caused Theodore.

Teodore, ever the provocateur, clapped his hands in mock praise. “Well handled, Your Highness. I couldn’t have tamed that ogre better myself.”

“Now I’m just an ogre, not even a princely one?!” Ed snapped.

“I don’t think *that’s* the omission that should offend you, darling...” I quipped,

a wry smile on my face. I was a little conflicted, watching Theodore dance verbal circles around my husband, but I didn't have to dwell on that for long, as a pointed throat clearing from Theodore let us know it was time to move on to more pressing affairs.

"Now that we're all in agreement—the heart of the matter." He leaned forward on his desk, fingers interlaced, the devious look that I knew so well blooming upon his face. "Prince Gilbert has been falsifying his patient accounts."

My entire being shook. *Prince Gilbert has been falsifying his patient accounts? The ones he dictated to me?!*

"Prince Gilbert has been exaggerating the severity of his symptoms in order to procure an outsized share of your time and attention, Your Highness," Theodore continued. "In reality, he's recovering much faster than reported. In my humble opinion, I believe that the acute symptoms of his illness have been almost completely resolved."

I gaped at Theodore in horror as I watched the genuine rapport I thought I had built up with Prince Gilbert crumble before my very eyes. Just how much of a fool must I have appeared to him, pouring my heart into his treatment, despite the fact that he was essentially well? All that work, learning medical knowledge, controlling my Divinity, and for *what?*

What a cowardly and duplicitous man. Feeling utterly disillusioned, a bitter laugh escaped me. "So it was all for naught," I muttered, reflecting upon my own naivete. I found myself wringing my hands in frustration and disappointment, only to have them suddenly stilled by a firmer, more reassuring grasp.

"It wasn't all for nothing."

I looked up to meet the gaze of my husband, blinking in surprise.

"Your efforts were not in vain."

His golden eyes bore into mine with sincerity.

"Yes," he continued firmly, "Gilbert may have been dishonest, but that doesn't diminish the value of the care that you provided. Your dedication, your

thorough examinations—they mattered. They made a difference.”

“Ed...” I whispered, my voice a mere wisp of breath as a torrent of emotions welled up in my eyes. He was right. Despite Prince Gilbert’s dishonesty, my contributions to his recovery remained significant—perhaps even more so than I had thought. After all, while he had embellished his reports, it had been in a way that had actually deemphasized my contributions. And with that thought, a sense of momentous accomplishment began to replace the weight of disappointment. “Thank you for reminding me that my efforts weren’t wasted. But I still intend to have a word with Prince Gilbert.”

Ed gave me a knowing smirk that was like a ray of sunshine, a signal of our newfound emotional intimacy, chasing away the shadows in my heart. “When you do, let him know *exactly* how you feel. I’ll handle the consequences.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I replied, a playful smile breaking through my dismay, my spirits buoyed by his encouragement.

Teodore motioned an indication that there was yet more to discuss, nudging his spectacles up the bridge of his nose. “Next, let us discuss the revised schedule and treatment plan.”

Ed and I refocused our attention on Teodore, sitting up attentively.

“For his reevaluated treatment paradigm, I suggest that we only administer divine infusions when Prince Gilbert exhibits symptoms, which I believe will be quite a rare occurrence from now on. His condition is significantly better than reported, as we’ve duly noted. We’ll scale back to mainly observing and monitoring his progress, so the examinations will continue as part of this observation phase.”

“Understood,” I concurred. “Am I authorized to determine if an infusion is needed?”

“In emergency situations, Your Highness, you have the discretion to act as you see fit. For all other circumstances, I would advise consulting with me first.”

I nodded, committing the new plan to memory as Teodore continued. “As for the schedule, we will be reducing the frequency of your visits to the Diamond Palace from once per day to once per week. Prince Gilbert’s condition no longer

demands daily attention, and that should free you up, Your Highness, for your myriad other responsibilities.”

Indeed so. Between imperial history, magical studies, fostering ties with the nobility, and estate management, many of my royal duties had been pushed aside to focus on Prince Gilbert. “Once per week would be a great help,” I said gratefully. “I would like to see the new schedule whenever it’s ready.”

“Certainly, Your Highness. You shall have it by tomorrow morning,” Teodore assured.

I murmured a word of thanks and offered an appreciative smile. Despite his own busy schedule, Teodore always made sure to prioritize my needs.

“That is everything on the agenda,” Teodore continued, his pen moving swiftly over the sheets on his desk. “Unless there are any further questions, we can consider this meeting concluded.” His eyes drifted out the window; he did a double take. “Oh?”

Curious, I turned to see what had caught his eye. Outside the window, a gentle snowfall had begun. The fluffy white flakes floated down softly, vanishing as they touched the ground. “Snow?” I murmured in surprise, watching the serene transformation of the world outside.

As the year’s first unexpected snowfall captured our attention, we found ourselves drawn irresistibly to the window, each of us lost in our own reflections.

“Snow, eh?” Ed muttered. “It certainly is cold enough.”

“Well, it is November, after all,” Teodore noted.

“How swiftly the seasons turn,” I marveled. “It feels as though spring was but a mere moment ago.” My fingers traced patterns on the frosty pane, feeling the icy bite of winter’s chill through the glass.

“Another blink and the year will be over,” Ed mused wistfully.

“Quite the daunting thought, isn’t it?” Teodore remarked with a light chuckle. “In just eight weeks, we’ll be raising our glasses to the advent of a new year. How absurd it feels to say that out loud.”

“With everything that’s happened, the passage of time has been the last thing on my mind,” I admitted.

Ed chuckled lightly. “Indeed, there hasn’t been a dull moment since we met.”

“Trouble does seem to have its way of finding us, doesn’t it?” I observed with a sigh.

“But we’ve faced every challenge head-on,” he replied.

Recalling the year’s events—the near miss with the assassin, Owen at the Founder’s Day Fete, the factional conflict, getting ambushed by Marielle at our summer retreat, the magical examination turned divine revelation—it was astonishing that all of this had transpired in a single year. Yet, despite the hurdles...

“I wouldn’t trade this past year for anything,” I declared with conviction.

Yes, each challenge had been more difficult than the last, and the bad days likely outweighed the good, but all of it had sculpted me into a woman of greater strength and resilience than the girl that I had been on the day that I had departed Celestia.

“I hope we can enjoy the first snow next year together as well,” I murmured, my voice laced with hopefulness.

“Yes, just the two of us,” Ed whispered near my ear. Turning towards him, I caught the playful shooing motion he’d aimed at Theodore. His charmingly juvenile efforts to send his friend away were met with a good-natured smile and a pair of hands raised in amused concession. Obediently, Theodore retreated.

Left to our own devices, Ed reached out to remove my hand from the frigid window pane and into his warm grasp. “Yes, just the two of us,” I repeated, my heart echoing the sentiment.

“It’s a promise, then,” he said.

In that serene moment, our eyes locked. Drawn together as though by an invisible force, we shared another tender kiss. It was a perfect, peaceful end to a year of turmoil and growth, a quiet promise of the warmth of our

togetherness amid the biting cold of the snow.

Epilogue: Raymond

Another night stretched into the early hours of the next day as I attended to my duties in the royal chamber in the presence of my king. A mountain of paperwork awaited His Majesty, but he didn't reach for the next document; he only stared at it fixedly, as if his gaze alone could vanquish the daunting pile.

I shifted my focus away from the weary figure of the king and turned my attention to a newly delivered report. The document detailed the remarkable effectiveness of the Pyreborn on the front lines against the mana-beast threat—a quick perusal of the particulars confirmed that their intervention had resulted in significant impact.

King Phillips, breaking his silence, voiced his exhaustion. “Day after day, page after page—does it ever cease, Raymond?”

“Not for those who bear our burdens, Your Majesty,” I responded, chiding him gently, but maintaining a tone of respect. “We should be thankful that Malcosias extends any aid to us at all in our time of need.”

“Don't think me ungrateful, Raymond, but even with Malcosian support, are we any closer to uncovering the root of the problem?”

“That is our responsibility, my liege, not theirs. Malcosian assistance is a boon, but ultimately, the solution must be one of our own making. We are already leaning too heavily on the personnel and material resources of the Pyreborn as it stands.”

Months had elapsed since our crisis had begun, yet we seemed no nearer to a solution—or even an understanding of the root causes of the recent agricultural failures and the sudden incursions of mana-beasts. The king's frustrations, though unbecoming, were not without merit. Frankly, the Pyreborn's intervention was the single factor keeping the crisis even remotely manageable—and theirs was an intervention that wouldn't have happened if it weren't for the debt incurred by the rash actions taken by Carolina's personal guard on the night of the Founder's Day Fete. It pained me to admit, especially as a father,

but it was truly a blessing in disguise that Carolina's guard had disgraced himself when he had.

"Forget the empire for a moment," King Phillips said, brandishing a report from the church in the air. Disappointment was etched into his face, a stark contrast to his typically nonchalant demeanor. "It's truly a shame what happened to Flora. Our beacon of hope, extinguished just like that."

"Quite, Your Majesty," I concurred, only a little bitterly. "The church's account suggests she fell short by a mere margin. Nerves, perhaps, or her ongoing condition must have affected her ability to fully harness her powers."

"Still troubled by her mysterious ailment, is she?" King Phillips murmured, his amethyst eyes narrowing in contemplation. I decided to leave him to his own devices and instead redirected my attention to my own report, when there was a sudden knock at the door.

It's two in the morning; whomever could it possibly be?

The guard's voice was muffled through the thick wood of the door, yet his words were distinct enough. "Your Royal Majesty, esteemed Prime Minister—Archbishop Mills requests an audience. He awaits you in the drawing room. Your instructions?"

"Archbishop Mills?" The king's voice echoed my own surprise. Our eyes met, sharing a moment of mutual bewilderment. Neither of us had foreseen this visit. Throughout his tenure at the Celestian see of the holy church, the archbishop had studiously avoided the royal castle. The strained ties between the crown and the church were widely known, but it was the clash of personalities between the king and the archbishop (both fiercely rapacious men) that truly kept them at arm's length from one another.

I harbored a fleeting hope that this was perhaps some elaborate jest. Glancing once more at the king, I noted his visible effort to compose himself. "Very well, inform the archbishop we will join him shortly," His Highness called through the door with regal authority. "Ensure he is accorded all due hospitality in the interim."

The guard's footsteps receded down the corridor, each step echoing into silence. A sense of foreboding gripped me. Despite the late hour, I felt unusually

alert as the king and I parted to prepare for the audience with the archbishop. After donning fresh attire, shaving my stubble, and hastily tying back my unkempt hair, I met His Majesty in the royal drawing room.

In the midst of the room's luxurious furnishings and its general aura of sumptuousness, Archbishop Mills seemed an incongruous presence, his smile unsettlingly fixed. Upon our entry, he rose swiftly, smoothing the wrinkles on his white cassock before bowing. "Your Royal Majesty, Prime Minister, your esteemed presence honors me. I trust my late visit hasn't caused undue inconvenience?"

"Dispense with the pleasantries," His Majesty interjected sharply. "We have little time, so speak plainly. Why are you here?" He remained standing, a clear signal that he had no intention of entertaining a lengthy meeting. While his brusque treatment of our guest was discourteous, the untimely nature of Archbishop Mills' visit had hardly put him in a position to complain. (This was not to say that I approved of the king's manner by any means, but I had to admit that the situation was indeed irregular.)

"Certainly, Your Majesty," Archbishop Mills replied, his bow maintaining an air of politeness in the face of the king's discourtesy.

This surprised me. The archbishop was displaying an unusual level of deference. I had braced for a sharp retort from him, a challenge to the king's dismissive attitude, yet he held his tongue. Both the king and I were visibly taken aback by his subdued demeanor. We exchanged glances, posing an unspoken question: had the man hit his head on his journey to the palace? The king and the archbishop's mutual disdain was well known. I had anticipated a volley of thinly veiled barbs, not this uncharacteristic display of composure from the archbishop. Just what game was he playing at?

"The reason for my visit, Your Majesty"—he paused, evidently for theatrical effect—"is to disclose the cause of the recent calamities plaguing our nation."

What? My eyes widened, and I felt His Majesty tense beside me. *Could Archbishop Mills truly mean to tell us that he, of all people, knows the cause of these three great calamities, a mystery that has eluded our brightest minds?*

Our reactions seemed to satisfy the archbishop's sense of drama, and his eyes

narrowed with satisfaction. “Your Majesty, you would do well to know that all of our misfortunes stem from the fact that Lady Carolina Sanchez is no longer with us.”

His Majesty’s response was swift and incredulous. “You expect me to believe that? That somehow, these events are solely due to Princess Carolina’s absence and are not in any way related to Lady Flora’s delicate condition?”

“Indeed, I do,” Archbishop Mills replied with a calm assurance. “Lady Flora’s ‘condition,’ as you term it, is utterly unrelated. It is Lady Carolina’s absence that is at the root of our troubles.”

Despite my reservations about Archbishop Mills, his conviction struck a chord of doomed certainty within me. His demeanor was calm and assured, without a hint of deceit. A man of his position and intellect would not lie about something so serious—and he would certainly pick a more believable lie if he intended such subterfuge.

His Majesty exchanged a glance with me, silently seeking my counsel. I gave a subtle nod. He turned back to the archbishop, his platinum-blond locks quivering slightly against his forehead. Clearing his throat, he conceded, “Very well, Archbishop. We will listen to what you have to say.”

Archbishop Mills’s expression transformed, his face alight with a near-maniacal intensity as he clasped his hands before him. “Thank you, Your Majesty, thank you!” he exclaimed, his gratitude seeming almost exaggerated. He paused, allowing His Majesty to settle into his seat before elaborating further. “First, it must be said that Lady Carolina has not herself done anything to knowingly sow seeds of discord within Celestia. Quite the opposite. Her departure is akin to the ebbing tide, exposing the hidden depths and troubles that her presence concealed, as high water covers the whereabouts of dangerous shoals.”

The ebbing tide? High water? Archbishop Mills seemed to be purposefully cryptic in his speech. I glanced at His Majesty, noting his focused yet slightly impatient demeanor. “Assuming your words hold truth,” he said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, fingers interlocked beneath his chin, “how exactly has Carolina’s absence led to such chaos?”

The archbishop seemed to relish His Majesty's thinly veiled impatience, his grin stretching ear to ear. "Patience, my dear king, I was just getting to that. To put it succinctly, the calamities have emerged because we have unwittingly married off a bearer of Divinity to Malcosias."

The word "Divinity" left both His Majesty and me momentarily speechless, our minds grappling with a notion so extraordinary it verged on the unbelievable. *Divinity—that sacred power, one hitherto assumed exclusive to His Holiness the High Pontiff?!*

"Yes, it may be difficult to comprehend, but Lady Carolina is indeed a bearer of Divinity," the archbishop continued, his tone steady and assured. "And not just any bearer—she possesses a strength formidable enough for her mere existence to influence the entirety of Celestia."

His Majesty struggled to articulate his thoughts. "Wait, let me understand this. You're saying Princess Carolina has always been a bearer of Divinity, and an extraordinarily powerful one at that, and we've inadvertently let her slip away?"

Archbishop Mills replied with a nonchalant ease. "Yes."

The enormity of his claim was so staggering that it was hard to fully grasp. Despite the improbability of deception at this juncture, I remained skeptical. The calamities had indeed started around the time of Carolina's departure, but the concept of one individual wielding such transformative power was hard to reconcile with what I thought I'd known about the world. Even His Holiness, famed for his abilities, could only manifest his power in modest ways. If the archbishop's assertions were accurate, the extent of Carolina's power was beyond anything we had imagined.

"I'm...inclined to agree that the theory has merit," His Majesty reluctantly admitted. "But plausible as it may be, do you have any evidence to back up your claim, Archbishop?"

With a self-satisfied nod, as though he had anticipated this demand, Archbishop Mills reached for something tucked away at his side. With a dramatic flourish, he spread a collection of documents onto the coffee table. He pointed at one in particular. "Observe this graph depicting Malcosian

agricultural productivity and harvest cycles, and compare it to the same data from a year prior. Please, take your time.”

His Majesty couldn’t hide his shock. “How did you come by these documents?”

“A friend in the central cathedral,” Archbishop Mills explained with a dismissive wave. “The church is deeply involved in agricultural matters, so acquiring these records was a simple matter.”

Dismissing what sounded suspiciously like espionage as a “simple matter,” the archbishop redirected our attention to the reports. Despite my initial doubts, curiosity prevailed. *Let’s see, then—though I don’t know what these documents could possibly reveal to sway our belief. Agricultural productivity and harvest times naturally fluctuate, so it would take more than a— What?!* “Their productivity has doubled? Early harvests by *how* many months? And these changes... They align precisely with Carolina’s engagement...” My astonishment broke through my usual reserve, even in the presence of His Majesty. I’d sooner believe a case of erroneous data entry, or perhaps a hysterical imperfection in my eyesight before I would even consider the reality of the picture painted by this information. The data before us, however, was irrefutable. Malcosias had claimed the prosperity we’d once witnessed in our own nation. Regardless of the truth of Carolina’s divine nature, her connection to the crises now seemed undeniable.

By this point, both His Majesty and I were deeply absorbed in the documents, grappling with the same inescapable truth. I could sense Archbishop Mills’s triumphant grin without even looking up. He had made his case in a most convincing manner.

“Tonight, Your Royal Majesty, I come to you with a proposal. Join me. Let the royal family and the church unite, aligned in an effort to take back what is rightfully ours,” the archbishop proposed, his voice laced with a persuasive, almost devilish charm; his lips twisted into a serpentine grin. “Let us reclaim Carolina.”

Side Story: The Troublesome Wedding Night— Edward's Memories

I thought often of something that had happened on the fateful night of my wedding.

On that night, under the shelter of darkness and the silent gaze of the stars, I sat upon my sofa, watching the ashen-haired beauty before me. The curve of her lips, relaxed and parted in sleep, traced in silver by the moon's glow, evoked a sigh that seemed to emanate from the very core of my being. In her unguarded state, she seemed so serene, yet I couldn't help but feel a little pang of suspicion.

Did she always find such ease in sleep, even in the unchaperoned company of a man? The thought brought with it a twinge of concern. I soothed myself with the thought that perhaps it was a sign of her trust in me, and this was a notion I felt that I should cherish. Still, a part of me wished she would be more cautious around menfolk. Unless she simply didn't view me as one...?

With these conflicted thoughts swirling in my mind, I moved from the sofa to the bed, seating myself gently beside Carolina. I took care not to disturb her slumber as I watched her, soothed by her steady breathing. "You always appear so poised and mature beside me," I whispered to myself, "but now, you seem like a child lost in dreams." As I spoke, Carolina shifted slightly under her blanket, murmuring softly. Panic briefly seized me, a stab of fear that I had awoken her, but she merely turned onto her side, resettling herself into peaceful sleep.

The blanket slid away, revealing her left hand. There, catching the pallid light, was the ruby-red ring I had designed for her, its color echoing the hue of her eyes. My gaze softened at the sight. It was perfect for her, a reminder of the countless hours I had spent perfecting its design.

As I studied that tangible symbol of our union, the reality of our marriage began to truly register itself in my heart. Our union, though born from political

necessity, now bound us together for life, a realization that brought an unbidden smile to my lips. Almost instinctively, my hand reached out to gently pull the blanket up to her neck. The last thing I wanted was for her to catch a cold at this pivotal moment in our lives.

Now then, was it finally time for bed myself? I contemplated the consequences of staying up too late and facing Teo's inevitable lecture the next day. His delight in reprimanding me, his face twisted in amusement, was motivation enough to avoid any possibility of allowing myself to oversleep. As I rose from Carolina's bedside, I moved perhaps too hastily, because I heard a soft groan behind me. I froze in place.

"P...Prince Ed...ward..." she murmured.

A chill shot through me. My mind ran in a torrent of harebrained and panicked conjecture. *Did I wake her? But she seemed to be so soundly asleep... Don't tell me...she caught me staring at her?! What would I do if she thinks me a voyeuristic cad who stares at women while they sleep? I would never regain her esteem!*

Never had I thought I would be facing the foreordination of inevitable divorce so soon. But even with a heart heavy with trepidation, I couldn't not answer my loving wife's call. Words of apology already forming in my mind, I turned slowly—ever so slowly—to face her. And what I saw was...a serene Carolina, still lost in deep slumber, her eyelids showing no sign of the vivid ruby sparkle that marked her lively, waking interest in the world around her.

I let out a silent sigh of relief—only for me to gasp it right back into my panicked lungs. Could it be that she was merely *pretending* to sleep? Yet the natural rhythm of her breathing seemed too genuine to doubt. In which case, the only plausible explanation left to me was...

"She's talking in her sleep?"

I finally let out the breath I'd been holding. Covering my mouth with my hand, I felt a smile creep in. How adorable was that? My wife Carolina, murmuring my own name in her slumber. Adorable, and slightly ingenuous. The thought warmed my heart, but it also brought a twinge of guilt for the fact that I had so hastily assumed the worst.

This unexpected glimpse into another facet of Carolina's personality sparked a strange sense of joy within me. I found myself imagining with great curiosity the dream that might have prompted her to speak my name. Abruptly, her lips parted once more. "I'll...sleep on the sofa...Your Highness... Take the...bed, Prince Ed...ward..." Her words were fragmented and soft, almost as if she were making them hard to follow on purpose. *Well, I reminded myself, it is not as if she has any control over them in the first place.* She tossed and turned about, the sound of sheets rustling against clothes an accompaniment to the soft murmur of her sweet voice.

So she was still hung up on the discussion we'd had earlier about our sleeping arrangements. I looked at her tenderly and shrugged a loving shoulder. I watched her with a tender gaze, recalling that playful debate. Just twenty minutes ago, we had bantered over who would take the bed, a "conflict" that had ended with me insisting, *"It goes against a gentleman's honor to let a lady sleep on the sofa,"* or something to that equally ridiculous effect.

The fleeting thought of actually *sharing* the bed with Carolina had crossed my mind, but I had quickly dismissed it, the idea too daunting to entertain. Despite reiterating to myself my honorable intention to maintain a respectful distance, I knew all too well the fallibility of reason in moments such as this. Particularly with Carolina, whose very being seemed to effortlessly erode my self-control. I wasn't ready for that step. I needed to bolster my resolve and my self-control considerably before even considering it again.

The nape of her neck was still visible. Such flawless flesh, tantalizingly exposed, so very...ripe, right there for my teeth to sink into as one might savor the most delectable... I clenched my teeth, expelling a breath through pursed lips. The temptation was almost overwhelming. With a resolute set of my shoulders, I turned away and made my way back to the sofa. Settling down with the armrest as my makeshift pillow, I tried to coax myself into sleep. I was truly exhausted, and rest was a necessity.

But after ten (and then fifteen) minutes, it was clear that slumber was not to be my lot. Despite my weariness, the soft sounds of Carolina's restless movements and her drowsy murmurs held my attention captive. Her words were not particularly loud, but her mere presence was enough to keep me

acutely aware of her every movement, and consequently, my mind refused to shut down. This kind of distraction wouldn't have been an issue with anyone else. It was a Carolina-specific battle, and I realized with a sense of resignation that it was not one that I was likely to overcome.

"Guess I'm not getting any sleep tonight," I muttered to myself. Acknowledging my defeat, I opened my eyes wide, waving the white flag to wakefulness. As I cast another covert glance towards Carolina, a thought crossed my mind. *Perhaps nights like these aren't so bad every once in a while.*

My gaze softened as I observed her. *Only you, Carolina, could evoke such a whirlwind of emotions within me, unknowingly directing my every action.*

I had often heard that in love, the first to fall is the first to lose. And if that adage held any truth, then I was undeniably the greatest loser of them all. From our very first encounter, she had captivated me, and I found myself continually—and hopelessly—lost in her allure.

How about that? The "Bloodthirsty Prince," known for his fearlessness, rendered utterly vulnerable by the mere presence of his wife. And all the while, she lay there blissfully unaware, lost in her tranquil slumber.

With my hand resting over my racing heart, I lay awake as the dawn's light crept in, not having closed my eyes for a single moment of the longest night of my life. A new day began.

Afterword

Thank you for choosing to pick up the second volume of *The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I Was the Real Saint All Along!* out of all the books that are assuredly at your disposal. It is I, Almond, the author who really needs to catch up on their sleep.

Picking up from the last volume, I'm eager to share a few more glimpses into my writing process. First, why don't we start with the star(?) of the second half of the volume, Gilbert—the man who was originally supposed to be, well, a water mage.

With his father being a wielder of lightning magic, his brother fire, and his mother frost, I thought, “Well, I gotta go with water!” without realizing I had overlooked one critical aspect of his character: Mana Hypersensitivity. Realizing the impossibility of him being a mage, I yelled out, “You'd be dead if you were a mage!” and then scrapped my initial plans. (Darn it.)

Also, I originally had some bigger(?) plans for Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome and the treatment of it. Let's break it down.

Originally, Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome stemmed from a divine blessing. Everyone received such a blessing at birth, but its intensity and effects varied. For instance, a blessing in the eyes might grant incredibly sharp vision. This sharp vision, in theory, was the basis for Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome (sharp vision = seeing things beyond the norm). While these divine blessings usually faded by adulthood, Gilbert's case was exceptional, which ended up causing his condition.

The only way to reverse his plight was to counterbalance divine power with more divine power, which was the basis for the divine infusions Carolina performed in the book. But ultimately, I found this concept a little too convoluted for the final story, and so I decided to omit it. I had already written most of the book out at this point, which meant that I was faced with extensive rewrites. I still have nightmares of tapping away at my phone, screaming, “I still

have to update the web novel too, gaaaaaah!”

Ha ha ha. So, that’s a peek behind the curtain for volume two. Did these behind-the-scenes tidbits bring a smile to your face?

Now, for some acknowledgments. To my wonderful dad who buys all of my books even though they’re written for women, my brother who acts all cool but is a big softie at heart, and all my writing buddies—thank you all so much, as always.

To Yoshiro Ambe, the incredibly talented illustrator for the series, and to my editor—my wise editor, whose clear feedback has always been indispensable; and to everyone else involved in the production of this book—thank you.

Lastly, to you, the reader, who picked up this book and ventured into my world, I will say this again because it bears repeating: thank you so very much.



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