

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

4

The cover features a vibrant illustration of three anime-style characters in a field of white daisies under a blue sky with falling petals. On the left, a man with red hair and a fur-trimmed cape looks on. In the center, a girl with long grey hair and a blue dress holds a flower crown. On the right, a girl with long white hair and a pink dress looks towards the viewer. The title is at the top in a stylized font, and a quote is in a banner in the middle.

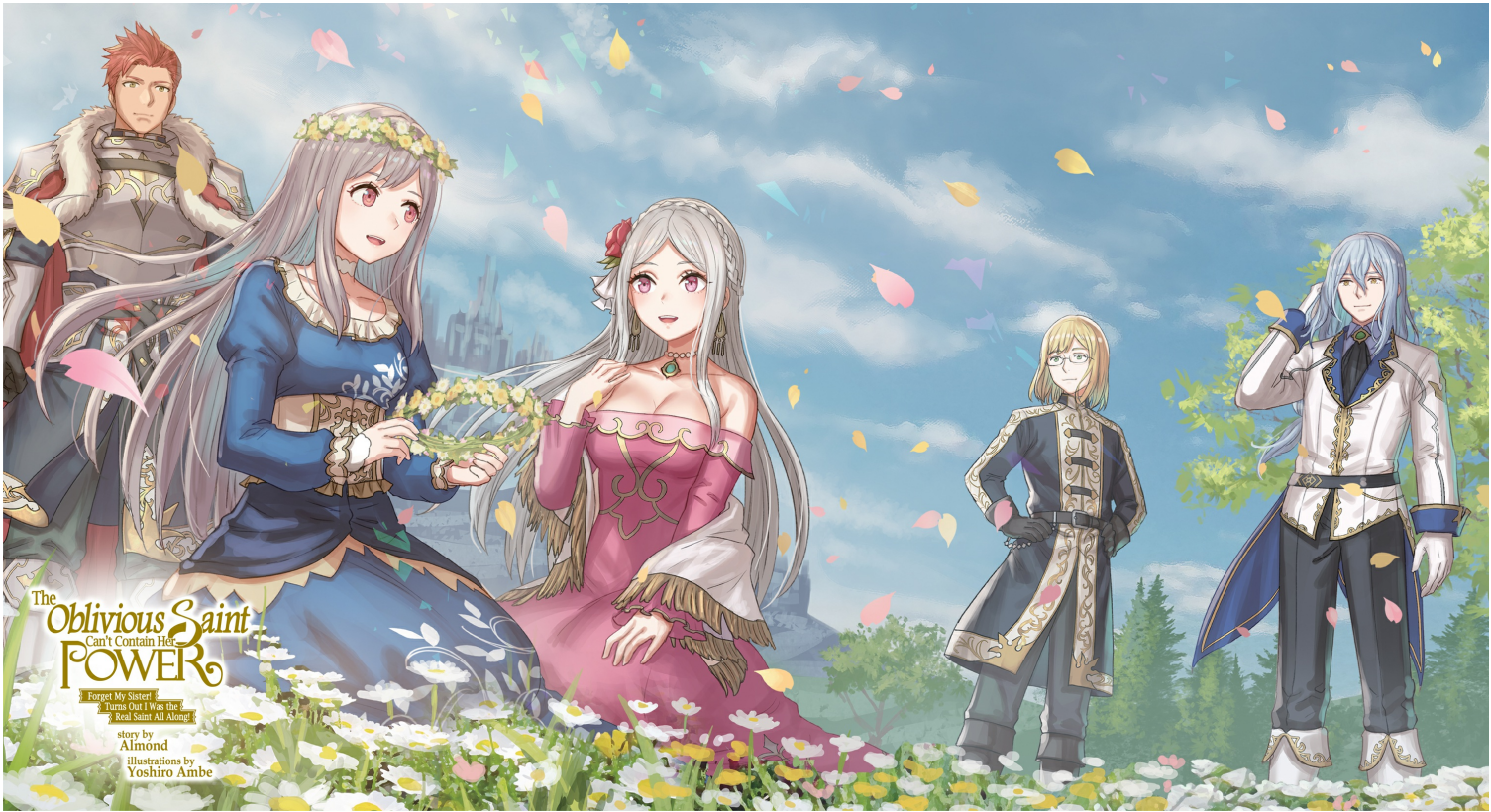
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Characters



Carolina

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



Edward

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



Marisa

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



Owen

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



Raymond

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



Gilbert

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



Vanessa

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



Eric

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



Teodore

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



Flora

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

Story

One day, Lady Carolina Sanchez finds herself suddenly married off to Edward, the second prince of Malcosias – a purely political arrangement. Despite years of relentless bullying from her older sister, Flora – something which left Carolina believing she was unworthy of love – she finds unexpected peace and affection in her new life, largely due to the support of her husband and in-laws.

The power struggles within Malcosias lead to several attempts on Carolina's life, but she overcomes these dangers, and her bond with Edward deepens into true love. To everyone's surprise, Carolina, long thought to be devoid of magical power, discovers she is a bearer of Divinity – a rare and miraculous power.

With her newfound abilities, Carolina cures the first prince of Malcosias, Gilbert, of Mana Hypersensitivity Syndrome, a feat that attracts unwanted attention. Archbishop Mills of Celestia, intrigued by her power, plans to take her under his control, but his efforts are thwarted by the imperial family. To showcase Carolina's Divinity, the imperial family devises the Saintly Trials, where she is set to demonstrate her power to the world...

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Chapter One

Not long after the Lady Monica debacle had concluded, I found myself in the Garnet Palace engaged in a meeting of the minds in preparation for the upcoming Saintly Trials. Though the purpose of the gathering was ostensibly formal in nature, it felt anything but thanks to the familiar company. Ed and Theodore, my constant companions, were present, although the coziness was admittedly somewhat deflated with the slightly awkward addition of Prince Gilbert.

The first prince, his slender fingers delicately curled around the handle of his teacup, let out a theatrical sigh. "What a taxing week this has been," he lamented, somehow managing a melodramatic flounce while yet remaining seated. "I daresay I'm so spent I could collapse on the spot."

"Yes, we've all had to make sacrifices to ensure everything is ready by Noel," Theodore said, his voice betraying only a modicum of impatience with Prince Gilbert's affectation. "Even with the church relieving us of the task of running the actual trials, the endless negotiations with the participating nations and the drafting of budget proposals have kept me busy enough."

"Every day seems to present a new challenge," Ed complained. "One day it's the chosen venue causing us grief, the next it's monetary constraints."

"And don't get me started on those who are clamoring for special regalia for the candidates!" I added. "The idea of a full Saintly ensemble for every candidate to wear might have been rejected, but with the tight schedule, producing even just the robe we agreed upon will be a challenge."

Our meeting devolved with remarkable alacrity into a collective airing of grievances. We each took it in turn to vent our frustrations, finding comfort and camaraderie in our shared commitment to surmount the difficulties and see our tasks through.

That being said, I wasn't sure I had quite the same degree of justification to complain as the others. As the Malcosian Saintly candidate, I was privileged

enough to be guaranteed a period of proper rest each night—a luxury that, I suspected, many of my companions had been denied. The guilt of being singled out for special treatment weighed on me, but I recognized that as an official representative of the empire, I had a duty to look my best. The slightest imperfection, even a mere blemish on my skin (to say nothing of bags under my eyes!) would reflect poorly on the dignity of the empire itself.

Reflecting on the meticulous efforts that I—that is to say, that *Marisa*—had been making in order to maintain my pristine appearance, I absently traced patterns over my skin, delighting in the flawlessly smooth sensation beneath my fingertips, a tangible reminder of her tireless care.

“Now then,” Teodore declared, clearing his throat. “If we’ve all said our piece, I propose we commence with today’s agenda.” He adjusted his spectacles and looked significantly at the nearby clock. Its hands read half past four, indicating there were only two hours left until supper.

I’m sure Teodore sees the value in maintaining a daily routine, I thought. I glanced sidelong towards Ed, seated beside me. And Ed appears to be utterly exhausted. I’m sure everyone here is looking forward to a much-needed good night’s rest.

I nodded silently, and Teodore picked up the materials on the table before him. “On the matter of venue for the trials, the church has graciously offered the halls of the central cathedral. Unlike the preliminary trials, these final trials will feature a stage built expressly for the event. Spectator seating will be necessarily limited, but we shall endeavor nonetheless to accommodate all attendees, prioritizing monarchs and distinguished nobility.” He languidly turned the page. “Moving on, the trials shall be broadcast live across the realm via magical instruments. Although we have precious few of these instruments in our possession, we will ensure that they will be strategically placed for the general populace to observe. After all, this event is, in essence, a contest of national significance.”

Magical instruments? He must be referring to the ones that were used to broadcast our wedding. I’d heard those instruments were only employed for the most prestigious imperial events, so to be under their lens for the second time in such a short while was frankly startling. Not to mention mortifying! I

thought, picturing all of the people who would soon come to know my face. *When will I get a chance to observe one of these broadcasts for myself instead of being the subject of them?* I wondered wistfully.

Teodore's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "As previously mentioned, the church alone shall oversee the trials. We—that is to say, the royal family—shall abstain from any involvement in order to preempt potential grievances. It is imperative that we avoid any accusations of favoritism or foul play; thus we will only intervene if absolutely necessary." He paused a moment before adding, "Furthermore, it is the high pontiff himself who will be presiding over the trials as arbiter."

A relieved "Oh!" escaped my lips. My heart leaped at the news.

Prince Gilbert looked surprised by this revelation, as did his brother. "Why bother His Holiness with such tedium?" the first prince grumbled. "The results are as good as fixed. Anyone with a pulse could surely adjudicate."

"But you can't deny that his presence would be invaluable in aiding the legitimacy of the trials," Ed pointed out. "This is a good development."

Despite the certain inconvenience to His Holiness, the reassurance that his involvement brought was undeniable. I was sure we were all tired of the legitimacy of the Faith Council of Saints being challenged at every turn.

"As Prince Gilbert so eloquently put it, the results are as good as fixed," Teodore said. "Nevertheless, we have solicited His Holiness to perform his role justly and without bias. This ties back to my earlier comment regarding favoritism. Let us continue on, shall we? With regards to the announcement of Her Highness's Divinity, it shall be declared by the high pontiff himself at the award ceremony." He lifted his gaze from his documents and fixed it on me. "The narrative that we intend to construct will state that he only recognized Her Highness's powers upon seeing her performance during the trials."

Teodore hesitated not a whit in his willingness to bend the truth. Yet what could I say, being entirely complicit myself in this duplicity? It pained me to have to involve His Holiness in such schemes, but the backlash that would arise if he stated he'd long known about my power was easily imaginable. It would expose our rationale for establishing the Faith Council in an instant. We had no

choice but to pretend it was a coincidence.

“Yes, His Holiness’s proclamation *should* silence any would-be detractors,” Prince Gilbert agreed. “At least, those who might dare to voice their skepticism publicly.”

Teodore seemed to accept the inevitability of whispered criticism with a pragmatic shrug. “That is a problem that will resolve itself. Her Highness’s powers surpass even those of the high pontiff. A firm demonstration or two should suffice to dispel any doubts. Now, I am eager to move on, so let us proceed.” He adjusted his glasses once more, his peridot eyes narrowing as they moved down the page. “Next, it has come to our attention through a recent dispatch that Celestia has chosen Lady Flora Sanchez as their representative in the trials.”

My body tensed immediately. While I may have escaped my sister’s shadow thanks to my Malcosian companions, any utterance of her name still served to paralyze me as well as any toxin. I gingerly worked my tense jaw open to speak. “Flora *is* an exceptional holy mage,” I managed to say. “The news doesn’t surprise me in the least. In fact, I rather expected it.” My words rang hollow, even I could tell—but I had truly expected this.

Flora was the premier healer in all of Celestia. I had witnessed her erase countless injuries with my own eyes. As I rationalized the choice, I willed the anxieties to retreat back into the depths of my consciousness. *It isn’t your place to throw a tantrum*, I told myself. Clenching my fists tightly, I fought to keep my emotions in check...and then a larger, more reassuring hand unexpectedly gripped mine.

“Lina, it’s all right.” Ed gently caressed my hand with his thumb. “You are wife to the second prince of Malcosias, a bearer of Divinity. You needn’t fear your sister.”

“His Highness is correct,” Teodore concurred. “In truth, this is the greatest opportunity you could ever have to enact revenge upon your dreadful sister. Show her what true power looks like; take delight in her defeat.”

Prince Gilbert looked a little confused. “I feel as if I’m missing important context, but no matter—you’ll be all right, my mistress. Never forget who you

are, beloved child of God.”

I surveyed the trio of men before me. Each sported a defiant grin, as if to say *show her what for!* Teodore, ever the sadist, had a particularly wicked twist to his smile that clearly conveyed *I won't be satisfied until you humiliate her thoroughly*. He could certainly be a bit...cold-blooded at times, and yet, in moments like these, that unrepentant ferocity was the greatest reassurance. Heartened by their words, encouraging rather than consoling, I formed a fist and curled it against my heart. “You’re right—all of you,” I said. “This is a chance to finally confront her, to prove I am no longer the sister she once overshadowed. I won’t let this opportunity slip through my fingers. I will aim to defeat her, thoroughly and completely!”

As I burned with righteous fervor, Ed broke out into a half smile. “That’s my wife,” he proclaimed proudly. Lifting a strand of my hair, he brushed it with a tender kiss. His golden zircon eyes locked onto mine with such intensity, such belief, that a warm blush spread across my cheeks and all the way up to my ears. I cast my gaze down, allowing my hair to fall across my face, hopefully hiding my flustered expression from the others.

Teodore shook his head. “Out of respect for the occasion, I will overlook this episode of rather...indiscreet behavior. Well said, Your Highnesses.” I could see the effort it took him to bite back a lecture on propriety; instead he simply stared at us in mild annoyance. Then, with a tired sigh, his shoulders visibly relaxing, he snapped his sheaf of documents. “Princess Carolina. Know that my following counsel is independent of Lady Flora’s presence at the trials; there is no need to hold back this time. Wield your power to its full extent. Demonstrate to all your true capabilities.”

I nodded decisively at his bold words. I felt the corners of my lips curl ever so slightly upwards as the figurative shackles that had bound my strength at the last trials slipped from my wrists and clattered to the ground. I was no longer afraid of the upcoming reunion with Flora.

Those in attendance at the Saintly Trials shall bear witness to the full magnitude of my power!

A scant fortnight later, the day of the Saintly Trials arrived. Spurred on by a clear goal and fortified by weeks of preparation, I gazed out the carriage window, my emotions a tangle of excitement and anxiety as we clattered our way towards the central cathedral. The streets of the capital were nearly hidden from my view, obscured on all sides by the line of defensive carriages flanking ours. The somewhat excessive security inevitably drew curious glances. Adults paused and stared, while children ran alongside, waving energetically. Some, recognizing the heraldry on the carriages that marked our convoy as that of the Malcosian Saintly candidate, even shouted encouragement. Though embarrassment tickled my chest, I was emboldened all the same by the vocal support of my people. *I best not let them down!*

As I smiled and waved back at my well-wishers as well as I could, Theodore observed me from his vantage point on the other side of the carriage with a chuckle. “It seems you’ve become quite the people’s champion, Your Highness. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“Ch-Champion?” I echoed bashfully. “Not at all. It’s the Malcosian Saintly candidate they’re cheering on, not me.”

“Then I do hope that Your Highness wasn’t expecting that they will cheer on the Malcosian Saint any less?” Theodore replied with a sly grin.

Ed nodded his head before I could retort. “A beautiful Malcosian Saint no less.” His face was as impassive as usual, but so was his earnest golden gaze, always shining with the full force of his sincerity.

Embarrassed, I felt my cheeks flush deeply.

“Now you’ve done it, Your Highness. She’s as red as an apple,” Theodore teased.

“Lina doesn’t like to be complimented,” Ed replied. “But that just makes me want to do it all the more.”

His smooth, rumbly baritone sent shivers down my spine. In a futile attempt to hide my blush, I quickly pulled the hood of my robe over my face—only to have my efforts thwarted by Ed, who craned his head around to peek underneath. “I almost forgot to say—Lina, that robe suits you well. Almost too well, as if it were designed just for you.”

The most distressing element of Ed's penchant for affectionate whispers and tender gestures was his apparent obliviousness to the effect of his own actions! When faced with his warm, sincere gaze and gentle words, I had no choice but to fly the white flag of surrender, dropping my defenses and removing my hood once more.

The white robe I was wearing, accented with blue for purity and pea green for healing, had been specifically designed for the Saintly candidates to wear on this auspicious occasion. Only Ed, with his unwavering honesty, could make me feel deserving of such significant attire. But then again, Ed's perspective was perhaps the only one that truly mattered to me—if he approved of my attire and the status it conferred, then that was all the validation I needed.

"Thank you, Ed," I said, only a little bashfully.

"For what? Saying what's on my mind?" he replied, tilting his head in genuine confusion.

Just then, the carriage rolled to a stop, the pure white facade of the cathedral towering before us, monopolizing the view through the windows. The journey had flown by surprisingly quickly thanks to the pleasant company. The cathedral square, closed to the public for the occasion, appeared unusually empty. The only figures visible were a few clergymen, with the deserted expanse of the plaza dotted here and there with empty royal carriages. Thankfully, there would be no crowd of onlookers to give me pause as there would be at the Trials themselves.

Once we had drawn to a complete halt, the coachman promptly opened the door and set down the step, allowing us to disembark. Acknowledging his service with a subtle nod, we filed out of the carriage.

Wispy white breaths escaped our lips as we emerged from the cozy warmth into the crisp December air—Ed's fire magic had kept us pleasantly toasty on the journey. I wrapped my robe tighter around me, grateful for the additional layer of protection against the chill. I felt a gentle tug at my hand.

"Lina, it's freezing out here. We shouldn't linger," Ed said.

"Catching a cold at this juncture would be no laughing matter," Theodore added.

Heeding the thoughtful advice of my two companions, I advanced towards the main doors, relishing the satisfying crunch of snow beneath my feet. The path across the square was well-tended, the snow shallow and packed tightly underfoot. At every icy patch or step we encountered, Ed cast a protective glance my way; he expressed his concern in a gentle reminder to tread carefully—a gesture I acknowledged with a tender smile and a word of thanks. Trailing behind, Teodore maintained a discreet distance but an equally vigilant watch.

As we approached the imposing entryway of the cathedral, the paladins standing guard bowed deeply. When we crossed the threshold, the biting cold gave way to an enveloping warmth, a comfort that seemed improbable given the open doors gaping wide to the frosty outside air. The juxtaposition felt strange on my skin, but I knew the feel of fire magic well, and I turned my mind to other things.

“Teo, is our greenroom to the right?” Ed said.

“The left, Your Highness. Really, how many times have I explained the route to you since this morning?” Teodore shot Ed a sharp sidelong glance.

Sensing the incoming lecture, Ed’s gaze immediately started to wander. “F-Five times? I don’t know,” he stammered. “But I was listening. I just...don’t remember, that’s all.”

Teodore’s lips slipped into his familiar dubious smile. “‘That’s all,’ Your Highness? Indeed, that *is* all. What other matters could possibly be vying for your attention than to simply recall what I tell you?” His peridot eyes glinted with reproach. “Perhaps my efforts would have been better spent discussing our plans with someone who doesn’t possess the memory of a chicken.” He sighed. “Regrettably, I anticipated as much, which is why I am here—to guide your perpetually scattered thoughts into something that approaches the capacity of the adult man I am assured that you are. Please, follow me, Your Highness, if we hope to arrive at the greenroom with any semblance of punctuality.”

Teodore’s tongue was as sharp as ever today. Sharper than usual, perhaps, as his typical digs at Ed were now blatantly unveiled (though I would not dare to make this observation to him out loud.)

“L-Lead on,” Ed quietly acquiesced.

“Follow me closely,” Teodore replied, tightening his smile. He placed his hand over his heart in a gesture of loyalty, then stepped forward to lead the way. But after only a step, he paused and turned. “I trust, Your Highness, you do not presume we’ve exhausted the topic of your elusive memory. We shall delve deeper into this matter upon our arrival.”

Ed’s eyes widened in dismay. *You mean that wasn’t it?* his expression seemed to say. But it seemed he had no courage left to voice his protest, and he only nodded sadly in resignation.

Teodore allowed himself a satisfied smirk, and we resumed our trek through the echoing corridors of the cathedral. We had scarcely rounded the next corner when our procession was stopped again by a figure emerging from around it. She was cloaked in the same robe that was draped upon my own form, her silver-blond hair loosely tied back, her breathing heavy and strained. Despite her evident exhaustion and frazzled aura, I recognized her immediately.

It was my elder sister, Flora.

Teodore had mentioned she would be participating in the trials, so I had braced myself for a reunion, yet I hadn’t envisioned it to be so sudden an encounter, here in the quiet confines of the cathedral’s corridors. Surprised, I observed her closely. She was as yet unaware of my presence, her gaze downturned, her fingers carefully massaging her neck. It was only when she looked up that our eyes met, and her reaction was one of unmistakable surprise. This encounter was clearly unplanned. Her padparadscha sapphire eyes darted about, betraying a fleeting hesitation. Then she took a deep breath, forced a weary smile onto her pale face, and stepped forward with a warmth that belied her initial reservation. “Carolina, it’s so wonderful to see you, sister. I’ve missed you dearly.” She then turned to Ed and dipped into an elegant curtsy. “And my sincerest greetings to Your Highness, Prince Edward. Thank you for looking after my little sister so well.”



As we were in mixed company, she effortlessly slipped back into her “doting older sister” persona. Had Ed and Theodore not been here, I could almost hear her scornful whisper, *Well, well, well, it seems a disgraceful little rat has managed to sneak her way onto the premises.*

Those eyes, feigning kindness... Her performance as the doting sister was frustratingly flawless, stoking an old flame of resentment within me. Curious, I glanced at Ed to gauge his reaction. To my relief, his expression was stoic, his usual impassiveness shading into slight annoyance as he regarded my sister without any trace of warmth or reciprocated greeting. Despite my previous warnings about Flora’s true nature, I had felt a twinge of fear that he might be swayed by a single charming encounter. Thankfully, my concerns seemed to be misplaced.

My spirits lifted immediately, my face relaxing, marveling at how transformative the support of just one person could be. It was at this moment that Theodore stepped forward, as if to remind me of *his* presence as well. “It is a pleasure to meet Her Highness’s illustrious sister. Lady Flora Sanchez, I am Theodore Garcia, councillor to His Imperial Highness. Though it pains me to interrupt such a joyous family reunion, I must ask you to allow us to be on our way, as we have commitments to attend to.”

Flora’s eyes subtly reacted to the unspoken message: *move aside for royalty*. Her smile, however, never faded. “My sincerest apologies,” she responded. “In the excitement of seeing my dear sister, I momentarily forgot my manners.”

“Is that so?” Theodore retorted. “Then, I must say, for someone so eager to meet her dear sister, I couldn’t help but notice quite a pause before you approached us.”

“I must have been so overwhelmed that I was rendered paralyzed with shock,” Flora excused herself with practiced smoothness. “Please forgive me. This reunion was quite unexpected, after all.”

I marveled at the volley of words in sheer astonishment. Flora’s ability to parry Theodore’s sharp remarks with such grace and agility was nothing less than remarkable. Secretly, I envied her eloquence; I knew I would have faltered at the first challenge. Despite my reluctance to admit it, Flora possessed a finesse

in social maneuvers to which I could only aspire.

Teodore's lips pulled into a devious grin. "I see, I see. Then, you must share an exceptionally close bond with your dear sister." He paused, and in that moment, I swore I saw his eyes glint. "Yet, I must wonder, if this bond is so strong, why have I never seen Her Highness exchange a single letter with Your Ladyship?"

Teodore served Flora undeniable proof of her lies, and yet only the merest, fleeting sign of strain was all that Flora's face betrayed. Her smile remained fixed, her response breezy. "Lord Teodore. I am sure someone of your position is well informed about the current events in Celestia. It pains me to admit, but the circumstances have left me with no time to write."

"Of course. But, His Grace Duke Sanchez even found time to—"

Interrupting him, Flora's tone took on a brisk note. "Oh, I've kept you too long already, haven't I? You mentioned you were in a hurry." Without waiting for a response, she smoothly sidestepped towards the wall, halting Teodore's inquiry. "My apologies. We must take up this conversation another time, mustn't we?"

And that was that. Teodore had made it clear that we had prior commitments, leaving no real justification for prolonging our stay. He resumed leading us past Flora, signaling it was time to move on.

"Good luck today, sister," I said as I passed.

Behind me, the faintest click of a tongue reached my ears. It was hardly the harshest retort in my long history of Flora's dismissals, so I ignored it and continued walking. But then, I felt a gentle pressure on my cheek—a large, comforting hand. "Are you okay?"

Looking up, I met Ed's gaze. In contrast to his curt words, his golden eyes were brimming with kindness and warmth. "I'm fine," I reassured him, surprised by my own calmness. "I thought I'd be more emotional seeing my sister, but much to my own surprise, I'm feeling fine. And Teodore was there to counter her sharp words. That was actually very satisfying." As I replayed the scene, relishing the memory of Flora on the back foot for the entire duration of that short encounter, a small giggle escaped me.

Teodore's eyes crinkled into a smile. "I am beyond glad you found some amusement in that, Your Highness." His expression shifted to one of concern. "Though I must ask, is Lady Flora suffering from some ailment? She seemed quite the worse for wear."

I shook my head. "Flora has always been the picture of health, save for the occasional cold. That pallor was unexpected to me as well. Maybe the preparations for the trials were more taxing than expected? But I can't be sure..."

"Because Your Highness doesn't think someone as meticulous as Flora would let herself lose her edge right before something as critical as the trials, correct?"

I nodded at Teodore, who was on the exact same line of the exact same page as me. Besides the recent mana-beast and crop issues plaguing Celestia, I'd never seen Flora suffer so much as a single failure. Flora's reputation as the "perfect lady" was not mere lip service; it was borne out of her relentless drive for excellence. To slip up, and in so visible a manner, I would have thought was inconceivable.

Is there something going on behind the scenes? My thoughts were interrupted by Ed's venomous and unhesitating dismissal of the topic of his sister-in-law's well-being. "Why are we discussing the health of that woman? It has nothing to do with us. Instead, we should be focusing on the trials ahead."

He didn't even deign to use her name. Clearly, he had no intention of recognizing Flora as family.

Teodore smiled. "You're absolutely right, Your Highness. Now there's a phrase I didn't think I'd be saying today."

Ed bristled. "You! That last part was clearly unnecessary!"

"On the contrary," Teodore snickered under his breath. "Without it, my compliment to you would've been incomplete, Your Highness."

Their usual acerbic camaraderie brought a smile to my face. And Ed was right—the trials were imminent; our focus needed to be razor-sharp. I gently shook my head to dispel any lingering distractions, and I refocused on the trials that lay ahead.

Soon enough, we reached our greenroom. After a brief respite, we proceeded into the venue. Backstage, hidden by the heavy curtain, I snatched a glimpse of the gathering crowd. It was a scant five minutes before the opening ceremony, and the cathedral was already packed to the brim. Without a doubt, it would be a full house. Waiting in the wings behind the curtains alongside me were the other saintly candidates. Flora was among them, of course, but I had resolved to pay her no mind, and so ignore her I did.

Just as I'd managed to gather my composure one final time, a clergyman took the stage. "Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the opening ceremony," he declared solemnly in a voice resonant with purpose.

There was a collective rustling as all members of the audience—aristocrats and royalty alike—rose to their feet. The directness of his request went unquestioned, reflecting the gravity of the occasion.

The clergyman, now serving as the host of the event (albeit one much more staid than Prince Gilbert had been at the preliminaries), clasped his hands together in prayer and closed his eyes. "In the name of our Lord, I hereby declare the Saintly Trials begun. May God guide all of His candidates and be with us all. So may it be."

"So may it be," the audience echoed back in chorus.

"You may now be seated," the host gently instructed. Those assembled finished offering their silent prayers for their chosen candidates and then gracefully resumed their seats.

The host moved to the side of the stage and cast a glance towards those of us waiting nervously in the wings. "The Saintly candidates shall now present themselves. Kindly honor them with your heartfelt applause."

At his words, a regal fanfare rang out, filling the air with majestic notes. As the music echoed through the hall, we lined up in order, and as the final note faded into silence, we made our entrance, stepping onto the stage and carefully navigating to our assigned spots. It was difficult to determine which sensation I felt more keenly—the bright lights beaming down on us or the intense, scrutinizing gazes of the audience.

My eyes wandered to the royal seating area, seeking out Ed. There he was,

alongside the emperor and empress, with Prince Gilbert and Teodore nearby—all of them applauding. Despite my intention to maintain composure, I felt a smile begin to spread across my face, buoyed by the overwhelming support.

I acknowledged their encouragement with a subtle nod, then refocused my attention forward. Just then, Flora, who was bringing up the rear, took her position diagonally behind me, signaling the completion of our procession.

“Thank you for your applause,” the host said. “All twenty-three saintly candidates have now taken the stage. For an introduction to each candidate, please refer to the programs you were given.”

The audience responded with a synchronized rustle as everyone opened the programs provided and began to read. A moment of collective focus ensued before the host cleared his throat to continue. “Next, we are honored to receive words from the high pontiff. Please extend a warm welcome to His Holiness.”

He stepped back, making way for a distinguished figure. The elderly man, draped in a cassock of white and gold, slowly ascended the stage. The gentle tap of his cross-shaped staff punctuated each step. Upon passing the line of bowing clergymen, High Pontiff Melvin Clark White stepped to the center of the stage.

The high pontiff’s back loomed large before us, commanding silence and reverence. It was a reminder that, despite his usual kind and lighthearted demeanor, he was the ultimate authority of our storied church.

“Hear my voice,” His Holiness proclaimed. “I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of you for gathering here to witness the Saintly Trials. My thanks and honor go out to all who have labored tirelessly to bring these trials to fruition. Such a feat, accomplished in such a short time, is a testament to your immense sacrifices.”

His voice maintained a composed cadence that was almost eerie in its calm as he addressed the assembly. He abruptly and unexpectedly turned to face us. His solemnity was counterbalanced by a gentle expression—a familiar warmth that I’d come to cherish. “And to you, the chosen few, I say this: unleash your fullest potential on this sacred day. Great things are expected of you all.”

As he turned to face the audience once more, I swore I felt his gaze drift over

me and linger for just a moment—a fleeting look of encouragement—before he resumed his address. “Lengthy speeches can diminish the spirit, so I shall be brief. As a final word, I wish for everyone to find joy in our gathering today.”

With a reverent “may God bless us all,” the high pontiff concluded his speech, leaving a profound stillness in its wake. He descended the way he had come and took the seat by the stage reserved for the arbiter of the trials.

The host stepped forward once more. “Thank you for your inspiring words, Your Holiness. Now, allow me to briefly explain how the trial will work. Our candidates will face three rigorous challenges, each crafted to test their abilities and virtues. We will introduce each trial in turn, providing clarity to ensure everyone’s understanding. The trials will operate on a points system; after each, candidates will receive scores reflective of their performance. At the conclusion of this event, the one among them with the highest total will ascend as the Saint.”

This explanation mirrored the details that were already known to the candidates and the public, so there were no surprises to be had there. The points system, visually clear and quantifiably precise, was designed to offer a transparent and accurate assessment of each candidate.

The host continued with his explanation. “Given the nature of this points-based scoring matrix, there should be no cause for withdrawals or eliminations throughout the trials. However, let it be known that any candidate who inflicts harm on another or engages in deceitful behavior unbecoming of this sacred competition will face immediate disqualification. I urge all candidates to exercise caution and integrity to avoid any actions that could lead to censure, even unintentionally.” He then shot a conspicuous and significant glance towards the paladins standing by in the venue, as if to issue a silent but stern warning to any would-be transgressors.

I, um, suppose the reason for the heightened security must be me, considering what happened at the preliminary trials. A curious mix of gratitude and guilt stirred within me as I acknowledged the lengths to which they had gone to ensure our safety. My hand instinctively rose to my neck, tracing the now-faded marks as the visage of Lady Monica flashed before my eyes. I prayed silently that something like that wouldn’t happen again.

“That concludes the explanation,” the host said. “We will now proceed to the first trial. Please stand by as we make the necessary preparations.”

At his word, a procession of nuns entered the space. They had smiles on their faces and what looked like stained and dirtied towels in their arms. They deposited a veritable small mountain of fabric in front of each candidate before gracefully retreating. We stared at the mysterious heaps of cloth, trying to unravel their purpose, when moments later, the nuns returned, this time placing next to each of us a large empty basket. This enigmatic pairing of items only deepened our bewilderment. After a final, graceful exit, I could see that the nuns lingered offstage, at the ready with additional towels.

“The first trial is set to commence,” the host announced. “Allow me to explain the challenge. Candidates, your task is to cleanse—that is to say, purify—these towels. Each towel you restore to pristine condition will earn you one point. But bear in mind that only towels which are completely clean will count towards your score. Consider this carefully as you plan your approach.”

At the host’s words, a few candidates visibly tensed—perhaps they had initially contemplated doing the bare minimum wherever possible, an eventuality that such a rule was clearly meant to circumvent. Not to say that I didn’t empathize with their eagerness to find any advantage; the stakes were indeed monumental.

“Place your cleaned towels in any arrangement you prefer within the provided basket,” the host instructed. “Should you exhaust your supply, more will be brought to you. Do not disturb or take towels belonging to others.” He took a deep breath, then bellowed out at the top of his lungs, “You will have fifteen minutes. Let the first trial...begin!”

The host had barely departed the stage when the candidates sprang into action, casting purification magic with fervor. Heedless of the grime staining their hands, each focused intensely on thoroughly cleaning their assigned towels, the host’s warning clearly having had its intended effect.

I, however, did not need to choose between quality and quantity. After surveying my competitors, I turned my attention to the soiled towels before me and clasped my hands together in prayer, just as I had in the preliminaries. The

pose wasn't strictly necessary, but I found that it was a handy way to align my spirit with the task. The divine nature of my power meant that getting into the right mood was actually quite an important consideration.

"O heavenly guardian, I beseech thee—purify this fabric before me!"

Careful to specify exactly which towels I wanted cleansed, I sent my prayer up into the heavens. Soon enough, it was answered, and a soft glow like moonlight enveloped the mound of cloth before me. The audience erupted into a hushed murmur, the odd comment to the effect of "that isn't purification magic!" reaching my ear. But I ignored the whispers, focusing solely on the divine intervention at work. As the light receded, it unveiled towels which were not merely spotless but impeccably white and fluffy as well.

Each towel was without a doubt immaculately clean, so I gathered them all and placed them into my basket. Almost immediately, a nun hurried onto the stage with another stack of towels. I gave her a grateful smile as she turned to leave—and promptly cleansed the new pile right away. She had hardly made it back to her spot before she noticed my work, and she rushed back at once with another set of towels.

I would love to avail myself of more towels on my own rather than putting her to such inconvenience, but unfortunately, I'm bound to this spot, I thought wryly. As she dashed away again, I called out, "Thank you!" hoping my sincere appreciation would compensate for the task I imposed upon her. Yet the relentless pace of the competition demanded my focus, and I continued my work, undeterred by my concern for my towel-laden ally or the murmurs of the captivated audience.

As I cleansed one set of towels after another, I glanced at my competitors. Perhaps feeling pressured by me, most had abandoned their cautious approach of one towel at a time and were instead frantically trying to cleanse five or six simultaneously. The effort showed—they were all breathing heavily, big drops of sweat beading off their brows.

Suddenly, I remembered Flora's presence, and I turned around to check on her. Like the others, she was breathing rapidly, each breath shallower than the last. Her face, already pale at the morning's start, now appeared ghostly, a clear

sign of her exhaustion.

Then, with a suddenness that caught everyone off guard, Flora cast the towel she was working on to the ground and clutched her chest. A cry of pain escaped her lips; her head bowed as if too heavy to hold up.

I found myself transfixed with horrified curiosity: would my ever-scrupulous sister really allow herself to show such weakness before this august assembly?

Just how much pain is Flora experiencing for her to allow herself to falter like that?

Something was clearly *very* wrong. Mana exhaustion was a real and dangerous phenomenon, and many of the candidates seemed to be displaying its symptoms to varying levels, but Flora's condition seemed far more severe than anyone else's. Recalling her appearance this morning and seeing her now, I found myself consumed by worry. Despite myself, despite our history, I couldn't just watch her suffer and do nothing.

I reached out reflexively towards her. "Flora? Are you—"

Her response was a glare as sharp as shattered glass. Her striking padparadscha sapphire eyes conveyed a clear message: *Do not speak to me.*

I bit my lip, conceding silently. *Fine.* Perhaps she found my concern irksome. I was still worried, but I recognized that there was no helping someone who had no desire to be helped. I supposed that she knew herself best. It was her own responsibility to stop herself before she went past her limits. Besides, I had my own battle to focus on—a competition to win.

Returning my attention to my task, I threw myself into cleansing more towels to distract myself from my concerns. Five minutes later came an unexpected announcement: the organizers had run out of towels well before the allotted time.

This mishap, I sheepishly admitted to myself, was likely one that was entirely of my making. I had filled my basket to overflowing almost at once, and I'd since resorted to forming heaps of terry cloth around me instead. The sight was almost comical—three luxuriant, fluffy mounds, piled so high that they now blocked my view of the audience. *I... I suppose I just wanted to be considerate*

and keep the stage tidy for everyone, but it didn't quite work out the way I thought it would...

The host hastened over to me, his expression a mix of embarrassment and urgency. "Your Highness, I must beg your forgiveness for this most unexpected mishap. It appears we've depleted our stock of towels—both our reserves and the additional supply we scrambled to gather in a pinch. Might I suggest you take this moment to rest?" His gaze then swept across the other competitors. "I urge everyone to do the same. Once you've finished the towels in front of you, please relax. Again, I sincerely apologize for this oversight," he repeated, bowing his head. His remorseful gesture was echoed by the attending nuns.

I... I didn't overdo it, did I? I thought, a cold sweat breaking out across my back. *I didn't mean to embarrass the church...*

I allowed my anxieties to consume me for a few more agonizing moments before a chiming of church bells announced that the allotted time was up. "Cease your spellcasting, candidates!" the host announced. His voice squeaked a *little* too high, betraying his ongoing disbelief about the towel situation.

At his command, all activity on the stage ceased. Some competitors made a show of dropping their towels and stepping back, leaving no question that they had stopped at the very moment the clock had run down. The nuns proceeded onto the stage, each retrieving a basket filled with towels—except for mine, which required two people to carry, as well as someone to gather up the extra piles of towels around me.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished candidates," the host continued, "we shall now enter a brief interlude to tally up the totals."

A collective sigh of relief swept through the candidates, our postures relaxing as clergy members handed out refreshments. We all took a moment to unwind and refocus. Twenty minutes later, a remarkably well-built man stepped onto the stage and handed a slip of parchment to the host, his hulking presence effectively dispelling the temporary calm among the candidates.

The host took hold of the results and dismissed the courier. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please? Stand by for the results of the first trial."

The murmurs in the audience died down, replaced by the rustle of attendees repositioning themselves in their seats. On the stage, we candidates straightened up, our postures reflecting the mounting tension.

Even I, feeling the tense atmosphere, felt a flicker of doubt creep into my thoughts. Objectively, I had worked through the most towels; the piles upon piles in front of me had been proof of that. But had each towel been cleansed thoroughly enough to meet the standards? In my haste, I hadn't inspected each one. Perhaps I should have done so?

Just as my anxiety began to crest, the host scanned the slip of paper. "The results shall be announced in ascending order, from the candidate with the least points to the one with the most points. Starting in twenty-third place..."

He proceeded down the list, calling out each candidate's name and the number of towels they had cleansed. With each announcement, waves of reaction rippled through the crowd—some murmurs were approving, others not so much, mirroring the mixed emotions of the candidates onstage.

Then, as the host neared the top five, he paused dramatically. My name had not yet been called, nor had Flora's. All I could do was hope my luck would last until the very end. I wasn't just aiming to win; I needed to dominate the competition decisively—not only to get my revenge on Flora but also to showcase the power of my Divinity.

The host resumed the countdown. My attention was razor-sharp. Fifth place went to a candidate whose name didn't even ring a bell. A wave of relief washed over me. *My apologies, fifth-place girl. I need this more than you do.*

"Next, in a breakaway fourth with seventy-nine towels cleansed, we have the Kingdom of Celestia's own Saintly candidate: Lady Flora Sanchez! Well done!" The announcement triggered a surge of applause.

Flora, ever the epitome of grace, flashed a radiant smile at the host and then turned to acknowledge the audience, her gesture eliciting even louder applause. She worked the crowd effortlessly, her charm amplifying the applause as she absorbed their accolades.

Well, that's Flora for you. I could never manipulate a crowd in such an effortless manner, managing to sway a whole assembly of nobility and royalty

to my command. Before I could dwell on our differences any further, the host announced third place. That candidate had edged out Flora by a slim margin, prompting a fresh wave of murmurs from the audience as they lamented Flora's near miss at third place.

Now, this is it! Only second and first place were left, and my name had yet to be called.

The host transitioned smoothly. "Ladies and gentlemen, as we cannot announce second place without it being immediately apparent who obtained first, they shall be announced together." Drawing in a deep breath to draw out the suspense of the moment, he continued, "Claiming second place in our first trial, having successfully cleansed an impressive 101 towels, is Princess Noelle Nero Noir of the Kingdom of Noir!" A pause allowed the applause to swell before he added, "And thus, our resplendent victor of this first trial, standing solidly in first place with an exemplary count of 378 towels, is...Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez of Malcosias!"

My heart leaped. I had done it! Stealing a quick glance towards Ed and my friends in the audience, I saw their smiles beaming with unwavering confidence, their faces alight with pride and their unshakable belief in me. The joy of their faith was overwhelming; it filled me with elation.

The host's voice, filled with admiration, cut through my reverie. "With not a single towel disqualified for incomplete cleansing, Princess Carolina has indeed delivered a flawless victory, if I may say so myself!"

Flawless. Exemplary. The words ignited a warm glow in my chest and a blush on my cheeks. The proceedings, however, waited not for my emotions to settle. The host cleared his throat, and the commotion of the crowd faded. When silence reigned in the venue, he carried on. "That concludes the announcement of results of the first trial. We will now proceed to the second trial. Please stand by as we make the necessary preparations."

The hush that had momentarily blanketed the audience lifted at once, and the chatter returned. All of the candidates took this as another opportunity to relax their postures and enjoy a brief reprieve—all except for me. As the victor of the first trial, I felt the weight of every gaze upon me, compelling me to stand taller

and straighter than ever before to meet the lofty expectations I had now set. It seemed any respite would have to wait until the trials concluded...

After fifteen agonizing minutes of maintaining the poised demeanor befitting a future Saint, the doors to the grand hall swung open dramatically. A procession of knights clad in armor marched in, their breastplates emblazoned with the symbols of church paladins, though each wore a brightly colored bracelet which clashed markedly with their ceremonial splendor. They numbered a few dozen, and as they positioned themselves before us, I could see that each soldier was scarred with wounds and other signs of battle.

I had an inkling of what this particular trial might entail. For the benefit of everyone else, however, the host explained, “The second trial is now set to commence. Your challenge, candidates, is to perform a ritual of healing. Extend your powers to these holy warriors before you, all of whom have borne great suffering in service to our Lord.”

Indeed. As I thought, this trial seems to be nothing but a repeat of the preliminaries.

“Distinguished candidates, each brave knight before you sports a bracelet of either white, blue, or red. These bracelets signify the severity of their wounds—white for minor grazes, blue for more serious injuries from crushing blows or incised wounds, and red for fractured bones or even graver injuries. Naturally, the points awarded for healing a wound correspond to its severity: one point for white, three for blue, and a substantial ten for red.”

So that’s what those bracelets are for, I mused. The church had given this quite a bit of thought. With the clear demarcation of the different colors, we could wisely choose our challenges and avoid the risk of complications caused by attempting to heal a wound that was beyond our skill to manage.

The host continued, “To earn points, you must approach and aid the knight of your choice. Upon their recovery—and only when they declare themselves healed—they will present you with their bracelet as a token of their mended state.” His tone hinted at the trust placed in the knights’ self-assessment. It was a curious but seemingly prudent choice that would considerably streamline the process.

“You may not ‘keep’ a wounded paladin to prevent them from being healed by another candidate. You may tend multiple knights simultaneously, but this will be capped at three for the safety of our volunteers. Interfering with another candidate’s efforts or attempting to ‘steal’ a knight is strictly prohibited. Should disputes arise, the high pontiff himself will arbitrate,” he added, ensuring every rule was crystal clear.

The host’s gaze swept across us, and we nodded firmly as if to say, *As if anyone would do something so disgraceful in front of His Holiness.*

“Please be aware, this trial will be conducted in two halves due to the spatial constraints of our stage with the additional presence of our valiant paladins. Those of you who are positioned in the front row, I kindly ask you to exit the stage for the first half of this trial. We beg your cooperation and understanding in this matter.”

I supposed accommodating all twenty-three candidates and the numerous paladins on the stage simultaneously would probably have been a logistical nightmare. We in the front row exchanged puzzled glances at the sudden command to exit, but we agreeably complied. As we made our way backstage, the paladins advanced, their bulky figures occupying the entirety of the part of the stage on which we had been standing. Now it was clear that removing us had been a wise decision indeed; the stage was too crowded as it was, and the risk of someone falling off it would have been all too real had all of us remained.

From my vantage point backstage, I caught sight of Flora. She had been positioned just behind me, and thus she was a part of the first cohort. Given the length of the interlude between the first trial and the second, she looked slightly better than before, but her complexion was still far from healthy, and she appeared even more fatigued than some of the knights she was about to heal. Could one use magic in such a state? In my opinion, standing upright was the most she should be managing at the moment.

I knew this wasn’t the time to be concerned about a rival’s well-being, but I just couldn’t shake off the ominous feeling that something was very wrong. I found myself wishing for someone to intervene, to force her to step down before it was too late, but I knew it wasn’t my place to say or do anything. Frustrated by my powerlessness and distracted by my worry, I barely registered

the host's voice as he declared the resumption of the proceedings.

"You have thirty minutes. Let the second trial...begin!"

(Flora)

At the host's signal, all of us candidates still remaining dashed towards our selected paladin to begin the process of administering healing. The delicate balance between healing efficiency and magical throughput meant that most candidates went for white or blue bracelets. Red bracelets, though valuable, were liable to drain away too much time and power to be viable as strategic choices, and thus they were largely left alone. I was right alongside the majority, quickly approaching a paladin with a blue bracelet, one who stood directly before me.

Flashing him a reassuring smile, I asked, "Would you mind?" My hands hovered above the deep slash that marred his left arm. He gave a brisk nod and murmured a soft "please," at which I smiled with grateful acquiescence.

I closed my eyes, channeling the swirling energy within me towards my palms. The mystic channels inside me, those fragile conduits for arcane energy, blazed with pain. Fiery discomfort seared through my chest and arms. It was almost unbearable, yet I suppressed the urge to cry out, letting only a faint grunt escape my clenched lips.

I had hoped for some degree of recovery after the first trial, but that had clearly been wishful thinking. The agony had intensified, and with this only being the beginning of the second trial, I knew that there was plenty of time for it to escalate.

Such unhelpful thoughts, however, were irrelevant; defeat was not an option. "I cannot...afford...to fail!" I whispered through clenched teeth. Despite every fiber of my being screaming for reprieve, I persevered, forcing out that mystical energy within me, converting it into magic and life force, then flesh and blood. After thirty excruciating seconds, the paladin stood healed, his vitality restored, while I felt diminished, as if parts of me had been carved away.

"Hoh hoh!" he exclaimed with vigor, while I slumped, overwhelmed by

fatigue. *The archbishop's lackey was right. The Forbidden Technique extracts a dire toll.* This was death by a thousand cuts, each expenditure of arcane energy accumulating increasingly grim side effects. Yet its power was undeniable; without it, I could never have healed a wound of such severity.

My limbs grew icy, my blood seeming to retreat towards my core. Battling dizziness and overwhelming lethargy, I forced myself to remain upright.

The paladin, noting my labored breathing, showed a flicker of concern before quickly masking it. "I thank you, Lady Flora. My arm is fully restored." He removed his bracelet and extended it towards me. "Here, your prize."

"Th...thank you," I managed to gasp out, clutching the bracelet. Under normal circumstances, I might have offered a more eloquent response, or at least maintained my poise as the perfect lady, but such pretenses were far beyond my current capacity.

Standing there, it took every ounce of my strength just to maintain the facade that I was still worthy of this stage.

Unexpectedly, the paladin's voice broke through the fog of my pain. "Forgive my forwardness, milady, but are you feeling quite all right? You appear rather pale."

I lifted my gaze wearily to meet his, his face now deeply etched with the genuine worry I had glimpsed a moment ago. Now it had intensified considerably.

"As a humble volunteer in these sacred trials, it is perhaps not my place to offer you counsel," he continued in a low voice, "but I feel I must say it all the same: I would implore you to consider withdrawing. The pallor of your complexion is...unnatural. Perhaps you should seek medical attention before it's too late."

I smirked internally. *Before it's too late, you say? Alas, it is already too late for me, my dear paladin—and it has been for some time.* The moment I had swallowed the archbishop's pill, my fate had been sealed. No, even before that—when I had agreed to enter these trials, I became a dead woman walking. I might collapse tomorrow or perhaps a week from now, but sooner rather than later, I would be freed from this mortal coil...for this was the price of power.

To me, there was only one thing that was worth such a sacrifice, and that was to eclipse my sister Carolina one last time. Before I departed this world, my deepest desire was to leave an indelible mark on Carolina's heart. I wanted to see her brought to her knees, compelled to acknowledge my supremacy and admit her insignificance, even if she had obtained the so-called blessing of God himself.

She needs to recognize herself as the disgrace she is. Carolina must be forced to see my strength, to witness my defiance. She had to understand that her very existence was a blight on everything I cherished. That it should have been Mother who had survived, not her. Carolina needed to suffer for what she had taken from me, and there would be no better way to do that than to ensure she understood that she was no better than the dirt she trod upon. I would have the last laugh, no matter the cost.

I clenched my fists tight, feeling a tumultuous surge within me. What was this overwhelming emotion? Too reckless to be revenge, too intrinsic to be mere resentment—it was something far more dire and violent, beyond easy description. Then it dawned on me: perhaps this was the natural state for a woman with nothing left to lose. If so, then oh, how liberating it felt to revel so openly in my darkest emotions.

Facing the paladin, I forced a smile through the pain. “Your concern is most appreciated, but I assure you, I am perfectly fine. A bit anemic, perhaps, but nothing that will impede my performance in the trials. Now, if you'll excuse me.”

With that blatant lie and a slight nod of my head, I left the paladin's side and began scouting for my next target. Winning the trials required safe and strategic choices, which means another blue or white bracelet, but the urge to utterly humiliate and humble Carolina burned within me. I needed something more—something *red*.

At one corner of the stage, three red-braceleted paladins stood seemingly abandoned, their limbs wrapped in gauze and fortified with plaster. As I strode towards them, I began gathering energy in my palms. “Excuse me,” I called, “you three knights over there—do you need a hand?”

Seeing my approach, all three knights did a double take before snapping to attention. They certainly seemed to have been caught off guard; had they thought nobody would dare to bother with them?

It was a fair assumption. A competent healer could handle three or four blue- or white-level wounds in the time it took to treat a single red one. Treating one red bracelet was undoubtedly less time-efficient—but what about three red bracelets *at the same time*?

“Stay still,” I commanded the knights, brusquely communicating my intentions. With the energy already amassed, more potent than any I had summoned so far, I extended my palms and let it flow outward in an overwhelming surge. Blood thrummed in my ears, accompanied by a high-pitched ringing. It seemed to be the sound of every cell in my body violently ripping itself apart in protest...yet for all that, the magic took hold.

As the flow of power ebbed and the knights opened their eyes, a dawning realization crossed their faces—they felt different, healed. One knight gingerly flexed an elbow. “It doesn’t hurt...” he said wonderingly.

Another tested his leg with a tentative kick. “I can walk!”

The third, moving all four limbs, exclaimed in disbelief, “I was told only a master healer could mend my wounds!”

As the paladins hastily unwrapped their bandages and shed their casts, reveling in their restored mobility, I found myself unable to share in their jubilation. Instead, I succumbed to a violent coughing fit. I had known that casting more potent magic would cause further deterioration to my body, but the actual toll was beyond my darkest predictions. I struggled to draw breath; my lungs felt as though they were being crushed by a leaden weight. My heart raced in an erratic pattern, my stomach churned, and on top of everything else, my hands had gone completely numb.

The very idea of a tomorrow now seemed like an overly optimistic prediction. I feared there was a good chance that my death was imminent. My body, already taxed by the purification magic during the trial of the towels, felt like its last dregs of life were being wrung out by this ordeal. Furrowing my brow, I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, and the pale skin came away

stained with bright specks of blood. The taste of iron in my mouth grew stronger, sparking a real sense of panic within me for the first time today. My body was disintegrating rapidly, much faster than I had anticipated.

How much longer will I be able to stand?

How many more spells can I cast?

How many more hours, minutes, seconds do I have left?

These anxious questions haunted me, not out of a fear of dying, no—but with the possibility that I might expire before I completed my mission. *Please, God, let me live—until I’ve at last repudiated Carolina’s very being in its entirety.*

With my fate left (in)securely in God’s hands, I accepted the red bracelets from the three rowdy paladins, all of whom still couldn’t quite believe their luck. I had no time to spare them even a word of thanks, for I was already on to my next target. I drifted from one paladin to the next, healing them in turn, enduring incessant searing torment for the remainder of the allotted half hour.

“Cease your spellcasting, candidates. That is time!” the host announced. “Stay where you are. Someone will come by to collect your bracelets, after which you may return to your positions.”

A nun approached, holding out a dowel-like object upon which I could see that I was meant to slide my collected bracelets. After I handed them off, she bowed her head in thanks and scurried off the stage.

As the only one who had taken on the challenge of the red bracelets, I knew that I was poised to be a strong contender for first place. Everyone else had settled for whites and blues, and even then, they hadn’t secured a significantly greater collection than mine. Unless Carolina managed a repeat of her first trial performance in the second half, I knew that I should be secure in my eventual victory.

The host’s voice cut through the air again. “While we tally up the points for the first group, we shall get the second half of the trial underway. Candidates now upon the stage, well fought. You may now rest.”

Following his directive, those of us on the stage began to file off. As we crossed paths with the incoming candidates, I locked eyes with Carolina. Her

brow was furrowed, her expression tense as if she were about to speak to me. She even parted her lips to say something, but she was quickly silenced by the host's call for her group's entrance. Hastily, she closed her mouth and headed towards the stage, though not without casting furtive glances back at me.

Rage boiled inside me. *Just what is her problem?!* I wanted to scream. Clearly, she thought so little of this competition that she could still afford to worry about her competitors. The rest of us must have looked like fools to her, little court jesters dancing a jig to a prearranged tune, exhausting ourselves while she effortlessly waved her hand and overwrote all our hard work with divine intervention.

Horrid, *horrid* woman. *You don't deserve this. You don't deserve any of it!*

My teeth clenched in sheer loathing. After cleaning the blood from my hand with a purification spell, I turned to face a wall, hoping to still my mind.

But it was futile. My fury only intensified, the image of Carolina's gloating smile burning vividly in my mind, as if etching itself into the blank wall before me.

The pain had faded. I was now sustained solely by spite. If my death was to be imminent, I was determined to ensure Carolina plummeted alongside me into oblivion. I would show her just how powerless and pathetic she really was.

With no fear of death to temper my actions, I continued unabated on this perilous path, barreling towards my certain doom.

Chapter Two

Standing on the stage, awaiting the arrival of another group of wounded paladins to augment the remainder of the first cohort, my thoughts were consumed by the abundant evidence of Flora's deteriorating condition. It was far graver than I had feared. During the first half of the second trial, I had watched, horrified, as she coughed up blood with each spell she cast. She masked her suffering well; only someone observing as closely as I had been would have noticed the toll her magic took on her.

I had to find a way to get Flora off this stage before her zeal led to her demise. Yet how could I intervene when she was so eager to dismiss every word I could possibly have to say?

No, no, I need to concentrate. The second trial was moments away, and here I was, distracted by Flora's plight rather than the impending challenge. I tried to refocus on the trial before me, but every time my concentration lapsed, a little bit of Flora drifted in.

With a furrowed brow and a heavy heart, I watched as the final wounded paladin stepped into position. "Ladies and gentleman, thank you for your patience. The second half of the second trial is now set to begin," the host announced. "Candidates, you have thirty minutes. And...begin!"

Just like that, the trial had started, as if the proceedings themselves displayed a cruel indifference to my inner turmoil. At once, the candidates dashed out towards their chosen paladins and began healing. Most went for white and blue bracelets, but here in the second half there were some, evidently inspired by Flora's rousing performance, who seemed to be challenging reds as well.

There it was again, echoing in my head: Flora's name. The trial had started; I needed to focus on the task at hand. Linger on the sidelines fretting would do nothing to aid Flora, and failing would render the many sacrifices of my friends meaningless. *Is this the girl I am? The sort of person who would let Ed, Theodore, and Prince Gilbert down?*

That thought seemed to do the trick—the uncertainty in my heart quieted. With a couple of brisk claps to my cheeks, I shook off my hesitation and finally moved from my starting position. To compensate for my initial delay, I approached a trio of paladins with red bracelets—a man with a bandaged eye and two others nursing broken arms.

Impatient to alleviate their suffering, I clasped my hands in prayer and called out to them. “Over here, please, I’ll heal you all.” As they approached, I winced—their injuries appeared even more severe up close. Steeling myself, I took a deep breath and imbued my next words with my wish to see them healthy and well. “O heavenly guardian, I beseech thee—spare these men from the suffering they have endured in Your name!”

The familiar, radiant glow descended from the heavens, enveloping the paladins in a warm, comforting light. As the luminance gently faded, it revealed three men visibly bewildered by their transformation.

The man with the bandaged eye was the first to respond. He cautiously unwrapped the dressing from around his face and slowly blinked open his previously damaged eye. His gaze shifted from left to right, disbelief flickering across his features. After a few more blinks, he cried out, “I... I can see! I can see out of the eye I was told would never work again!”

The other two quickly followed suit, tearing off their casts and flexing their previously immobile arms. “The bone was shattered...completely shattered. I don’t believe it! I had given up on ever holding a sword again!” one exclaimed in disbelief.

“I’m able to serve our Lord once more. Praise be!” the other added.

This disjointed cacophony of celebrations was hardly a coherent conversation, but their sheer joy was unmistakable and infectious. Once the initial excitement had subsided and their calm returned, they expressed their gratitude and handed me their red bracelets, which I accepted gracefully. Although this was a good start, it wasn’t a guarantee of victory quite just yet. Determined, I resolved then and there to heal each and every paladin who sported a red bracelet (time permitting, of course). Those with bracelets of other colors stood a chance of recovery even without my immediate intervention, but those

marked with red bracelets had been forsaken by even the church's own healers. The men might never act in service of their beloved Lord ever again. That was a cruelty they did not deserve.

This is why I was granted such power—to aid those most in need!

With renewed purpose, I approached the next group of paladins. My Divinity felt limitless, and I wielded it boldly, bestowing rest and reprieve upon these valiant holy warriors. In twenty minutes, the number of red-braceleted paladins onstage had halved. As proof of my efforts, my arms jangled with an absurd collection of bracelets. They slid up and down my wrists, clinking with chaotic rhythm, and each time I reached to adjust one, another would invariably tumble against it.

Noticing my peculiar but gratifying predicament, a group of paladins I had already healed approached me.

"P-Princess Carolina," one stuttered. "Please. Allow me to carry your trophies!"

"Allow me as well!" a second added.

"We'll protect them with our lives," a third chimed in, to which a fourth quickly added, "Lives that you have returned to us!"

There I was, suddenly surrounded by several large, burly paladins offering (or perhaps insisting?) to help me carry my spoils. Their fervor was palpable, but truthfully, it left me feeling uncertain. I pondered whether I *should* be thanked so effusively for merely participating in a competition, or whether it was fitting for me to allow them to carry my belongings.

"Thank you, brave paladins," I said, striving to maintain a neutral tone. "I appreciate the thought very much, but aren't you all still convalescing?" My statement tapered slightly into a question; I was unsure what it felt like to be healed by Divinity, after all. "I wouldn't dream of asking you to exert yourselves in such a state."

"We're right as rain, Your Highness, all thanks to you!" the first paladin replied eagerly. "Please, it would be our honor!"

Their enthusiasm made it hard to refuse them. But then I remembered, *The*

high pontiff is here! Perhaps he could subtly restrain his followers. Quickly, I shot a look to where he sat in state. His Holiness caught my gaze instantly, then responded with a reassuring smile. “Participant paladins may carry a Saintly candidate’s bracelets, as long as they are the ones who offered,” he called out to me warmly.

That was the exact opposite of what I hoped you’d do! I didn’t dislike the idea of off-loading the cumbersome bracelets, but having paladins perform such menial tasks seemed beneath their dignity, didn’t it?

Despite my reservations, the high pontiff’s endorsement left me with little room to maneuver. With a reluctant nod, I conceded, “Very well then, please, and thank you. But you are not to unduly exert yourselves. Inform me immediately should you feel even the slightest bit unwell.”

Their faces lit up with joy and they fervently nodded their agreement. *They’re like eager young puppies...* I thought wryly. Yet their intentions seemed genuine, and with the bracelets now in their capable hands, I could redirect my focus entirely to healing.

After handing off my bracelets to the paladins, I proceeded to seek out my next patient. As I walked, the paladins trailed behind me, forming a line reminiscent of ducklings following a mother duck. It was curious, as well as slightly ridiculous, yet it neither distracted me nor obstructed my path. Assuming they would tire of the novelty, I decided to let them have their moment.

However, it turned out that I had gravely underestimated their dedication. The line of followers didn’t dwindle; instead, it grew as each newly healed paladin joined the procession. The little parade at least remained very orderly, so it did not disrupt the other participants at all.

The church bells tolled just as I completed healing the last paladin with a red bracelet. “Cease your spellcasting, candidates. That is time!” the host announced. “The second trial is now concluded. Please hand off your bracelets and return to your positions.” The last paladin handed me his bracelet, and then, in a final act, my entourage of bracelet carriers heaped all the collected bracelets back into my arms. With that, the group dispersed, dipping their

heads in profuse thanks as they departed.

As the nun came around to relieve me of my bracelets, I let out a sigh of relief. Fortunately, I had managed to fulfill my goal of healing all of the paladins with red bracelets, but I still wasn't sure if I had deserved that almost bombastic display of gratitude. On the other hand, it didn't diminish the satisfaction of having made a tangible difference.

The tiniest smile tugging at my lips, I returned to my starting position. As I did, the host then announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, we shall now enter a brief interlude to tally up the totals. All candidates, please return to the stage."

As the other candidates strode back onto the stage to join us, Flora returned with them, her smile fixed and vacant across her pale features. To see the effort she poured into upholding her image even now—it stirred a tumult of feelings inside me. Though she appeared somewhat rejuvenated after the brief respite, I couldn't help but question the possible impact of a mere thirty minutes. She needed to withdraw now, to rest and recuperate.

This was the last chance I would have to talk to her, to make my concern for her known. If I hesitated now, the third trial would commence, and should she exert herself magically in her current frail state, I feared disaster was inevitable. Despite everything, I could not allow her to risk her life!

Before I could lose my nerve, I whipped around to address her. Our gazes locked instantly, her padparadscha sapphire eyes forcing my words to momentarily catch in my throat. But I spurred myself to push past my fear, opened my mouth to speak...

And that was as far as I got.

It might have been a trick of the mind. That was how quick it was. But for a fleeting moment, Flora's face contorted into an expression of pure loathing. Her fierce glare cut through me, her message resounding through the air between us, shouting without words: *Do not dare to speak*. My speech lodged against my tongue unspoken as I faced the raw animosity etched on her face.

I was at a loss. Why was she so opposed to withdrawing? What was driving her to such extremes? Were the trials so crucial to her that she would risk her very life to see them through? Or was her stubborn resistance a reaction to me

personally, a refusal to concede at a suggestion from my lips?

My thoughts were a tangled mess, yet I knew this was no time for deference. What was more important: respecting Flora's wishes or preventing her from treading a path from which there was no return? I parted my lips once more, desperate to voice my concerns, to say anything that might sway her decision. But my initial hesitation proved too costly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention, please! Stand by for the results of the second trial."

The host's voice thundered through the hall, snatching away my last opportunity. The timing couldn't have been worse. A part of me wished for the courage to interrupt the proceedings, to make my plea heard regardless of the spectacle it would cause. But with a heavy heart and a frown etched into my face, I turned back to join the silent crowd, the moment irrevocably lost.

"The results shall be announced in ascending order once more. Starting in twenty-third place..."

Names, colors, and counts of bracelets echoed through the hall in a systematic reveal. Blue and white bracelets were plenteous, as expected, and red ones were not, making for a very close distribution of scores. The audience murmured and speculated, their voices blending into a dull roar that barely registered above the clamor of my own racing thoughts.

Flora... I missed my moment, but is there still a chance to reach her? Would it be completely inappropriate to approach her now, amidst the formal proceedings? Is the risk of breaking decorum worth the possibility of her listening to me? Even if she does listen, can I persuade her to step back from this precipice, or will a plea coming from the "girl who killed her mother" only strengthen her resolve to continue on?

Paralyzed by indecision, I felt utterly helpless. I couldn't act, not when there was a chance I'd exacerbate the situation. The frustration was suffocating, gnawing at me from the inside as I clenched my fists tightly, the creak of my joints mirroring the tension wracking my body.

What should I do? What should I do? What should I do? What should I do? As the relentless query reverberated through my mind, the announcement of the

results continued, drawing ever closer to the climax.

“In third place,” the host proclaimed, “Lady Cindy Soleil of the Kingdom of San! Amassing a total of two white bracelets, thirteen blues, and one red, she has distinguished herself with a remarkable fifty-one points! Well done indeed.” The applause that erupted was noticeably louder than before; the scoring had leaped abruptly from the thirties to fifty-one, igniting a wave of excitement among the audience. Well, that and the fact that the only two names that hadn’t yet been announced were mine and Flora’s.

“And now, the moment we have all eagerly awaited—the announcement of our top two candidates.” He paused for effect, amplifying the suspense. The applause crescendoed; the fierce competition had everyone on edge. Eyes darted between Flora and myself, speculative and expectant, as if our very auras were being weighed and measured.

“The moment has come to reveal our champion,” the host proclaimed, his voice sweeping across the captivated crowd. “Claiming second place, with an impressive tally of one blue and twelve red bracelets...Lady Flora Sanchez of the Kingdom of Celestia! And thus, our victor is none other than Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez of the Empire of Malcosias!”

The hall burst into vigorous applause, the atmosphere electrified by my back-to-back victories. As accolades and congratulations filled the air, I managed only a weak smile. My heart felt heavy; the spectacle brought me no joy or excitement, consumed as I was by the image of Flora coughing up blood.

“Princess Carolina has healed an incredible thirty knights, earning all of the remaining red bracelets! Her Imperial Highness is indeed formidable, and expectations are undoubtedly high as we move into the third and final trial.”

Thirty red bracelets, three hundred points earned in a single trial—an unprecedented display of healing ability that ensured all eyes swiveled to me and no doubt would remain fixed there for the rest of the trials. With a running total of 678 points, I stood far ahead of the competition. Most of the other candidates hovered around one hundred points, and even Flora, a distant second, had only 202 points. Unless the third trial held a significantly larger fraction of a potential score, the nearly five-hundred-point difference between

us appeared unassailable, setting the stage for what many might already deem a foregone conclusion.

“That concludes the announcement of results of the second trial. We will now proceed to the third and final trial,” the host went on. “Please stand by as we make the necessary preparations.”

With that, he stepped aside, clearing the stage for the arrival of the same group of nuns who had assisted in the first trial. They carried tanks filled with brown, murky water, setting one before each candidate. *Well, this is a familiar sight.* Squinting at the tanks, I wondered if this muddied concoction was the same purification-resistant sludge that had been used in the preliminary trials.

Water purification, then, was the last trial. Though the volume of water this time seemed a little...underwhelming? Previously, the tanks were so heavy that they had required two knights to carry each; now, it looked as though one person might manage alone.

Once the nuns completed their setup, they withdrew, and the host reclaimed center stage. “The third trial is now set to commence. Your challenge, candidates, is...to uncover the hidden treasure.”

Surprise rippled through the candidates. Observing this, the host smiled wryly. “Allow me to elucidate. Hidden within each tank, you will find a rose pendant. The task before you is to locate and retrieve this hidden item. However, be advised that the water in these tanks is mixed with a special type of mud that is resistant to purification. I urge you all to think twice before attempting to purify the entire tank with a single spell.”

“A couple of critical rules to heed.” He paused here and raised two fingers for emphasis. “First, any mud that is transferred to your person or attire will result in points deducted, proportional to the size of the stain incurred. Secondly, the use of purification magic is strictly limited to the contents of the tank only. Should any of you attempt to purify your garments to avoid penalties, you will immediately be asked to stop, and you will earn zero points for the trial. You have been warned.”

So that’s why the tanks are so small. In other words, this is a competition of steady, careful effort rather than of sheer throughput. In that case, it seemed

wise for me to purify everything quickly at the outset and secure the pendant without risking any deductions.

I appreciate the warning, but with a power like mine, overexertion seems rather unlikely.

As I shifted my focus from my own tank, I studied the other candidates, their expressions furrowed in concentration as if trying to devise the most efficient strategy to go about their task. My gaze swept from right to left and then behind me, finally coming to a rest on Flora. Her eyes were fixed on her tank, her focus so intense that the bland smile she'd sported all day was conspicuously absent.

I had failed to stop her. I had failed to even broach the subject of my worry. Yet this time, as I watched her poised, frail figure, it wasn't concern about her well-being that consumed me, but thoughts of a much darker and more morbid variety.

Did I even *want* to stop her? If Flora were to keel over at this very tournament, what *would* my reaction be?

Would I mock and laugh at her lifeless corpse, claiming she had brought it upon herself?

Would I, as any sister should, weep and mourn her passing?

Or would I be overwhelmed by guilt and regret for not intervening when I had the chance?

These thoughts were dark yet inescapable as I watched Flora stand there. So weak, so feeble, as if she shouldn't even be capable of remaining upright, let alone preparing to use magic. Flora, as intelligent as she was, no doubt understood this better than anyone, and yet there she was, obstinate and determined, ready to face the trial.

I supposed that in a way, Flora's unwavering presence was her response to my unspoken question—the definitive answer of “the perfect lady,” Lady Flora Sanchez. She was determined to be here, resolved to see this through to the end.

“Why are you doing this, Flora?” The question escaped me as a weary exhale,

a whisper lost in the tension of the moment and the rumble of the crowd. I turned my attention back to the task ahead.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but in response, I thought I detected the faintest click of a tongue.

“You have twenty minutes. Let the third trial...begin!”

(Flora)

Every candidate except for Carolina and myself leaped into action, casting spells of purification. Their magic, however, was low in power; it merely skimmed the surfaces of their tanks, gingerly probing the peculiar mud, testing the extent of its resistance to cleansing. Their cautious approach stood in stark contrast to Carolina, who clasped her hands in solemn prayer, a stance reserved for moments of divine supplication. Her intent was clear: to purify the entire tank in one fell swoop and retrieve the pendant nestled within its depths. It was a bold and impudent move, one that was so like her. (Though I had to admit if I had the same amount of power at my disposal, I’d most certainly act in a similar manner.)

I’ve already lost, haven’t I? This bleak thought crossed my mind as I turned to face my own tank. A sharp, piercing pain wracked my lungs and heart with each breath. Clenching my teeth against the agony, I extended my right hand towards the glass, the numbness in my arm turning this simple movement into an ordeal.

Carolina had threefold the amount of points I possessed. It seemed an insurmountable gap even if I somehow managed to pull off a flawless performance in this third and final trial. That second trial had secured her more than enough of the points she needed to triumph. Anything that I or the other candidates managed to accomplish with our purification spells would amount to nothing but a consolation prize. But even then, I had to best her. If not overall, then at least in this last trial! Perhaps I was no longer able to strip Carolina of her Sainthood, but I could at least strip her of an accolade—I would not let her sweep through these trials completely undefeated.

This futile goal resounded meaninglessly even within my own mind. Had my

quest for retribution been reduced to nothing but this? Yet what choice remained? My life was dwindling away by the minute, perhaps even by the second. If there was any hope of finding another opportunity to exact my revenge, I would have withdrawn from this doomed competition to bide my time. But this was all that was left to me—a handful of desperate breaths. *And I will spend each one striving to diminish Carolina's glory, even if only by a fraction.*

I had become a caricature of the woman I once had been. “The perfect lady”? What a joke. Now I was nothing more than a failure—a shameless, laughable failure, so utterly consumed by a pathetic quest for revenge that had become an exercise in futility. And yet there was no one around to dissuade me from my course, no one to prevent me from hurling myself into the abyss. Could I cleanse the tank with a single, powerful spell, challenging Carolina just one more time? Perhaps, but such an act would surely cost me my life. *Then so be it.* I marshaled the last vestiges of my strength, channeling it towards my trembling fingertips.

“I’ll be seeing you soon, Mother,” I murmured, my voice unnaturally calm for someone about to face death. Her image crystallized in my mind, her warm smile so vivid it almost bridged the gap between memory and reality. As the spell surged from me, a chilling numbness enveloped my body, followed by an unexpected tranquility. I watched as the magic took hold; the mud in the water shimmered, converged into a single point at the center of the tank, and vanished. In its stead, a pendant with a rose engraving materialized, gracefully drifting through the clear water to rest on the bottom of the tank.

How beautiful, I thought, my eyes tracing its slow descent. I intended to stoop gently, to retrieve the pendant and declare a final, hollow victory, but agony struck like lightning. A sharp, stabbing pain buckled my knees, and I collapsed to the ground. My mouth gaped open as if to scream, but no sound emerged. Instead of my voice, I felt a wet, uncomfortable warmth, expelled in the form of a coughing fit and dark crimson stains on my hands and garments. The acrid stench of iron assaulted my nostrils, the sound of someone else’s screaming echoing over the ringing in my ears. My limbs convulsed, unresponsive, and my lungs refused to inflate.

Everything ached. I could feel my body failing, my heart frantically making its last feeble attempts to sustain life. Around me, I could dimly sense that the stage had erupted into chaos, yet none of it reached me; my mind was fixed on a single, mesmerizing thought: *This is it. I'm finally going to see Mother again.*

As darkness crept into the edges of my vision, I reached a trembling hand towards the water tank before me.

"Flora!"

I lifted my eyes. Carolina stood over me, her face twisted in anguish, tears threatening to spill. My gaze shifted reflexively to her tank; its waters were crystal clear, and her pendant floated gently within.

Hah, I scoffed in my mind. So in the end, that vexing brat chose me over victory.

Foolish. Foolish to the very end. Now you've done it. Now you've lost your glory.

With a spasmodic jerk, I plunged my hand into the cool, clear water, grasped the pendant, and raised it triumphantly above my head. "I've snatched victory from your hands, sister!" The water diluted my blood and dribbled down my arm in a macabre stream. I mustered a defiant grin, feeling a surge of triumph, then a final wave of euphoria. Now I could depart this world without regrets.

Darkness enveloped me completely. The pendant slipped from my weak grasp. I heard it clatter to the floor.

"Flora! Are you okay?! Flora!!!"

Silence, you infuriating woman. She'd even dared to grab me by the shoulders. I couldn't even muster the strength to shrug her off, as my body no longer seemed to be obeying my commands. This vessel was exhausted, yet it had endured—through powerful spell after powerful spell, all while under the strain of the Forbidden Technique, right up until this final trial. What more could I have asked of it? Though I'd failed to secure my Sainthood, I had won the richer prize—an early reunion with my mother.

Oh, dear Mother. I'll be with you soon. Just wait for me a moment longer.

“No... No! You can’t die! Flora! You can’t leave me and Father!”

Was she still speaking, that cursed girl? And praying for my life at that? *I hope I die. I hope I die right here in your arms and haunt your dreams forever, so don’t give me that. Don’t sob over me with such genuine sorrow and panic as if you might genuinely mourn my departure.*

How dare you offer me your sympathy! Or is this merely your final ploy to infuriate me in my last moments by evoking memories of Mother? Her kindness, her grace, her compassion...

Go to hell, Carolina.

As my consciousness poured away, I felt a profound loathing that seared through me, and then in a stark juxtaposition, a steady, enveloping warmth.

Chapter Three

My face paled. As Flora's eyelids drifted shut, her body sagged against me, limp and motionless. There she lay, my bloodstained sister, wilting away like a flower, each petal detaching one by one right before my eyes. Frantically, I channeled Divinity, trying to heal her with all the fervor I could muster, but it was as if her body were decaying faster than my powers could repair. Divinity—wasn't it supposed to be this omnipotent force, an answer to all my prayers? If so, why was it failing now? Confronted with the apparent limits of a force I had once deemed infinite, panic began to claw its way into my heart.

I laid Flora down on the floor as gently as I could and moved my hand to her neck, searching for a pulse. It was there, faint but perceptible. Her chest rose and fell weakly—signs of life, but such faint ones. Her skin felt clammy with the creeping chill of impending death. All my senses whispered to me that her end was near.

"Why?" I muttered weakly. "Have I lost my faith? Has God forsaken me? Or—" My mind raced to a dark, unbearable thought. "In my heart of hearts, do I truly not desire to save her?"

A shiver traced its way down my spine, halting my breath. The revelation shook me to my core, and my hands trembled as the weight of this knowledge settled over me. Could I truly claim that I wanted to save Flora? She had rejected my existence from birth, belittled me as a disgrace, scorned me, and torn me down to elevate herself. She was the reason for a childhood devoid of friendship, a life steeped in misery. Was I now expected to cast aside all that bitterness and *save* her?

Deep within, I couldn't deny that there had been times when I'd wished that Flora would simply vanish from my life. I had imagined her being married off, abducted—anything that would remove her from my sight forever. She was the root of all my pain, my trauma made manifest, and I had harbored the darkest wishes against her—until Ed had entered my life.

Ed, who had shown me what love was, who'd promised to stand by and protect me, had transformed me with his kindness and compassion. I was no longer the bitter girl I once had been. I had a husband now, an irreplaceable part of my being who imbued me with strength and courage. At the mere thought of him, my chaotic mind began to calm, the inky venom that had blackened my heart receding, overwhelmed by the powerful force of my love for Ed.

My true heart of hearts emerged clearly now: *I don't want Flora to die.*

Not yet. Not until she acknowledged her wrongs. I refused to grant her the release she sought without making her atone for all the pain she had caused.

Ruby-colored determination blazed in my eyes as I withdrew my hands from Flora's rapidly fading form. She lay motionless, her platinum-blond hair spreading out like a pale veil on the stage beneath her. I clasped her icy, rigid hand. A heavy silence enveloped the venue, the audience holding its collective breath, awaiting my next move.

Taking a deep breath of my own, I composed my plea.

"O Heavenly Guardian, spare my sister's life—so that I may be granted my wish!"

This was the crucial distinction. I knew now that my wish, as it was in my heart of hearts, wasn't to save Flora for her own sake—it was to save Flora for *my* sake. I knew that this seemingly minor change in syntax—morphing my prayer from a selfless entreaty to a selfish desire—fundamentally altered the nature of it. But I didn't falter. I sent that prayer up to the heavens with all my might.

Suddenly, the outflow of power within me ceased. The endless font of divine energy that had been surging from me since birth stopped abruptly, as if the roaring waters of a surging river had been dammed up. Despite this, the energy within me didn't dissipate; denied an outward path, it began to accumulate inside of my body, and the pain was instant. My insides boiled, an intense internal blaze consuming me as the amassed energy threatened to rend me apart from within. "Gah!" I instinctively voiced my agony. *What is...happening to me?!*

My scream was stifled by the sheer intensity of the pain. As I collapsed onto all fours, writhing in torment, I scrambled for a shred of control over the energies that threatened to tear me asunder. But all of my hard-won abilities eluded me; I was entirely at the mercy of the holy power at the center of my being. As the pain intensified, I realized it was converging towards my spine, which burned as though aflame. Despite the excruciating anguish, a desperate curiosity gripped me—I needed to understand what was transpiring, but the pain clouded my thoughts.

Amid my suffering, I heard Ed’s voice—a mixture of panic and awe—as he called out to me. Galvanized by his voice, I summoned all my strength to lift my head. Just then, I felt an extraordinary sensation of release, as if something were erupting from between my shoulder blades.

As suddenly as it had begun, the pain ceased. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if I had somehow emptied myself of all of the pent-up energy, but the power still thrummed through me, only calmer and less chaotic.

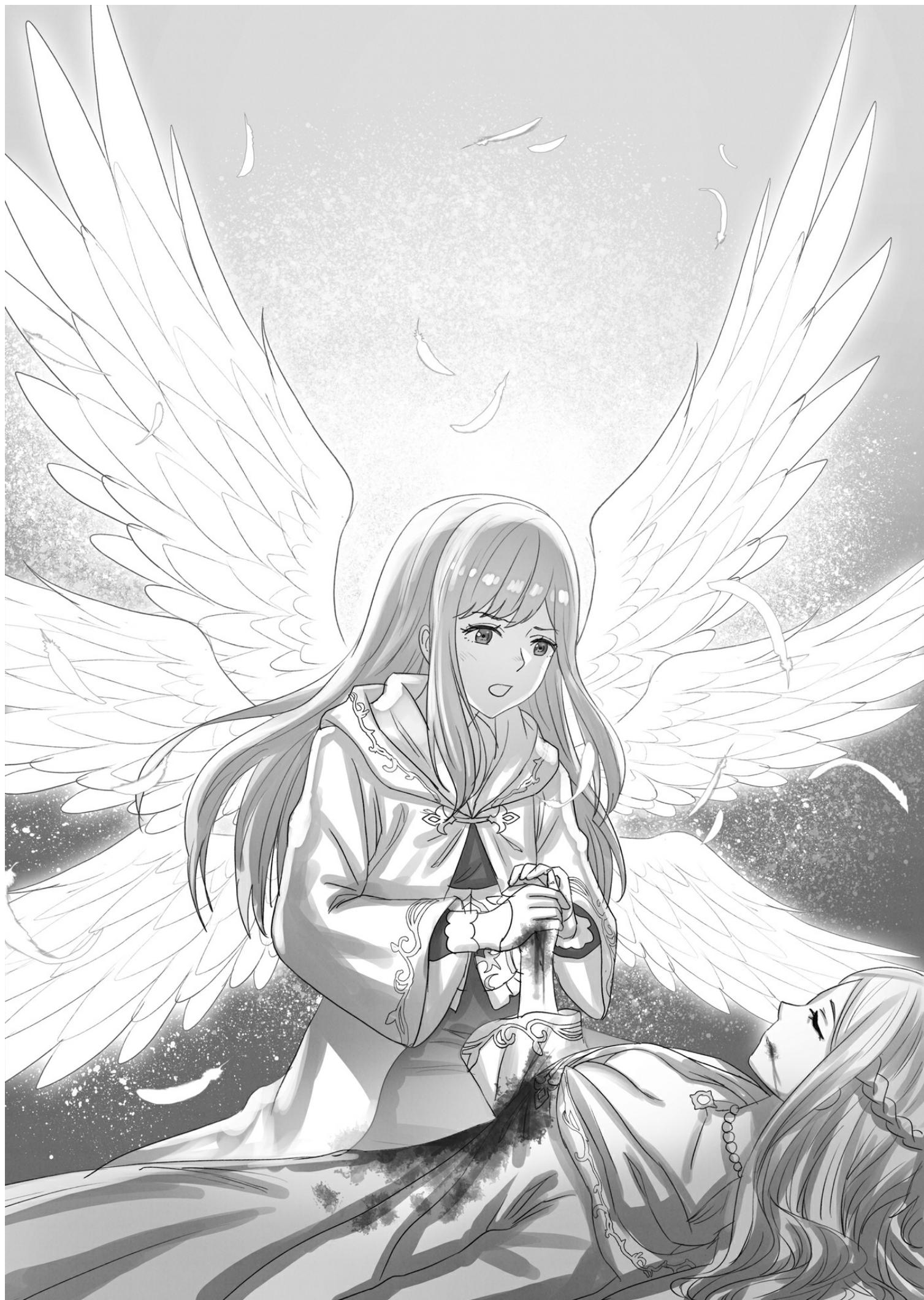
What had happened? Confusion overtook me, replacing the pain. As I tilted my head and blinked in astonishment, I could hear awed whispers begin to percolate through the crowd.

“Is that...what I think it is?” One voice tentatively broke the silence.

“Do my eyes deceive me?” another added in disbelief.

“What does it mean...?” A third trailed off into silence.

I could see heads slowly shaking in disbelief, every eye fixed upon me, no—fixed *behind* me. Curious, I craned my neck around, and the sight that met my eyes was nothing short of miraculous—three pairs of pristine, white wings unfurled behind me.



“Wings?!” I stammered, utterly bewildered by the sight. These wings sprouting from my own back could have hardly been more alien to me, yet they carried a paradoxical and peculiar sense of familiarity. Each feather on each wing emanated a soft, comforting glow, giving off an aura with which I had come to be intimately familiar: Divinity.

These wings were a physical manifestation of my divine power—it was the only explanation that made even a shred of sense. As the reality of this transformation sank in, I was engulfed by a wave of overwhelming emotion and a profound humility.

“Oh, most holy heavens,” someone near me murmured in a voice suffused with awe.

I glanced up. It was the high pontiff. He had left his seat and now knelt upon the ground in front of the stage.

“Such transcendent power. I had always known Her Highness bore our Heavenly Guardian’s blessing, but to behold such a high miracle wrought with His ineffable glory with my own eyes...” He spread his arms wide, as if in rapture. “Oh!” he cried, his voice quivering with overwhelming emotion. “Beloved child of God, I stand before you, your humble and devoted servant.”

In his eyes, I saw myself reflected as an object of near-fanatical devotion. Then, disregarding the dignitaries on all sides, he bowed his head deeply in respect.

“Divinity,” “blessed child of god”—these words resonated through the hall, shocking all those present. Although we had planned to reveal the nature of my power at the closing ceremony, this was, in some respects, better timing than we could’ve ever hoped for.

There was no time for me to take in the moment. Flora was fading fast. The chaos around us became a distant murmur as I turned my entire focus to her. Drawing in a deep breath, I willed my wings to spread and rise, reaching their full breadth, and they obeyed immediately, as if they’d always been a part of me.

I was now straying into unknown territory. I’d been learning to coax the

power flowing from me into bending to my will, and before that, I'd exerted it unconsciously. But this was different. This was a deliberate use of my abilities on an unprecedented scale. There was a real risk that using them in such a manner would dilute the efficacy of my power.

But I had faith in God's grace. If He had blessed me with these wings and the knowledge to wield them, then surely He had also endowed me with the power to save Flora.

"I am not letting you die, Flora," I declared resolutely. I clasped her hands firmly, channeling the energy within me—no longer chaotic, but calm and controlled, crystallized as it was into the intricate wing formations on my back. *This will work.* Emboldened, I let out another prayer. "O Heavenly Guardian, I beseech thee—heal my sister's wounds; relieve her of this torment!"

A pillar of light formed around me, accompanied by a poignant and sudden sense of loss. I glanced back to see two of my six wings disintegrating, their radiant essence transforming into a cocoon of pure, white light. They crumbled away, delicate shards of light flaking off and fading into translucence.

That's all right. I don't regret it. All this power, I bestow upon you, Flora. I have faith that my powers shall someday return, but your life is irreplaceable.

"All I have, I give to you, sister. So please, wake up," I whispered gently. As my first pair of wings faded completely, warmth returned to Flora. Her hands, once as cold as ice, were now bathed in warmth like a gentle sunrise. Relief washed over me as I saw my prayers taking effect. My brow relaxed, but my determination did not waver. I continued to pour my energy into Flora.

The second pair of wings dissolved. Flora's breathing steadied, her pulse became regular, and color returned to her cheeks. Her lips, previously tinged blue with the icy touch of death, now looked pink and full of life. Only one pair of wings remained—would it be enough? I had resolved to give her everything I had, yet I hadn't anticipated it would come to this.

Just how severe were her injuries? Were they graver than they seemed? As my last pair of wings began to fade, panic set in. If I used them and Flora remained unhealed, I would be left with nothing.

"Work... Please work!" I clenched Flora's hands as tightly as I dared, as if that

would amplify my efforts. As the last pair of wings dissolved into nothingness, the halo surrounding us dimmed. Tiny specks of white light floated around us, the remnants of the divine glow, disappearing like fragile soap bubbles upon contact with the floor. My Divinity exhausted, I snapped back to reality and assessed Flora's condition. I gently palpated her neck and face, then brought my ear down to her chest—she yet lived. There was nothing I could say about her vital organs or skeletal structure or anything of that sort, but I seemed to at least have pulled her back from the brink of death.

“Thank God,” I breathed out in relief. We weren't out of the woods yet, so it wasn't quite joy I felt, but it was at least something marginally more comforting. As I watched Flora now, a wry smile crept onto my lips. It was hard to believe that someone who was now sleeping so peacefully had been on the brink of death mere seconds ago. As the relief at my sister's survival sank in, the clamor of the hall returned to my ears.

“Is she...alive?” I heard someone ask.

“Can someone explain what just happened?” another added.

“‘Divinity’? ‘Blessed child of God’? I beg your pardon?”

“One thing's for certain—Princess Carolina's power is beyond the ordinary. Whether it is Divinity remains to be seen, but, at the very least, it is not arcane magic.”

Speculative murmurs filled the air as baffled dignitaries darted glances between me and Flora. Despite the high pontiff's public recognition of my power, the room seemed caught in a state of limbo, unable to accept such a miraculous display but equally unable to discount what they had witnessed with their own eyes. It was a lot to take in, after all, but I was confident that they would come to believe it in time.

A slight smirk still tugging on my lips, I surveyed the audience—and caught the gaze of a certain fiery-haired prince. He had leaped from his seat and now stood just in front of the stage, his golden zircon eyes radiating concern and that familiar, comforting love. *Are you okay?* his beseeching expression seemed to ask, to which I responded with a reassuring smile.

“I'm all right,” I said aloud. “Feeling drained, but all right.”

“Are you sure?” he replied. “Do you need to lie down?”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m fine, really. Worrywart.”

Finally, he relented, his features softening into relief. After giving me one final nod, he turned and retreated, evidently not wanting to disrupt the proceedings now that he had been assured everything was under control.

Watching his broad figure recede, I silently thanked him. I felt grateful from the depths of my heart for his presence in my life, an encounter of political expediency that now seemed like fate. If he hadn’t become my dearest love, if my thoughts hadn’t drifted to him in my moment of crisis, I might have let Flora die. Perhaps I would have even relished in the opportunity to be free of my sister. *For not letting me become a victim of my own hatred, Ed, I owe you my gratitude.*

It was at that moment that the high pontiff snapped out of his trance, his expression one of genuine astonishment. He surveyed the scene around him as if seeing it all for the first time: the awestruck crowd, the mystical remnants of divine power still lingering in the air, and finally an awareness that he himself was kneeling on the floor in a most unseemly manner. Regaining his composure, he rose and cleared his throat. Turning to the pair of paladins beside him, he issued a command. “Take Candidate Flora Sanchez to the infirmary immediately. Have her examined and treated.”

The paladins replied in unison. “At once, Your Holiness!” They moved swiftly, calling for a stretcher. Medical staff appeared within moments.

“Hold that side,” one directed.

“You there, take a step back,” another instructed.

“Careful now,” cautioned a third.

They were there in a flash, and then, abruptly, they weren’t. In one efficient motion, they placed the stretcher down, gently transferred Flora onto it, and disappeared down the hall with their precious charge. Part of me wanted to chase after them, to ensure Flora’s well-being for myself, but with my divine powers depleted, I knew I would be more of a hindrance than a help. I had done what I could; the rest I had to entrust to the skilled hands of the church’s

physicians and healers.

Restless once more, my gaze started to wander, and this time, I caught the eye of a certain blond-haired lord signaling discreetly for my attention. He pointed at himself, then the door, then smiled. I gathered that he meant to go check on Flora on my behalf. Certainly, it would be an immense comfort for the empire's greatest mage to be by her side. I nodded my approval, and he quickly whispered something into Ed's ear before slipping out of the venue.

Finally, the host resumed control of the situation, addressing the audience with a hint of unease. "Um, ladies and gentlemen, we extend our apologies for this unexpected...medical incident. However, the third trial shall now resume without further delay. To account for the interruption, the trial will be extended by fifteen minutes. I kindly request all candidates to promptly return to their positions onstage so we may begin."

I supposed there wasn't enough time for a reprise of the trial in its entirety. Onstage, a few nuns hurried to erase any evidence of the earlier chaos, mopping up traces of Flora's blood from the floor and her water tank. Slowly, I stood up, held out my hands, and looked down. Both my hands and my robe were a grim sight, stained with dark crimson patches from my close contact with my dying sister.

This wouldn't be grounds for a point deduction, would it? I frowned, contemplating the possibility. Though I wouldn't protest or regret it if that were the case. It was a badge of honor, I decided. As I resolutely made my way back to my designated spot, a hand gently grasped my wrist.

"Beg your pardon, Your Highness," a kind, motherly voice said.

"Allow us to assist you out of your robe," another added.

"Pardon us while we work," said a third. And "Rest assured, Your Highness, you won't be deducted points," said the last.

I turned to find a small group of nuns behind me, equipped with wet towels and a spare robe. In a flurry of efficient motions, they removed my bloodied robe, cleaned my hands, and dressed me in the fresh garment, for which I was grateful (despite the fact that it was slightly too large).

“There we go. Good as new.”

“Our apologies for the delay.”

“Best of luck in the third trial.”

Their ministrations complete and their well-wishes extended, the small assembly of nuns offered me a modest bow and withdrew backstage.

“Thank you!” I called after them, but they didn’t turn around. Though it had delayed me slightly, I was beyond glad to be out of that soiled robe. Eager to return to the competition, I hurried back to my already-purified tank, rolled up my sleeve slightly, and plunged my hand into the chilly water.

Then I paused—it had suddenly occurred to me to check on my competitors’ progress. I halted my hand mid-plunge, the cold water encircling my wrist, and surveyed the room. Most of them were still engaged in the search for their pendants, but a few had successfully retrieved theirs. Considering the time I had lost attending to Flora, their progress should not have surprised me. I realized that it did, but I shook my head—it was an unnecessary concern, really, given my substantial lead of over four hundred points. The swift recoveries of my rivals would scarcely close such a gap.

Still, it wouldn’t do to become complacent. Refocusing on my own task, I spotted the telltale glint of metal, retrieved the pendant from the water, and took a moment to admire the intricately carved rose on the face of the disc. Water droplets streamed from my hand, creating mesmerizing ripples that spread across the tank as they hit the water’s surface. I lingered a moment, captivated by the sight, then gently placed the pendant on the floor beside me.

It was a struggle for me to stay alert during the remaining twelve minutes of the trial. Drained completely of my powers, or perhaps overwhelmed by a sense of relief that the trials were finally about to conclude—the source of my weariness was difficult to discern, but I stifled yawn after relentless yawn until finally, the church bells rang. The tanks were carried off, the results were tallied, and that was all—there was no immediate announcement of the trial’s outcome this time around.

As I stood there, mulling over what I suspected was a fourth-place finish in this final trial, the host reclaimed the stage. “Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed

guests, and distinguished candidates. The moment you have all eagerly anticipated has arrived. The standings are now final. It is time to commence the closing award ceremonies of the inaugural Saintly Trials.”

The hall stirred, each sound of the rustling of clothes and the shifting of seats seemingly magnified in the suddenly tense air. For myself, I released a long, drawn-out breath. With the final announcements imminent, my nerves had flared up once again.

“First, it is my great honor to present the victor of the inaugural Saintly Trials, whose unparalleled performance left every other candidate in her wake—” he paused, his gaze sweeping the audience to ensure he had their rapt attention. “The Saintly candidate from the Empire of Malcosias—Her Imperial Highness, Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez!”

My name thundered across the hall. It felt like the culmination of an arduous journey, the final reward for relentless effort and myriad challenges conquered. Finally, the title of Saint was mine. As the weight of uncertainty lifted, my expression softened into one of profound relief. Around me on the stage, there was a subtle stir among the other candidates; they exchanged glances, shrugs, and nods, their gestures conveying a resigned acknowledgment—almost as if to say *I thought so*. However, they only allowed themselves a moment to express their regrets before becoming outwardly gracious, smiling and congratulating me on a well-deserved victory. I responded with an appreciative smile and heartfelt thanks.

“With an astonishing final score of seven hundred forty-eight points, and with a placement of first in the first and second trials, and fourth in the final trial, I believe I speak for all of us when I say Princess Carolina has surpassed all expectations. In addition, her dedication to saving her sister was nothing short of miraculous—a true demonstration of the values a Saint should embody.”

A rumble of approving murmurs swept through the crowd, accompanied by a sea of nodding heads. The notion that the chosen Saint should exemplify not only exceptional ability but also the highest moral character seemed to have struck a chord. This was an outcome that was perfectly fine with me; the boost to my reputation among the realm’s nobility was welcome, if somewhat undeserved—it wasn’t as if I had saved Flora’s life as a selfless act of piety.

The host continued. “Candidate Carolina— Excuse me, *Saint* Carolina will now receive a certificate of merit and memento from the high pontiff. Your Holiness, if you would please.”

At his words, the revered elder occupying the seat of the arbiter rose from his seat. With solemn dignity, he ascended onto the stage, flanked on either side by two paladins. One carried a piece of parchment, the other a scepter. *These must be the certificate and the memento*, I thought.

All eyes converged on us as I approached the high pontiff, crossing a hand over my chest and bowing deeply. He returned my gesture with a look of profound warmth and kindness before addressing me. “On this day, the fifth of December in this now-esteemed year of our Lord, I, High Pontiff Melvin Clark White, do solemnly confer upon you, Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez, this sacred attestation in recognition of your achievements in these blessed trials. By the authority vested in me, I proclaim you henceforth a Saint.”

He extended the certificate towards me, which I accepted with utmost care. “I humbly accept this sacred title, Your Holiness,” I replied with a respectful smile gracing my lips.

It was just a piece of parchment, yet the sight of my name inscribed upon it brought home the profound reality of the responsibilities now bestowed upon me as leader of the Faith Council of Saints. Even if the role was more symbolic than not, to be a figurehead carried its own burdens of expectations and influence.

The high pontiff reached for the pure white scepter, adorned with a golden ribbon, from the other paladin and presented it to me. “Please accept this token in commemoration of this auspicious occasion.”

With careful movements, I tucked the certificate securely under my arm and accepted the scepter with both hands. “Thank you, Your Holiness.” Gently adjusting my grip to hold the scepter in one hand, I grasped the certificate again with the other. Turning towards the assembled crowd, I bowed gracefully, causing the venue to erupt into thunderous applause.

The host allowed the adulation of the crowd a little room to breathe before gracefully motioning for quiet. “Thank you, Saint Carolina. Now, if you would

please return to your place on the stage.” With the award ceremony concluded, I gave the high pontiff a respectful nod and made my way back to where I had previously been standing.

“Next, we are honored to receive closing remarks from His Holiness, the high pontiff.” The host stepped back to give space, and the paladin guards also retreated to the edges of the stage. The high pontiff turned to address the gathered assembly.

“Hearken unto me,” His Holiness solemnly began. “I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each of you for bearing witness to the Saintly Trials in their entirety.” He paused, letting the weight of his words settle over the gathered assembly. His gaze swept majestically across the audience, then came to rest on the clergymen and paladins arrayed on the stage. “To the devoted members of the clergy, I offer my profound thanks. Your unwavering dedication and tireless commitment to service have carried us through the challenges that arose. Well done!”

The clergymen and paladins, overwhelmed by the direct acknowledgment from their revered leader—a figure so seldom seen and even less often heard—were visibly moved. Tears streamed down their faces as they absorbed the weight of his words. “We are merely humble servants,” they responded in unison, smiles of joy lighting up their tear-streaked faces.

Amid this deeply emotional atmosphere, the high pontiff turned his attention next to us, the Saintly candidates. “And to you, our distinguished candidates. We have all borne witness to your achievements here today. Stand proud, return to your nations with heads held high, knowing that you have participated in a spectacle for the ages!”

His words were both an acknowledgment of our efforts and a proclamation that for most, their journey here was at an end; a few sniffles and subdued sobs emerged from our side of the stage. His Holiness watched this display of vulnerability with a compassionate gaze, an expression that put me in mind of a grandfather watching over his beloved grandchildren. But then, as if to crown his profound address, His Holiness turned his attention to me. “Saint Carolina. What you have accomplished here today shall endure. Your name shall be celebrated for ages to come—O blessed child of God.”

At that phrase, the audience once again erupted into murmured conversations.

“As the events of the third trial have revealed,” His Holiness continued, “the power wielded by Saint Carolina transcends the bounds of the ordinary. I lacked the lucidity to declare it in the moments following her miraculous restoration of her sister, so let me speak with more clarity now: Saint Carolina is a bearer of Divinity.”

Even coming from the thirty-ninth high pontiff of our faith, with all the authority vested in him, the proclamation felt surreal. The audience fell silent, their minds grappling with the realization that perhaps the high pontiff’s earlier enraptured ramblings were indeed true.

“The light you beheld as Saint Carolina healed Lady Flora was the light of Divinity, shining at a purity and intensity that I have never seen, far outstripping my own humble allowance of power. Be assured, Princess Carolina is graced with the profound favor and blessing of our Lord—a truth of which I am unequivocally certain.” As if to underscore the conviction of his words, the high pontiff stuck his chin out, almost defiantly, daring someone to challenge him.

Nobody did, of course. They had all personally witnessed the wondrous nature of my power. If there were any grumblings of doubt, they were kept securely within.

“I am not asking that you believe me now, only that you keep your minds open to the notion. May God bless us all.” With these parting words, the high pontiff, accompanied by his paladins, gracefully departed the stage and returned to his seat.

That was it—the trials were over. Though they had felt like an eternity and a fleeting moment all at once—a paradox that defined the novelty of my experience—the imperial family of Malcosias had accomplished everything that we had set out to do. While a few lingering questions remained, they were not pressing, and for now I could bask in the overwhelming sense of achievement that now filled the air.

An involuntary smile spread across my face, breaking through my earlier resolve to maintain stoic composure until the very end. *So much for respectable*

aloofness, I thought wryly. Clutching the scepter in one hand and the certificate in the other, I stood resolute and expectant, waiting for the host to officially declare an end to the event.

“Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, and distinguished candidates, the inaugural Saintly Trials have officially concluded! Let us extend our deepest gratitude to all who participated and witnessed this historic event. Thank you all!” The emcee acknowledged the crowd as they burst into a final round of enthusiastic applause, and with that, it was over.

Chapter Four

After the trials had officially concluded, Ed and I made our way to the cathedral's infirmary, with Owen bringing up the rear as my stalwart bodyguard. As we left the venue, Prince Gilbert and the emperor, who had lent their support to me by witnessing the entirety of the trials, left behind their well-wishes as they departed to attend to other matters.

How is Flora faring? The thought nagged at me incessantly as we hurried down the corridor. *Could her injuries have worsened? Could new symptoms have appeared?* I reminded myself that Teodore was there to handle anything that might have happened, but even the knowledge of his presence couldn't quell my anxiety. Her injuries had been so severe, requiring every last drop of my power to heal. Could the nature of her affliction be so abnormal that it defied conventional understanding? There were no assurances to cling to.

As my brow knit into a frown, Ed did his best to reassure me. "You needn't look so worried, Lina," he said. "I'm sure she'll be all right." He gently stroked my head in reassurance as we came to a stop before a pristine white door. "Ah, we're here," he observed.

Ed's announcement rang with a degree of redundancy when faced with the "Infirmary" placard that graced the door, but even without the clear label, the faint smell of disinfectant seeping through into the hallway was confirmation enough. Now that I was here, my worry about facing Flora surged. Concern for her mingled with a knot of awkwardness in my stomach. The selfish reason I had saved her gnawed at my conscience, filling me with guilt. *Do I have to go in? Perhaps it would be better if Teodore just gave me a report instead?*

Torn, my hand stopped short of the door. Yet before I could decide, a much more decisive—not to mention much larger—hand swept past mine, knocking firmly on the sturdy wood.

Ed?! What are you doing? I'm not ready!

"Prince Edward Ruby Martinez, here to check on my sister-in-law Flora

Sanchez,” he said, utterly oblivious to my inner turmoil. *Admittedly, that’s because I didn’t give voice to my feelings, but still! Oh, why must I dither so? I’ve done nothing wrong—objectively, I saved a life. What do I have to fear?*

With that bit of self-scolding, I straightened up and tried to muster a semblance of composure. Almost immediately, the sound of movement came from behind the door. Then, a slightly muffled “Come in,” spoken in a mellifluous tenor that I knew all too well.

Why was *he* granting us entry? Where were the other healers the high pontiff had promised? Ed and Owen exchanged glances, seemingly sharing my question. Deciding that the answers must lie within, Ed grabbed the doorknob and opened the door.

A spotless white space unfolded before us. Despite its size, the large infirmary felt slightly cramped, outfitted with over ten beds fitted with clean white linens, as well as a few medicine cabinets lining the walls. After a moment of admiring the immaculate tidiness of the room, my eyes drifted to the bed where Flora lay. Theodore was leaning against the windowsill with a startling casualness, unexpectedly accompanied by my handmaiden Marisa. (I supposed she was here for propriety’s sake.)

I began with the most pertinent question. “Where is everyone? The physicians and the healers His Holiness sent for?”

Teodore straightened up and chuckled. “I dismissed them,” he said in an offhand way, “so that they might return to their regular duties—and I could focus on mine. Too many hands in the pot, as they say.”

The glint in his eye told me he had his own agenda, and I knew better than to attempt to pry into it. I responded with a noncommittal “Is that so?” and turned my attention to Marisa. Acknowledging her with a nod, I moved to Flora’s bedside.

“How is she?” I asked. Her complexion seemed much better, no longer as pale as a ghost, but I still wanted Theodore’s expert opinion.

Owen moved chairs so that Ed and I could settle comfortably beside my sister, and Theodore waited until we were seated before replying. “Lady Flora is, to be brief, on the mend. Save for obvious weariness and slight anemia, her health is

sound. Owing to Your Highness's intervention, her vital organs sustained minimal damage. The healing was so thorough that my assistance was hardly needed. Well done," he added, crinkling his eyes in praise.

That was high (and embarrassing!) adulation coming from the most accomplished mage of our generation. I gently pressed my hands to my heating cheeks, relieved that Flora was going to be all right.

"It's fortunate she will recover," Ed said, "but what brought about her condition in the first place? Is it some grave illness?"

This was an excellent question, and Theodore seemed to think so too. His expression hardened, eyes dropping slightly as he brought a hand to his chin in thought. It seemed to me that he must have a theory, but perhaps not enough proof to say it with confidence.

Observing Flora lying in repose, I reflected on her symptoms today. Her pale skin, the fact that she had been coughing up blood, her stubborn behavior (though that was Flora all over and so may have not been due to what had been ailing her): This all pointed to some unnatural affliction. I had no proof either, just a gut feeling that something was ominously amiss. Inadvertently, I caught Theodore's gaze.

"Before I answer that question," he began, "I'd like to ask Her Highness this: Princess, in healing Lady Flora, did it feel like your Divinity was rather...ineffective?"

A gasp escaped me, as if he had plucked the thought straight from my mind. My certificate and scepter—which I had hardly been aware of still carrying—slipped from my hands in sheer shock, but Owen's swift reflexes saved them before they hit the ground. I felt a surge of relief, especially for the delicate scepter. He offered to take responsibility over my spoils for the moment, and I responded with a quick, rigid nod.

After thanking him, I faced Theodore once more. "Yes... My powers felt wholly ineffectual. I succeeded in healing her, but it drained me of everything I had. If I didn't know any better, I'd almost say there was some force actively resisting me, but that... That couldn't be. Could it?"

I tried my best to describe what was, at its core, a vague and subjective

feeling, but Theodore seemed to grasp it immediately. “I see. Regrettably, I had hoped you would prove me wrong, Your Highness, but alas...” He sighed deeply and turned his gaze to Flora, his eyes softening with what looked like genuine pity. It struck me then how deeply dangerous Flora’s plight must have been to draw such compassion from this sadistic lordling. It highlighted the severity of the situation to an almost alarming degree. Even Ed, with all his frustrating and potentially dangerous antics, had never evoked such a worried expression on Theodore’s face.

Teodore swept his gaze across all of us. “Before I divulge my hypothesis, I must make myself abundantly clear. I possess no concrete proof to substantiate my claims, only educated guesses drawn from my own observations and Her Highness’s testimony. Bear this in mind before you proclaim my conclusions as incontrovertible truths. Let us proceed with caution and discerning minds.”

But despite his words of caution, there gleamed, in stark contrast, unwavering conviction in his eyes. *Lord Theodore—always the master of hedging his bets.*

Ed and I exchanged looks, then nods, then returned our attention to Theodore and replied in unison, “Understood.”

Is it just me or was the reveal rather being milked for its suspense? I thought, feeling that familiar sensation of being on pins and needles from the blond lord’s theatrics.

Teodore exhaled a long, drawn-out breath. “It is my opinion that Lady Flora’s condition stems from having dabbled in...mana manipulation.”

Mana manipulation? Ed and I exchanged confused glances, our heads tilting in puzzlement. The term didn’t immediately ring a bell, but as I sifted through my memories, I recalled a side note in imperial history about a now-extinct civilization developing a novel spellcasting technique some centuries ago. They had been conquered by Malcosias before they had been able to complete their research, which had then been promptly suppressed and forbidden. But this only added to the confusion. What did a partially developed, presumably lost technique from centuries ago have to do with Flora’s poor health?

Teodore’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “Your Highness, might I inquire as to your level of knowledge when it comes to mana manipulation?”

“I’m aware that the research delved into methods of amplifying the power of mages and spellcasters, but my knowledge ends there,” I admitted. “Beyond the historical context, I’m afraid I’m rather ignorant of the technique itself or its working mechanism.”

This was in actuality a rather belabored way of saying I didn’t have a clue, but Theodore only replied with a noncommittal “I see” and nodded his head. “Allow me, then, to explain the technique. However, given the paucity of knowledge on the subject, be mindful that I shall interweave my own suppositions to supplement the known facts.”

I felt my body tense; I had expected there to be some kind of investigation into the origin of Flora’s condition, but to delve into the forbidden secrets of a long-lost civilization? That was a prospect eerie enough to send a shiver down my spine. Not to mention that this technique must have posed such a threat that despite its innovative and conquering spirit, the empire had seen fit to bury it and let the secret fade into obscurity. Regardless of my feelings of dread, I knew that we needed to hear this explanation. I nodded for Theodore to proceed.

“First, allow me to explain the intended effect of mana manipulation,” he began. “According to what few records remain, it is understood that the primary purpose of this technique is intended to enhance the *quality* of an individual’s arcane energies.”

The words that flowed from those elegantly formed lips left both Ed and myself wide-eyed in astonishment. Shaking off the initial shock, I deliberated upon Theodore’s words, lightly touching my chin. “I’ve never even thought about how one might enhance the quality of arcane energy... It’s always discussed in terms of quantity, isn’t it? The more powerful the mage, the greater their energy reserves. I mean, such a feat can’t be simple. How is a thing like that accomplished?” I tilted my head in bewilderment. My unfiltered curiosity was overwhelming my dread in a manner which seemed to border on crass, but there was no undoing it now.

Theodore adjusted his glasses with a faint click. “On the contrary, it is quite simple, Your Highness. To enhance the quality of one’s arcane energy, one must simply...increase the amount of mana one takes in.”

“Increase the amount of mana one...takes in?” I echoed in disbelief. “What? How? In fact, now that you mention it, what *is* the relation between the quality of arcane energy and mana in the first place?”

My mind whirled and spun, but the nature of Teodore’s revelation was far beyond what I might’ve anticipated even in my wildest imaginings. I tried to force myself towards some degree of acceptance or understanding so that I could keep up with the conversation, but even that seemed a stretch.

“And now for one of the suppositions I alluded to earlier,” Teodore continued. “It is my theory that arcane energy is nothing more than a highly functional, but far less potent, derivative of mana.”

“What?” both Ed and I gasped at once. Just as I felt I was starting to grasp the nuances of the conversation, they were ripped from my fingers once more.

Sensing our utter confusion at the notion that arcane energy was nothing more than a mana derivative, Teodore elucidated once more. “Let us take a few steps back, shall we? First, let us recall that mana is the fundamental energy source behind the supernatural feats we call ‘magic.’ In other words, mana is the elemental force of magic. However, this elementary force is challenging for us as human beings to harness. Therefore, when we absorb mana into our bodies, we must convert it into a more accessible form—arcane energy—which allows us to benefit more readily from its blessings. We can therefore consider arcane energy to be a derivative of mana, the only way in which we mere mortals may use magic.”

“I... I see.” As the manner in which this new concept fit into my entire picture of arcane theory became clearer, the surprising nature of the explanation caused my hand to drift to my mouth to cover my shock. Amid the questions and conjectures swirling in my mind, Teodore’s idea that arcane power could be framed as a mana “derivative” stood out. If his hypothesis held true, it did indeed suggest that the quality of an individual’s mana could be enhanced through the absorption of more mana. This revelation carried significant implications, specifically the notion that increasing the quality of arcane energy was akin to potently concentrating one’s power. A mage who could cast more spells using less energy would certainly have an edge over their competitors, a concept I was certain had captivated the minds of the researchers of that long-

extinct culture.

“I think I understand. Thank you, Teodore,” I said. “Now, here is the most pertinent question for Flora’s case—how does increasing the amount of mana one intakes cause such extreme physical damage?”

Perhaps I am misunderstanding some crucial detail, because I would otherwise think that without an underlying condition like Mana Hypersensitivity, there would be no cause for worry.

Teodore narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “Your Highness, I would direct you to recall my earlier statement that arcane energy is a more accessible form of energy, converted from mana, which facilitates our ability to use magic.”

“Yes, of course I understand that. But how does that relate to my sister’s plight?” Tilting my head in confusion, I waited for Teodore to elucidate further. He obliged—but not before his expression turned unexpectedly solemn.

“The conversion process is performed by our bodies,” he said grimly. “Like any bodily process, there’s a burden to it, a cost.”

I gasped, hands flying to my open mouth to block the indelicate vocalization. *Of course. The process is taxing to the body. And introducing significantly more mana to convert would result in significantly greater stress to one’s internal systems!* I didn’t think that my understanding was particularly comprehensive, but I was unable to see any obvious holes in this logic.

“It appears you have grasped the concept,” Teodore said. “As modern research into the specifics of increasing capacity for mana conversion is sorely lacking, for what I hope are obvious reasons, take my words with a measure of caution. What we do know from records of experiments undertaken in the past is that participants in trials involving mana manipulation consistently experienced adverse physiological reactions, with the most severe cases resulting in death. While the extant accounts cite the cause of death as ‘unknown,’ can we truly dismiss the likelihood that it was the overloading of the body’s natural mana conversion process that led to these fatalities?”

Adverse physiological reactions resulting in death. My eyes immediately flew to Flora. Observing her faintly rosy complexion and the gentle rise and fall of her chest, I was once again reminded of how close she had come to death. We

still lacked proof that mana manipulation was the cause, but her case did indeed seem highly suspect. Ever since this morning, she had been looking worse for wear, and every time she had cast a spell, it had appeared to be draining her very life away. This only raised the question...

“Why would she engage in something so dangerous?” I muttered more to myself than to anyone else in the room. *Especially when she is already a powerful holy mage?*

My brow furrowed in confusion. Given Flora’s usual prowess, she would have been more than capable of competing in the Saintly Trials without needing to augment her abilities in the least. I had seen with my own eyes the countless times she’d healed seemingly incurable injuries and wounds without breaking a sweat. While it was true that she had failed the Celestian Saintly Trials by narrow margins, that didn’t mean she was outclassed by any of the candidates I’d seen today...

The more I thought about it, the less sense it made. Flora especially was nothing if not cautious, so why would she willingly take on such a certain and enormous risk?

Ed opened his mouth to speak. “Perhaps she was just extremely determined to become the Saint? I’m not familiar with her usual degree of competence, but is it possible that she sought to tip the scales in her favor in whatever way she could?”

“I suppose so, but...” I trailed off, the furrows in my brow deepening. “Then what was her plan for *after* the trials? Imagine that she had won, only for her health to be in such ruin that she’d perished shortly thereafter. Was a single moment of glory truly worth that much to her?”

“That’s a good point,” Ed concurred. “I don’t think it would be worth it.”

I cast my gaze towards Theodore. His lips were curved into a devious smile; evidently, he had already arrived at his conclusion. “Do you have an idea, Theodore?” I asked, giving in to his silent prompting.

“I do,” he replied simply. “But an idea is all it is, and nothing more.”

“That’s all right. I wouldn’t ask you to speak on such things with absolute

certainty. Please, share your thoughts.”

He dipped his head in a gesture of graciousness. “As Your Highness wills,” he said before raising his head, revealing an even crueler expression than before. “In the opinion of this humble lordling, Lady Flora never possessed the ability required of a Saintly candidate in the first place. Thus, she had to resort to mana manipulation, for without it, she wouldn’t have been able to compete at all.”

“What?” both Ed and I gasped. Neither of us felt capable of approaching the underlying assumption of this theory, but Teodore articulated this shocking statement as if it were nothing. Extraordinary claims required extraordinary evidence, so I looked to him to explain.

“As Your Highness is well aware, Lady Flora is the type of woman to demand perfection in all her endeavors. It seems inconceivable that she would resort to a course of action so overtly risky as mana manipulation. So let us consider what might warrant such a risk. What does Lady Flora fear the most? One might suggest it is wounding her own pride. However, I contend that it is the potential disgrace to the duchy bearing her name that truly terrifies her.”

As Teodore spoke with alarming insight into Flora’s character, I found myself hanging on every word.

“If Lady Flora were to present herself at the Saintly Trials and be found woefully inferior to her fellow candidates, she would certainly become the subject of ridicule. The prospect of being a stain on the storied excellence of the ducal House of Sanchez must have been a burden too heavy for her to bear.”

I...was absolutely speechless. The descriptions Teodore dared to attach to Flora, so stark and damning, sent a jarring dissonance thrilling through me. It was as if he had declared night to be day, the moon to be the sun, north to be south... Yet for all my confusion, I couldn’t entirely reject the logic in his assertions. Perfection, that relentless tyrant, demanded no less than everything from Flora. She might very well welcome death over dishonor. However, despite Teodore’s insightful critique of my sister, there remained one nagging question he had left unanswered.

“Then how would you explain the numerous feats she has accomplished prior

to today?” I asked. “Flora has healed countless grievous injuries. Witnesses can attest to this—I can attest to this.” I pointed towards my eyes, as if to say, *How would you explain what I saw with my own two eyes?*

In response, Theodore narrowed his playfully. “Yes, I’m sure you can,” he muttered under his breath. Pushing up his glasses, he added, “Then allow me to ask you this, Your Highness. How many of her so-called miracles do you think you’ve truly witnessed?”

“Well, I would think almost every one,” I replied. “She made sure to carry them out in my presence...presumably to spite me.” My face contorted bitterly at the memory.

Teodore, however, had the audacity to smile in the face of my distress. “Good. That should lend credence to what I am about to suggest. You see, I believe Lady Flora has been benefiting from your *remarkable* ability to amplify arcane ability for...her entire life.”

In a flash, I remembered the time we had all witnessed Ed’s mishap in the foothills of Mount Gespenst. Ed appeared to connect the dots at the same moment, understanding washing over his face. “Remarkable is right,” he nodded in agreeable approval.

Despite Ed’s easy demeanor, this revelation struck me deeply, and I sat there, unblinking. Theodore’s words were hard to deny. I had never consciously boosted Flora’s power, but I couldn’t rule out the possibility that I had done so unwittingly either, especially as I’d only learned of my ability to do so in the past several weeks. The incident with Collett during my journey to Malcosias came to mind. I certainly hadn’t meant to heal him. I mean, I had, but not because I’d known I could.

Indeed, it was a little hard to digest at first, but the more I pondered, the more it all made sense. *Especially because now, thinking back, I can’t recall a single instance of Flora using her magic outside of my presence.* This was the ultimate irony, wasn’t it? That I had been the unwitting source of her celebrated powers all along? I felt almost exploited, but I supposed that since it had been in the pursuit of aiding those in need, no real harm had been done. In addition, it was probably inaccurate for me to frame the situation in a way that

implied that my sister had ever used me consciously; her pride would never have permitted her to rely on a “disgrace” like me.

“Thank you, Teodore. I think I understand now,” I said. “Though I do have to ask one thing—how did you arrive at the conclusion that Flora was employing mana manipulation?” I was curious to know what methods Teodore had used to eliminate all of the other potential causes of Flora’s condition.

Behind his eyeglasses, his peridot eyes gleamed momentarily before his gaze dropped away from mine. “The decisive element in my diagnosis was the assessment of her arcane energy pathways. Though it must be said that I found her other symptoms to be highly suspect.” He crossed his arms and gazed down at Flora. “While Your Highness’s healing was remarkably thorough, it couldn’t quite mend the damage to her mystic channels. The effects, markedly unique to mana manipulation, suggested internal rupture. In addition, I recalled the contents of the documents we discovered in Archbishop Mills’s private quarters, detailing his personal research into mana manipulation... Documents which we disposed of properly, of course,” he added with a nonchalant shrug.

Exhaling a long sigh, I took a moment to process Teodore’s thorough, evidence-based conclusion. I had to commend his diligence—and his discretion. *This is why he ordered everyone else out of the infirmary, isn’t it?* Another physician could have examined Flora and arrived at the same conclusion. This prudence was a small courtesy Teodore had extended to me because she was my sister.

I glanced at the blond lord. He regarded me with a severity that made me shrink back almost instinctively. He adjusted his posture and stood more erect. “Now that the mystery is revealed, Your Highness, what shall be our course of action? Lady Flora has dabbled in forbidden arts. We could easily bring her to justice.”

An uncomfortably wicked smile rose to my lips. His deference to me over the more authoritative prince in the room hinted at one thing—he was offering me the opportunity to exact my revenge.

Mana manipulation was outlawed in most countries. If Flora were formally charged with pursuing such arts, it would undoubtedly spark controversy,

bringing grave consequences for someone who had long been celebrated as “perfect.” It would be a classic tale of a fall from grace—her life would be irreparably marred by scandal. There was no more fitting way to make her suffer for all the pain she had caused me, but...

My eyes drifted to her silvery-white hair, fanned out across the snow-white bedsheets. I raised a hand to examine a lock of my own hair, its ashen color—a trait I had been mocked for my entire life—now gleaming with a newfound luster.

“That’s all right,” I said after a beat. “Since we lack irrefutable proof of her misdeeds, let us keep silent on the matter.”

Teodore paused briefly, then shrugged. “Very well.”

Ed, too, looked slightly dissatisfied. “If that is your wish, Lina.”

I had to admit that it was a difficult decision. Did I harbor a desire to see Flora suffer for what she had done to me? Perhaps in some manner...but not like this. For all her recklessness, Flora hadn’t harmed anyone else. The only victim of the consequences, the sole bearer of risk for her actions, had been Flora herself. In light of that, her dabbling in forbidden arts seemed like something we could overlook.

As I wrestled with accepting the decision I had made, Flora stirred. A soft grunt escaped her lips, and her eyelids fluttered open, revealing padparadscha sapphire orbs that locked onto me. “Mother?”

Her voice was a frail croak as she extended a stiff arm towards me. A pale hand brushed past my cheek, then turned inward, caressing my skin with a gentleness reserved only for the most precious treasures. Never before had I witnessed such tenderness, such affection, from her.

She...must think that I’m Mother. I may like to believe I resemble her; from a distance, my ashen hair could pass for black, but...

Hadn’t Flora always vehemently denied any resemblance between us?

Still caressing my cheek, she smiled. “Oh, Mother. How I’ve longed for this day. Now, we can finally be—”

“I’m sorry, Flora,” I managed to whisper. “It’s only me.” It felt necessary to shatter her illusion if she wouldn’t snap out of it herself. I cut her off and gently lowered her hand from my face. “I’m sorry,” I repeated.

She froze, blinked several times, then her expression twisted into a mix of disgust and shock. *That’s more like it*, I thought wryly.

“Carolina?! What are you... I’m dead, am I not?!” Flora sputtered. Struggling to prop herself up on her elbows, she forced her torso upright and continued to stare at me, shaking her head as if trying to dispel the reality before her eyes.

“Flora, you’re very much alive,” I replied calmly. “This is the cathedral infirmary. You were brought here after I poured all of my power into saving your life.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief, then her jaw snapped shut, her teeth audibly grinding under the strain. Rage ignited behind her gaze; it was clear she had eyes only for me, despite the presence of my husband and his most trusted friend.

“Y-You saved me?! How dare you!” she cried out, her voice escalating into hysteria. “I’d rather die than find myself indebted to you!” She clawed at her hair, her movements wild and frenzied. “Of course... You weren’t content with just killing Mother, were you? No, you weren’t done until you robbed me of the chance to see her again.” Her shrill accusations rang out into the quiet room. “You think yourself noble, Carolina?! You think yourself selfless?! Well you’re not! You’re a selfish disgrace—a monster who denied me the death I deserved!”

No one else said a word. It was just Flora, ranting on about her disdain for me and her rage at being denied the release of death. Behind me, the faint sound of skin tightening against skin reached my ears—a fist clenching with the intent to strike.

Despite trying to convince myself that Ed wouldn’t lash out with such minimal provocation, I wasn’t eager to test the limits of his restraint at that moment. I stole a glance back at him. His expression wasn’t one of anger, but rather a chilling void of emotion as he regarded Flora with icy detachment. This was bad. Desperate to calm him, I looked pleadingly at Theodore. To my dismay, he simply

observed the scene—in fact, was he nodding in approval ever so slightly? When our eyes met, he conveyed a silent message of tacit endorsement, a dreadful unspoken promise to overlook any imminent violence. My face paled.

This was really, truly alarming. *Flora, please stop*, I silently implored, but she was oblivious to my desperation, ranting on and on about her “mother’s murderer.” That was the last straw. Ed rose from his chair, his self-control evaporating...!

Bang! The door to the infirmary burst open. My hand shot out reflexively to grab Ed’s arm, my pulse thundering in my ears. He instantly placed his hands on mine, his touch gentle, fingers running through my hair to soothe my frazzled nerves. This gesture of affection accomplished, he resumed his seat with an eerie calm, the anger that had darkened his features dissipating as if it had never existed in the first place.

Oh. Right. I supposed I could have reached out to stop him at any time, couldn’t I? In the heat of the moment, I had completely forgotten how straightforwardly suggestible of a creature he was.

Teodore, meanwhile, shrugged a shoulder in a gesture that seemed to convey a suspicious air of disappointment, then looked past us to the door. “Ah, Duke Sanchez, your hasty arrival has been noted. Please, Your Grace, do take a moment to regain your composure.”

Both Flora and I flinched and slowly turned our heads to regard the door behind us. There he stood, our father, his hair disheveled and his clothes in disarray, as if he had dropped everything to rush to his collapsed daughter’s side, which is clearly what he had done. While I supposed that the urgency of the situation certainly warranted it, to abandon all decorum and barge in like this? *Just what could have driven my ever-composed father to such an extreme?*

Before my swirling doubts could settle, Father took a moment to catch his breath, then bowed deeply. “Your Highnesses, Prince Edward and Princess Carolina, I implore your forgiveness for my unannounced and rather abrupt intrusion. Hearing my daughter’s agitated voice through the door, I regrettably lost my temper.”

He heard everything? Flora’s uninhibited ranting towards me in its entirety?

That would certainly explain his hasty entrance...

My father looked pained beyond belief, and a frown crept over my own features. He was the last person in the world whom I would have wanted to know about everything that had just been revealed. I sneaked a sidelong glance at Flora, who had fallen conspicuously silent. Her gaze was awkwardly fixed on her knees, the suddenness of our father's entrance evidently snapping her back to her senses. But it was too little, too late. Her true feelings had been laid bare, and there was nothing she could say to take back or ameliorate her words. She sat there quietly, biting her lip, the weight of her exposed hatred hanging heavily in the room.

Father dropped down to one knee and bowed his head low. "My daughter's conduct cannot be excused. The insolence she displayed towards Her Imperial Highness is...beyond forgiveness. I humbly place myself at your mercy, Your Imperial Highnesses. What is your punishment?"

He deemed the situation so grave that even asking for an apology felt presumptuous, leaping straight to accepting royal retribution. I couldn't fault his response; it was the proper reaction for a high-ranking dignitary—but not for a father. Some part of me rebelled against the notion that this was his only option. Though I was a foreign princess, I was also his daughter. He could have invoked our family bond, pleaded for leniency as a father, but instead, he adhered strictly to his official role, acting solely as a prime minister, a dignitary of another nation.

I knew this was the type of rigidly principled man he was, never allowing personal matters to encroach upon his public duties. Still, it hurt. It felt as though he didn't—couldn't—rely on me to fight my own battles.

"Duke Sanchez, I charge you with the task of guiding your eldest daughter. Ensure she does not repeat these transgressions," I declared.

This barely qualified as a punishment. It was a thinly veiled reprieve masquerading as a sentence, and my father, the wise statesman that he was, immediately understood, his eyes widening with realization. As the sole target of my sister's disrespect, and with the witnesses to her tirade confined to my closest confidants in this room, I held the power to dictate a far more lenient

consequence than what imperial justice might have otherwise demanded. This was my family; despite their foibles, I did not wish for them to suffer unduly.

Father looked on the verge of speaking, but perhaps realizing that nothing good would come from pursuing the issue further, he quietly bowed his head once more. “Yes, Your Imperial Highness. I am humbled by your graciousness.”

With that, Ed and I rose from our seats. With Flora awake and her guardian present, we no longer had any reason to linger. We prepared to depart, but not before I addressed my sister one last time. “Flora, permit me this final remark,” I said with all the sternness I could muster, locking eyes with her as I tightened my expression. I delivered my subsequent words with all the confidence and dignity befitting a princess of my status. “I am no longer the Sanchez family disgrace. I am now the Saint—and you are not. Remember that well.”

Giving voice to this so brazenly might have made me seem petty, but I held no regrets. I needed to assert that truth. If not for Flora’s sake, then for mine—so I could finally shed that awful epithet that had haunted me for sixteen long years.

Flora quaked with suppressed emotion. After one final, parting glance, that was it. Ed and I led the rest of our party from the room, leaving Father and Flora to themselves. Though I had finally put my sister in her place, I was startled to find no feeling of fulfillment or satisfaction that welled up within me.

“Are you sure that was for the best?” Ed said, peering down at me as we returned the way we had come. “You could’ve had her arrested and tried for *lèse-majesté*,” he added, suggesting that I had perhaps been too lenient.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I responded firmly. “I can’t imagine a worse punishment for her.”

Ed tilted his head, puzzled. “What do you mean by that?” he asked. In contrast, Teodore and Marisa instantly grasped my meaning, murmuring their understanding from behind us.

“What my sister hates more than anything, Ed, is being beholden to me, her sworn nemesis,” I explained patiently to my husband. “This way, I’ve saved not only her life but also her reputation. I doubt Flora will ever come to terms with this. So yes, that was indeed for the best.”

Ed finally got it, nodding his head in understanding and, thankfully, without judgment. Despite hearing, for perhaps the first time, a decidedly less than noble insight into my feelings, he showed no signs of disapproval.

“I think you’ve been hanging around Teo too long, Lina,” he observed. “Not that I’m complaining. You are lovely, even with a shade of darkness.”

An even darker presence crept up beside us.

“Pardon me, Your Highness? Would you care to explain what you mean by that?” Theodore asked sweetly, his smile ghoulish and his aura even more ominous.

“Um, I was just...” Ed stammered.

Clasping my hands together, I silently sent up a prayer for my graceless husband. *Stay strong, Ed.*

(Raymond)

As the sound of the imperial party’s footsteps receded down the hallway, the tension that had held my shoulders in an iron grip finally relaxed. The silence of the room was now deafening, pressing in on me from all sides. I wanted nothing more than to bury my face in my palms, but I managed to hold back the gesture (though it took every ounce of willpower I had left).

When the urgent message had come that Flora had collapsed, I’d raced to the cathedral infirmary as swiftly as possible. However, nothing could have prepared me for the barrage of hatred that had seeped through the door as I’d stood upon the threshold. When my ears were assaulted with every barb that Flora hurled at Carolina, it felt as though my heart was on the verge of failing.

The specter of that earlier anxiety haunting me once more, I let out a deep, weary sigh and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to gather my thoughts. From the corner of my eye, I saw Flora stir under the bedsheets. Looking up, I noticed her fists were clenched tightly, her body trembling slightly—as if the tumultuous emotions roiling within her were desperate to break free. Though her outburst had ceased, the anger that had fueled it yet simmered within her.

The revelation of the deep-seated animosity between Flora and Carolina had

blindsided me. It was clear that the words spewing from my eldest daughter's lips had not merely been a spontaneous outburst of emotion, but the eruption of long-suppressed resentment. I struggled to grasp which was more heart-wrenching: Flora's raw, unfiltered fury or Carolina's chilling apathy, as if such confrontations had become nothing more than a numbing routine.

Pure self-loathing consumed me. How many years had this bitterness festered? How had I allowed my job, my duties, my very title to blind me to the yawning rift between my daughters? I had been pathetically negligent, a failure not just as a father, but as the very custodian of my family's unity.

As I stared across the room at Flora, now quiet but visibly shaken, I found myself at a loss for words. What could I possibly say to mend the fractures I had so long ignored? The typical parental response would be to reprimand her, to assert that her behavior was unacceptable. But coming from me—a father who had been little more than a shadow in her life—wouldn't such words be hypocritical? How could I expect her to have known better, to have done better, when I had failed to guide her at all?

No. I was the reason Flora had become this bitter, twisted young woman. This complete collapse of a functional family dynamic was my fault, a direct consequence of my thorough failure to fulfill my role as a father. I needed to take responsibility for it.

But how? There didn't seem to be a clear path to redemption. Perhaps, then, I should start by hearing Flora out. I cautiously approached her bedside and gently lowered myself down to sit on the edge of the bed by her feet.

"Flora. Darling," I began, my voice trembling slightly, the term of endearment feeling foreign on my lips. "I don't wish to place blame. I simply wish to understand."

Despite my careful approach, it was not what Flora wanted to hear. She twitched, raising her trembling head to peer at me through the strands of her disheveled hair.

"Understand?" she seethed quietly. "What else must I say for you to understand?! Carolina has always been a blight upon this family. Mother's murderer, a worthless wretch! Need I say more?!"

The dam had already broken, and her inner turmoil continued to spill forth uncontrollably. Her padparadscha sapphire eyes, once beautiful, were now bloodshot and bulging, corrupted by the intensity of her fury—a fury that was terrifying while also rendering her utterly irrational.

“If she hadn’t been born, Mother would still be alive!” she screamed. “I long for a world where Carolina had never existed. I turned her into a joke, caused her to be shunned from high society, because the sight of her finding joy while knowing that she took everything from me was unbearable!”

I could see that all logical thought had thoroughly deserted Flora. Fury, loathing, murderous intent—these were the only emotions I could see burning in her eyes. To think I had let things deteriorate this far before even realizing it—I was indeed an abject failure of a father. This conversation should have happened years ago—a decade ago—but it hadn’t. I had convinced myself that Flora was mature, that she had been capable of accepting the harsh realities of our world.

Mature, I scoffed internally. Do you even hear yourself, Raymond? She was a child when Karen died. She’s barely an adult even now. How could she have possibly accepted her mother’s death with no support from you?

My brow knit in frustration. I was a pathetic excuse for a man who had deluded himself in order to avoid the burdens of fatherhood.

I looked again at Flora, who had finished her latest tirade and was panting heavily with exertion. Her outlook on life as she had grown up had clearly been twisted by grief and warped by fear, but there must have been something I could do, something I could say to help her now. Suddenly, a vision of Karen flashed into my mind, and the ghost of her presence gave me the courage to speak.

“Flora,” I began gently. “Your feelings are your feelings, and I would never seek to dismiss them. I only ask that you consider this—” I paused, the memory of Karen’s warm, inviting smile, the one I had cherished with all my heart, flooding my mind. “With your mind as keen as I know it to be, perhaps you’ve already pondered this truth. You must feel it in your heart, don’t you? That your mother adored Carolina with every fiber of her being; that she bore no malice,

held no regrets about bringing Carolina into this world. And, Flora, that she fretted for you, cherished you, until her final breath.”

Flora exhaled sharply, the weight of my words clearly striking deep, but I didn’t relent.

“Karen understood you more than anyone else,” I continued. “That was why she was so concerned, even on her deathbed. She knew you had a vulnerable side, a sensitivity that she feared might one day manifest dramatically.”

As I evoked the memory of her beloved mother, I saw tears begin to well up in Flora’s eyes. Reflected in those pale pink orbs, I saw the image of Karen lying on her deathbed, wishing she’d had more time with her children. My heart twisted with pain—pain not only for Karen’s foresight but for my own negligence. Karen had seen this coming; she had warned me, and yet I, in my obstinacy, had dismissed her concerns. I had done nothing, hadn’t even tried to address Flora’s needs. In my misguided belief in her precociousness, I had left her to fend for herself, and this was the bitter fruit of my neglect.

Had I comforted Flora when Karen passed? Had I held her, allowed her to cry into my chest and grieve? Or had I coldly left her to cope alone, retreating into my work as if that could somehow dilute the pain? That moment should have been one of shared healing, yet I had forsaken it, burying myself in responsibilities that now seemed so trivial by comparison.

My fist clenched with the weight of my regret. It was too late to lament the actions I hadn’t taken, yet I was overwhelmed by it, feeling as if my chest might split open from the agony. Despite my titles—Prime Minister, Duke Sanchez—I had failed at my most precious duty.

Flora shifted in her bed, turning away from me. She lay back down and pulled the covers over herself. “Even so, I stand by my convictions,” she said, her voice steadier than before yet tinged with resignation. “Someone of Carolina’s kind doesn’t deserve happiness. She can’t be happy, not while I’m...”

Her voice faded into a rare hesitation, the fierceness giving way to uncertainty.

After a pause, I responded gently, “All right. If that is your answer, so be it. But I implore you not to hurt Carolina any—”

“Out. Get out!” she snapped suddenly, her anger rekindling. “I want to be alone.”

Seeing her temper flare again, I decided it was best to leave, to give her some space to cool down. Without another word, I rose from my seat and quietly left the infirmary.

(Flora)

The door swung shut with a soft thud, punctuating my father’s departure. Alone once again, I felt a profound sense of release. Tension drained from my limbs, and a deep, slow breath escaped my lips.

The silence was comforting, but at the same time, there was a sadness to it that made my chest feel tight. It was as if the world were trying to tell me right now that I...was hopelessly trapped in my own solitude.

Oh, Mother, how I miss you. How I wish I could go back to those carefree, happy days.

The tears threatened to spill, but I squeezed my eyes shut, halting their escape. Then I recalled those words—my mother’s words.

“When you want to cry, Flora, don’t hold it in,” she had told me with that kind, understanding smile. As the memory took hold of me, the gentle timbre of my mother’s voice cut through the stillness. “When you want to cry, Flora, let it out,” she had said, her smile the last beacon of understanding to ever cut through the darkness of my life.

As if encouraged by my absent mother’s words, a lone tear escaped, tracing a wet path down my cheek and falling, leaving a dark spot on the bedsheet. Then another followed, and another, and another.

How long has it been since I last cried? I wondered, tracing between the damp splotches on the fabric with my fingers. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since I had last expressed my grief.

“Mother,” I whispered into the quiet room.

With the flood of tears came a flood of memories.

They were painful memories, ones I would have preferred to lock away forever. But they surged through me, heedless of my desires, relentless and vivid. Assaulted by a wave of nausea, a desperate need to expel this aching sorrow, I surrendered to the onslaught. I dove headfirst into the depths of recollection.

Perhaps, I thought, by remembering her touch, her kindness, I might ease this piercing loneliness.



It was on a cold, wintry day more than a decade ago that I first donned the mask of the perfect lady.

I had long been lauded as a prodigy, a precocious young girl who could conquer any challenge set before her. These were the expectations that had been set for me, and I, so desperately afraid of disappointing those who had placed that faith in me, endeavored to embody that acclaim with every fiber of my being.

I, Flora Sanchez, showed no weakness, buried any signs of imperfection. Yet for all that, there had remained one person in front of whom my facade always effortlessly melted away—my mother.

Karen Sanchez. No matter where I fled, no matter where I tried to hide, I could count on her to always find me.

“Goodness, Flora, darling, there you are. What happened?”

With a soundless, startling abruptness, my mother appeared before me. I found myself gazing into those beautiful padparadscha sapphire eyes; they brimmed with love as she peered into my face with a gentle curiosity.

I felt my own eyes widen in surprise. How had she found me? I had come all this way to the secluded rear gardens of our estate, a half-wild place where no one ever ventured, yet this nevertheless seemed to be the first place she’d thought to visit. Not only had she found me, but she had also discerned that something was bothering me with just a cursory glance. Even at that young age, I had understood that this was no common ability, but rather a rare gift

belonging only to those with deep compassion, attuned to the silent struggles of others.

The urge to voice my complaints and grievances rose almost instinctively, but I pressed my lips tightly together. It felt wrong to burden my mother, to seek refuge in her embrace. Convincing myself that I was the epitome of a composed young lady, I attempted to present a facade of strength. "I'm perfectly fine, Mother," I managed to say with as much poise as I could muster. "I appreciate your concern, but it is misplaced."

"My, putting on a strong face, are we?" she replied, her eyes dancing with kind amusement. "Where did my darling little girl learn to do that?"

Her teasing words were accompanied by a knowing smile, undaunted by my attempts to assure her of my well-being. She knew I was concealing something deep inside. The message in her expression was clear: *lean on me*.

"My dearest Flora," Mother began again, her voice firm yet filled with tenderness, "we all endure hardship from time to time, but we mustn't become accustomed to it. It's important to express our emotions, and sometimes that requires a good, long cry." She opened her arms invitingly. "Come here, darling."

Everything in this encounter had transpired exactly as she'd wanted. I found myself suddenly confronted with the safest, most comforting place to release my pent-up emotions. It was then that I realized I was no match for my mother's stubborn sweetness; I was perhaps foolish to have even thought I'd stood a chance. All my pretensions of stoicism dissolved under the weight of her unconditional affection. Clearly, I still had much to learn.

Without hesitation, I rushed into her open arms, and she enveloped me in a warm embrace. Encased in this cocoon of affection, I let go completely, crying loudly and without restraint. "There, there, my precious one," she whispered, her voice so soothing that it drew the tears from me without effort.

Oh, Mother. You're the only one who can remove this mask of mine. You always have been, and you always will be.

A mother's love knows no bounds. That phrase had never felt more poignant than as I clung helplessly in her arms.

Those were the times, those rare moments when I could act like the child I was, which were the happiest ones. Back then, I had wished they could last forever. I'd known even then that it wasn't possible. But alas, if only I had truly known how few moments we'd had remaining to us.

Not long after that day in the garden, Mother fell ill, then died.

It was the plague that took her from me. It claimed her quickly. Her frail body, weakened by recent childbirth, couldn't withstand the onslaught of the disease, and it wasn't long at all before she'd breathed her last.

I'd stood there at her funeral, clad in a somber black gown. Gazing down at her casket, I regarded my mother's serene visage. She seemed so peaceful, which felt like a cruel illusion suggesting she might awaken at any moment, gracing us once more with her loving presence.

But this was no fairy tale. She was gone, irrevocably so. I forced myself to look away, vowing not to cry. The sorrow within me swelled, but I refused to let it break through my defenses. This was my mother's funeral; here, of all places, I could not afford to let my true self slip through.

I was calm, collected—the perfect lady. While family, friends, and servants wept openly, I endeavored to console them. I put on a strong face, thanked them for attending, and spoke of Mother in fond remembrance. This role should have fallen to Father, the chief mourner, but he remained rooted by her casket, ensnared in silent grief, leaving me to shoulder the burden alone.

In the absence of his strength, someone had to step up. Why did I have to pick up the slack? *Because I was the perfect lady, and this was what perfect ladies do.*

The hushed whispers of the gathering reached my ears:

"Lady Flora exhibits remarkable composure for one so young. Truly commendable."

"Well, she is the duke's daughter."

"The epithet 'perfect lady' is not just for show, is it?"

“To manage not to shed a single tear at her own mother’s funeral and to assist in the proceedings—such a feat is beyond the reach of any ordinary child.”

“It appears she has matters well in hand. Let us not intrude. Flora will manage admirably on her own.”

On her own. The words echoed through my very being. Through it all, not a single sentiment of consolation was spoken towards me. I felt suffocated, entrapped. Were they even aware of the immense pressure their words imposed on me?

That was perhaps the first time I suspected that the sobriquet of perfection was not a blessing, but a curse—a titanic burden I was barely able to support, one under which I would ultimately be crushed.

With my mother gone, I lost not only her person but the sanctuary she had provided. It was in her comforting presence that I had been able to shed tears, reveal the truth of my fragile self, and suspend the illusion of perfection. Without her, no one remained to peel away the mask that clung to me, to allow me a moment to breathe.

How could I continue, day after day, with my identity fused to this facade of the perfect lady? Would the mask ever come off, or would it remain, constricting me indefinitely? I feared that eventually, something would have to break—me or the mask. And when the pretense dissolved, what then? At the time, it was impossible for me to imagine.

As I stood at her graveside, surrounded by adults too wrapped up in their lives to care for mine, I wondered if it was time for me to give up the act. But the roots of that insidious title—perfection—had burrowed deep. Deeper than I’d thought. I found myself unable to uproot these entrenched expectations, fearing the sharp sting of disappointment and rejection—a pain for which I was utterly unprepared.

Pathetic, wasn’t it? Unable to fully embody the role of the perfect lady, yet too cowardly to reject it outright. I craved the accolades but wanted none of the responsibilities. As I pondered an alternative source of emotional release, striving vainly to think of anything in my life that could take the role my mother

once had played, the sound of wailing snapped me to attention.

I turned towards the source—the new sister, Carolina, cradled in her wet nurse’s arms. The nurse rocked her gently, cooing in a futile attempt to soothe her cries. “Oh, my sweet lady, do you mourn Her Ladyship’s passing?” she murmured. “Your cries are more sorrowful than ever.”

All eyes shifted towards the pair, filled with a mix of compassion and sorrow. Their voices held no malice as they murmured “poor girl” this and “poor girl” that. The more their words of pity washed over me, the more I felt...irritated. Why did a mere infant, of all people, deserve their compassion? In some way, wasn’t she partly responsible for Mother’s demise? Yet here they were, lavishing empathy on a newborn, whose very existence might indeed be what had cost us the very person we were all gathered to mourn!

Anger churned within me. Was I wrong? Was it misguided to think that if Mother hadn’t been so weakened after birthing Carolina, she might have survived the illness? Her body had needed every ounce of energy to combat the disease, energy that had been siphoned away by this bawling bundle, my sister!

As I recalled Mother’s fragile face, drained of color, lying on her deathbed, my thoughts darkened to a grim, inevitable conclusion:

Carolina is to blame. If she hadn’t been born, Mother would still be alive. Mother is dead because of her.

The sadness for my mother’s death was gone. It had been replaced by a seething hatred towards this nascent life. And in that moment, the resolve to uphold the persona of the perfect lady rekindled within me, fiercer it had ever blazed before.

Because I had to become her—that unassailable ideal—if my plans for revenge were to succeed.

Gazing up at the gray, ominous sky, I steeled myself. *Endure any hardship, tolerate any pain*, I commanded myself. *Do whatever it takes to leave Carolina no refuge, no sliver of doubt about her undeserved existence. If her birth has robbed me of Mother, then I will deprive her of joy in a life she does not deserve!*

With a malevolent spark in my eyes, I approached the wailing infant. Gently, I

took her from her wet nurse's arms, cradling her against my chest. I smiled at her so gently, the mask of the perfect lady—no, the mask of the doting sister—on my face. Even before this child could grasp her surroundings, I needed to lay the groundwork for my revenge. I had to act swiftly, to ensure she wouldn't (couldn't) retaliate.

Yes, my revenge had to be all-encompassing. No, it had to be *perfect*. My very dignity now depended on it.

My heart withered into a darkened lump of revenge, yet those around us remained none the wiser. I absorbed their praise, their admiration of my role as the caring, affectionate sister, and inwardly, I smirked.

It begins, I whispered to myself. *The curtains rise on the carefully plotted drama of my revenge.*



And my schemes *had* unfolded flawlessly—until Carolina had managed to get herself betrothed to a Malcosian prince. In Celestia, I had everyone's support; the nobility shared my disdain for her, recognizing her as the disgrace she was. But in a foreign land? My influence could not extend so far.

In Malcosias, she had found acceptance. Love, even. At this rate, she might no longer think herself wretched, might perhaps even dare to hope for happiness. That was unacceptable to me. As I lay in my infirmary bed, restless and tormented, hatred contorted my tear-swollen face. I gripped the sheets tightly, my teeth grinding in silent fury.

If I could no longer ensure her misery, I would at least thwart her happiness. I could not bear the thought of her standing triumphant, looking down upon me.

"I will strip that girl of her future, no matter the cost," I muttered ominously to myself.

Kill her. I was going to kill that girl. What did I have left to lose? The moment my father had discovered my machinations, my fate was sealed. It was too late for redemption. "Nothing else matters," I spat, staring blankly at the palms of my hands. If I dared to attack an imperial princess, successfully or not, I knew that my own survival would no longer be assured. But that no longer frightened

me. Bereft of anything else to live for (be my fate life imprisonment or even death), I was unafraid.

“The end is near, Carolina. Soon enough, everything between us—our hatred, our history—will be settled, once and for all.”

I clenched my hands tight, holding desperately to the red-hot embers of revenge that yet smoldered within.

Chapter Five

Three days after my ascension to the pinnacle of the Faith Council of Saints, the hubbub of the Trials had finally started to subside—just in time for the preparations for the Noel festivities to begin. Amid the whirlwind of activity, I found myself immersed in meticulous planning for that auspicious holiday.

From the details of the ceremonial attire to the agenda and scheduling for the day, there were countless tasks to manage, leaving little time for rest. It wasn't just me; the entire palace buzzed with urgency, with maids and butlers briskly moving through their tasks to keep up with their tight schedules. I briefly glanced at yet another group of maids darting past before returning my focus to the book of design sketches and fabric samples spread before me. Along the wall, an array of prototype dresses and robes stood silently.

"I trust the participating nations will receive Carolina with grand festivities, so we'll need a gown for the ceremony of greeting—perhaps a couple of choices, just to be safe," a cool voice rang out. "Then there's the ensemble for the performance of her Saintly duties—didn't His Holiness present Carolina with a scepter? What color was it? White? Then her attire should be designed to match it."

Only one person could command the situation with such grace and authority, and that was the empress herself. She stood serenely in the center of the activity around us, dispensing instructions to the clothier, who listened attentively to her every word. Her Imperial Majesty had carved time from her relentless schedule to be here, a kindness for which I was endlessly thankful. She managed every detail with an air of composure, her face betraying not a hint of dissatisfaction with me for foisting this task onto her. I was sure everyone here had breathed a sigh of relief when it had become clear that she was the one who would be delegating and directing this process rather than me.

"I believe I possess a few evening gowns that may suffice for diplomatic

occasions, though none befitting the sacred part of my duties,” I offered, eager to contribute at least in some small way. “I do think we should make an effort to match the commemorative scepter, but how exactly shall we create something in a complementary design?”

Thanks to the empress, I already possessed an extensive collection of exquisite gowns and the jewelry to match. It seemed prudent, then, to focus more on crafting the holy ensemble I would wear during the Noel ceremonies I was to perform in my capacity as the Saint. I asked a nearby maid to fetch the scepter so we could scrutinize it more closely. I let out a long breath as she departed, but I did not long await her prompt return. She presented the immaculate white scepter, which the empress took at once and examined it with a discerning eye. “Hmm...” she murmured thoughtfully.

“If we consider that white will be the foundation of the color scheme, perhaps we could introduce accents of blue and pea green?” I suggested. “These could echo the colors of the robe I donned during the trials.”

“Yes, incorporating those colors makes sense—blue for purity, pea green for healing,” the empress agreed. “However, relying solely on this palette might seem a bit...lackluster, don’t you think?”

I nodded thoughtfully. It would indeed be somewhat underwhelming for my attire to closely resemble that of the Saintly candidates. To underscore the distinction of the Saint, it would be necessary to introduce at least one additional color to emphasize the uniqueness of the ensemble.

“What about gold?” I ventured hesitantly. “I worry it might be a bit too ostentatious. That and, well...isn’t gold a color linked to the high pontiff’s office...?”

The empress nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, the high pontiff wears white and gold as befits his status. Now, of course, white symbolizes the church itself, so I doubt anyone would take umbrage with the Saint herself dressing in a hue of such holiness...”

But gold was a different matter entirely, wasn’t it? I would have hated for people to perceive our choice of color as an insinuation that the Saint held a status comparable to that of the high pontiff’s. With the Faith Council being a

nascent addition to the church's hierarchy, it was crucial to avoid any misinterpretation that could be construed as overstepping. Perhaps we were being overly cautious, but in such matters, prudence was preferable. Besides, it didn't seem as if either one of us felt all that strongly about using gold in the first place.

Just then, a knock rang out on the lintel of the open doorway.

"Pardon the intrusion," came a mellifluous tenor. "If color scheme is the concern, might I suggest silver?"

"I'd prefer fiery, passionate red," added a baritone.

I turned around and there they were, Teodore and Ed, each proposing their own (predictable) alternatives as they entered the room and joined our deliberation.

"Welcome back, Ed. Teodore." I greeted them warmly.

"Returned so soon?" the empress asked. "Wasn't that meeting with the church supposed to extend into the evening?" Her expression of outward disappointment at the interruption of our mother-daughter bonding time was subtle but apparent.

Ed merely shrugged and took a seat next to me, his gaze quickly falling to the sketches spread out before us. His expression seemed to indicate that he considered the designs well beyond his ken, and so he withheld any comments.

"Setting aside the ill-considered suggestion of a man all too eager to indelicately announce his claim over his wife..." the empress said teasingly, quirking an eyebrow at her son. The gentle ribbing sailed right over Ed's head, and with a fond sigh, she turned her attention to the blond-haired lord.

"Teodore. Silver might just work. It acknowledges a deference to His Holiness and fits well within the framework of the design."

"I am humbled," Teodore responded, offering a slight bow as he adjusted his glasses. Meanwhile, Ed, whose suggestion had been somewhat unceremoniously dismissed, found solace in examining his wedding ring, fidgeting with it absentmindedly while muttering, "I thought red would've been nice..." His expression remained stoic, yet in a manner reminiscent of a gently

chastised puppy, I noticed a subtle change in his demeanor—as if his ears drooped and his tail had fallen still. In such moments, it became clear that Ed was not unfeeling; one simply had to know what to look for.

“Let’s go with a white and silver motif, complemented by sapphire and peridot accents,” the empress went on decisively. “That is, a white base with silver embroidery... Ah, and we’ll need a shawl with a diaphanous material, something like the delicate lace of a veil. To enhance the mystique.”

Now that the color scheme had been decided upon, my mother-in-law was all too eager to finalize my garment, suggestion after suggestion tumbling from her lips. Of course, Her Majesty’s taste was exquisite, and I found myself nodding in agreement to each addition to the design. Truthfully, I began to feel as if my presence was a little unnecessary, if all I was going to add to the process was a tacit approval for each and every one of the empress’s ideas. It seemed she sensed this too, for she suddenly left off examining the designs and got to her feet with a graceful rustle of her skirts.

“Carolina, would you entrust the matter of your Saintly attire to me?” she asked.

“Of course. I would be much obliged,” I replied with a twinge of relief.

“Excellent. Then, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be borrowing a room,” she announced, signaling her intention to depart. I attempted to express my gratitude, but she waved it away with a shrug and a casual “It’s my pleasure, dear” before sweeping imperiously from the room.

I sincerely hoped her words expressed a genuine sentiment, as entrusting the dress to her capable hands left me feeling somewhat guilty for walking away from the entire affair. With the matter of the Saintly regalia more or less settled, all that remained for me to settle was the matter of my formal gowns, which Marisa and I could handle later tonight. *Bringing along two or three should suffice*, I mused, as I reached for a cup of my handmaiden’s finest.

After taking a moment to savor the brew’s luxurious aroma, I turned to Theodore, who had settled onto the single-seater sofa in the empress’s absence. “Speaking of the meeting with the church, how did it go?” I asked. “Was the matter of my security detail settled?”

As an offshoot of the church, the Faith Council fell under its jurisdiction, which included the protection offered by its paladins. However, my status as an imperial princess consort added a layer of complexity. The imperial family was understandably reluctant to relinquish all control over my security arrangements.

“Yes, I am pleased to report that we have reached an amicable agreement,” Teodore said. “The Pyreborn will be collaborating directly with the paladins to ensure Your Highness’s safety. You can expect to see members from both factions accompanying you at all times.”

“Oh my, is that all right?” I asked. “Will there be no issues with the paladins and Pyreborn dividing the responsibility?”

The paladins served our God; the Pyreborn, their imperial lords. Both groups carried a profound sense of pride in their roles, and I was wary that such divided loyalties could potentially ignite conflict.

But Teodore assuaged my concerns with an easy smile. “Rest easy, Your Highness. Our knights know exactly what’s at stake. If they so much as twitch towards the paladins, they’ll find themselves with a ticket home. It’s a once-in-a-lifetime honor, guarding the Saint. I trust that both sides will play nice.”

“Ah, I... I see,” I managed, feeling my cheek give a slight twitch of its own. It was evident that Teodore had employed some...rather coercive methods to maintain discipline among his knights. While it was somewhat disconcerting to realize how well he knew their dislikes and how readily he used that knowledge to ensure compliance, I could not deny the pragmatism behind his approach. We certainly could not afford any lapses during the proceedings, especially in the matter of my security...

Just then, Teodore lightly tapped his palm, as if he’d remembered something. “Ah. It has also been decided that I will personally oversee your transportation during the events—using my teleportation magic.”

I let out an unseemly noise. *Teodore would be teleporting us...to other countries?* It wasn’t the notion itself that gave me pause, but the fact that he intended to transport *all* of us. Including my security detail? That would be a few scores of men at the very least. Wouldn’t such a feat overly tax him?

Teodore smiled reassuringly. “It will just be the five of us, Your Highness. The remainder of our forces will convene with us at the destination.”

“Oh, I see! Then they’ll be dispatched beforehand? That’s a relief.” I exhaled deeply, feeling the tension drain away as I settled back into the cushions. It was reassuring to have even one less thing to worry about amid the chaos.

“Does that mean they’re already en route?” I asked. “I’m sure Malcosias won’t be a problem, but what about Celestia and Noir? They are quite distant, and Celestia is our first destination.” I cast my mind back to the details of the itinerary we had confirmed the previous evening.

“Indeed, the detachment headed for Celestia has already departed,” Teodore confirmed. “The team for Noir will follow shortly.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “I pray for their safe and uneventful journey.”

My concern lingered for the knights venturing into foreign lands, but Teodore shrugged off my worries. “I’m confident they’ll manage,” he assured me casually. “They’ve been instructed to avoid all dangerous areas, and they are well-equipped with both arms and provisions. Besides, we’ve selected some of our most highly decorated veterans for this mission. Should any issues arise, I trust in their capabilities. Rest easy, Your Highness,” he added, his lips curling into a reassuring half-smile.

Well, if their vice commander holds them in such high regard, what room is there for my worries?



The remaining days of preparations passed by in a blur, and before I knew it, it was the evening before we were slated to depart. I gazed wistfully out the window at the sky, painted a fiery red by the setting sun, momentarily distracted from reviewing the final schedule with Ed and Teodore in my sitting room in the Emerald Palace.

It was hard to believe that we were at last approaching the culmination of our efforts. The outcome of success had been uncertain at times, with genuine moments of doubt when it seemed we might not meet our deadlines, but thanks to the unwavering dedication and hard work of everyone involved, not

only were we on track, but we were also likely to be afforded enough space to breathe that we'd get some actual rest tonight.

I was so grateful to Ed and the others for their help. The tasks had often felt overwhelming; there were countless times I'd felt that I might collapse into sleep at any moment. Yet it was their steadfast presence that had carried us through.

This whole organization, this role of the Saint, though initially created for my sake, was designed to endure well beyond my time. There would eventually be a second Saint, and a third, each inheriting this legacy. It was crucial, then, that we execute everything with meticulous care. I did not want to be remembered as the first Saint who faltered during the inaugural Noel, burdening my successors with the weight of my mistakes!

One cannot be too prepared, I told myself, reclining back on my sofa. As I pinched the bridge of my nose, I heard Ed beside me instruct one of the maids to fetch something sweet. Across from us, Theodore began organizing the documents littered across the table.

"I believe that's everything. We're all ready for tomorrow," he said, his voice brimming with a warm confidence. "Princess, your dedication is truly appreciated."

"Of course," I replied with a smile. "Though, really, it is I who should be thanking both of you."

"I would do anything for my dear Lina," Ed responded sweetly.

"All *you* did was sit back and bark a few orders at your men," Theodore added just as sweetly, a comment meant clearly as a punishment for Ed trying to curry favor with me.

Ed grunted and looked away uncomfortably. It seemed he had nothing to say about his lack of effort when it came to paperwork and other such practical tasks. But then, in a voice that was only a little sullen, he muttered, "I...filed a few documents, didn't I?"

"Oh, did you? Well, then congratulations—Your Highness has matched the capabilities of a competent eight-year-old," Theodore quipped.

You should've held your peace, darling, I thought to myself, amused. Considering the exhaustion that clung to me, I found it remarkable that Ed and Theodore could still muster the energy to banter. *Commander and vice commander—truly a force to be reckoned with (and not just on the field of battle)*.

The maid returned with an assortment of bite-size chocolates. I popped one in my mouth, savoring it as I enjoyed the ongoing exchange between the men in my life, an exchange which culminated, as it almost always did, with Ed's ego only slightly worse for the wear.

As he sulked, still grappling with his undersized role in our preparations, I offered him a piece of chocolate, my smile tinged with irony. "You know, Theodore," I suggested gently, "perhaps you could ease up on my husband now and then."

"Oh, but I do," the blond lord returned smoothly. "When propriety demands it, I hold my tongue." He picked up his freshly refilled teacup, his casual shrug and smile signaling me to let the matter rest.

Just then, there was a knock on the door. It was quite peculiar to receive visitors at this hour, so I looked to Owen for confirmation. After receiving his reassurance, I called out, "Enter!"

The imperial castle's head maid stepped into the room. "Your Imperial Highnesses, Your Lordship. I apologize for the intrusion. You have been summoned by His Imperial Majesty, Emperor Eric."

"The emperor?" Theodore and I responded in unison, overlapping with Ed's "Father?"

"Yes," the head maid confirmed succinctly, dispelling any lingering doubts.

Apparently, her declaration had not, in fact, been a mass auditory hallucination. But the emperor knew of our schedule, that we were to depart tomorrow. A matter that might warrant cutting into our precious time at this hour must have been one of utmost importance.

"Well, we mustn't keep His Majesty waiting," Theodore prompted.

"Yes, let's go," Ed added.

We each took a brief moment to collect ourselves, exchanged affirming nods, then stood and exited the room in a composed manner. Owen was, as always, at my side as my personal bodyguard, while I instructed Marisa to tidy up in our wake. Led by the head maid, our group of four wended our way through the corridors and out onto the grounds, lit with the slanting rays of a day descending quickly towards twilight.

“Do you think this summons is related to what we have planned for the Noel celebrations?” I asked.

“Knowing my father, it might be that, or it might be something completely unrelated and unnecessary,” Ed said.

“His Majesty *has* summoned us in the past with no other purpose than to invite us to dine with him, has he not?” Teodore joked.

His comment drew light smiles and chuckles from us all, easing the tension slightly. Soon enough, we had made our way through the corridors and arrived at the grand doors of the emperor’s chambers. The head maid stepped aside and bowed. “His Imperial Majesty awaits within. Please knock and enter.”

Thanking her for her diligent service, Ed and I stepped forward. As the highest-ranking individual present, Ed knocked on the door three times. “This is Prince Edward Ruby Martinez. May we enter?”

“Enter,” came the emperor’s voice from within.

We shared a nervous glance and a nod, murmured, “Pardon me,” and gently pushed the doors open to reveal, ensconced within the room’s opulent decor, three imperial figures: the emperor, the empress, and Prince Gilbert. *I thought surely it would just be the three of us meeting with His Majesty...* This must have made for the first imperial family gathering since the incident with Archbishop Mills.

As our party stood there, dumbstruck, the emperor’s face broke into a wide smile. The empress offered a nonchalant shrug, while Prince Gilbert looked just as astonished as we were—clearly, he had not been briefed on the proceedings either.

The emperor gestured towards the seats to our left. “Please, sit.”

Ed and I exchanged another look, but ultimately, standing idly by would not gain us the answers we sought. We complied and took our seats, and Theodore positioned himself behind us. Owen nodded respectfully and quietly exited the room. As I settled into my chair, I couldn't help but wonder: *What could possibly be the reason for such a gathering? Also...could we perhaps get to it just a little more quickly?* I had to admit that I was more than a little impatient; I should have been preparing for bed, resting for my big day. My gaze inadvertently met the emperor's just as he turned to look at me. A chill raced down my spine, but he responded with a burst of boisterous laughter.

"Lighten up, Carolina!" he boomed, his voice echoing warmly in the chamber. "I promise this won't take long, so please, everyone, grant me your undivided attention."

"Y-Yes, Your Majesty!" I managed to squeak out. His laughter faded into a softer smile, which helped to ease my nerves slightly. He appeared content, his eyes crinkling with amusement as he turned his gaze forward again. Observing his distinguished profile, I was reminded of the resemblance between him and Ed.

"First, I must thank you all for responding so promptly to my summons, especially given the lateness of the hour," the emperor began. "I know you all have been preparing tirelessly for tomorrow's events, so I will be brief. I wanted you all to know—" He paused, eyes slowly scanning the small assembly. "We have reached a decision regarding the crown prince."

A shock wave rippled through the room. Every pair of eyes widened except the empress's. A sense of foreboding filled me as the implications of this statement sank in: the succession had finally been determined.

I felt my lips tighten as I stole a glance at Prince Gilbert. He had long coveted the throne, and now, his features were set into determined lines, reflecting how much this moment must have meant to him.

The empire's factional crisis was, after all, far from resolved. Following the Arendt family's fall from grace, the party supporting the first prince had weakened, but Prince Gilbert had been tirelessly working to reverse this trend, albeit at great personal cost. In the little time he'd had during this busy season,

he'd focused on courting favor from members of the formerly neutral faction. As a result, the nobility had become more polarized than ever before, with a robust caucus for the second prince confronting the first prince's circle, one that continued to draw support from a dwindling pool of unaligned nobles. The balance of power remained precarious, and I feared that the announcement of the crown prince, regardless of its outcome, would inevitably ignite significant upheaval.

All eyes were fixed on the emperor. Prince Edward or Prince Gilbert—who would it be? The room fell into a deafening silence, and I swallowed hard, the sound echoing in my ears.

The emperor took a deep breath. "Before we proceed, let me be clear. I have made this decision not as a father, but as the leader of this great empire. I will entertain no grievances or objections."

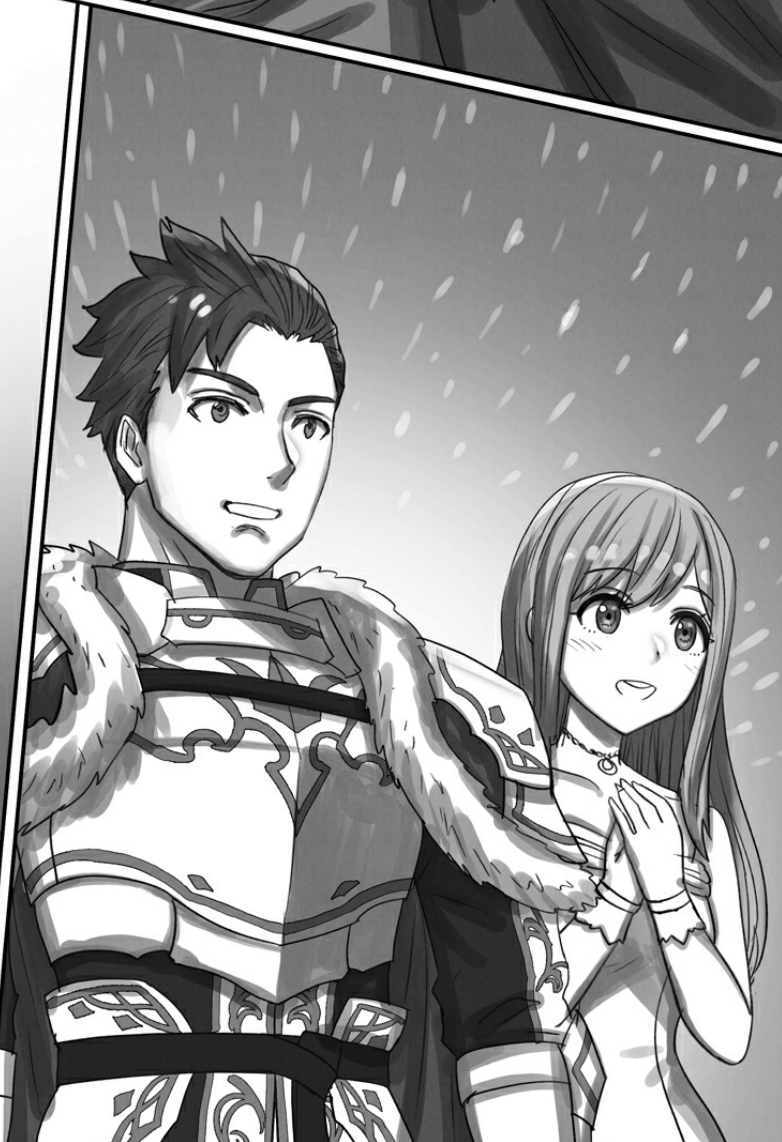
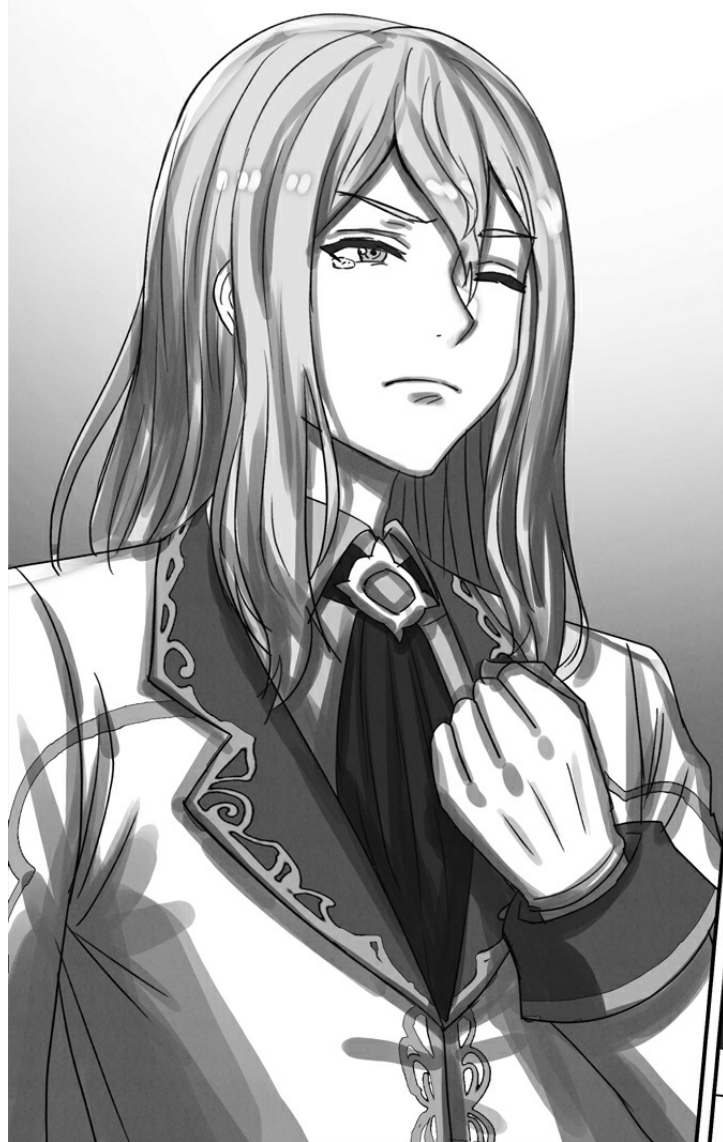
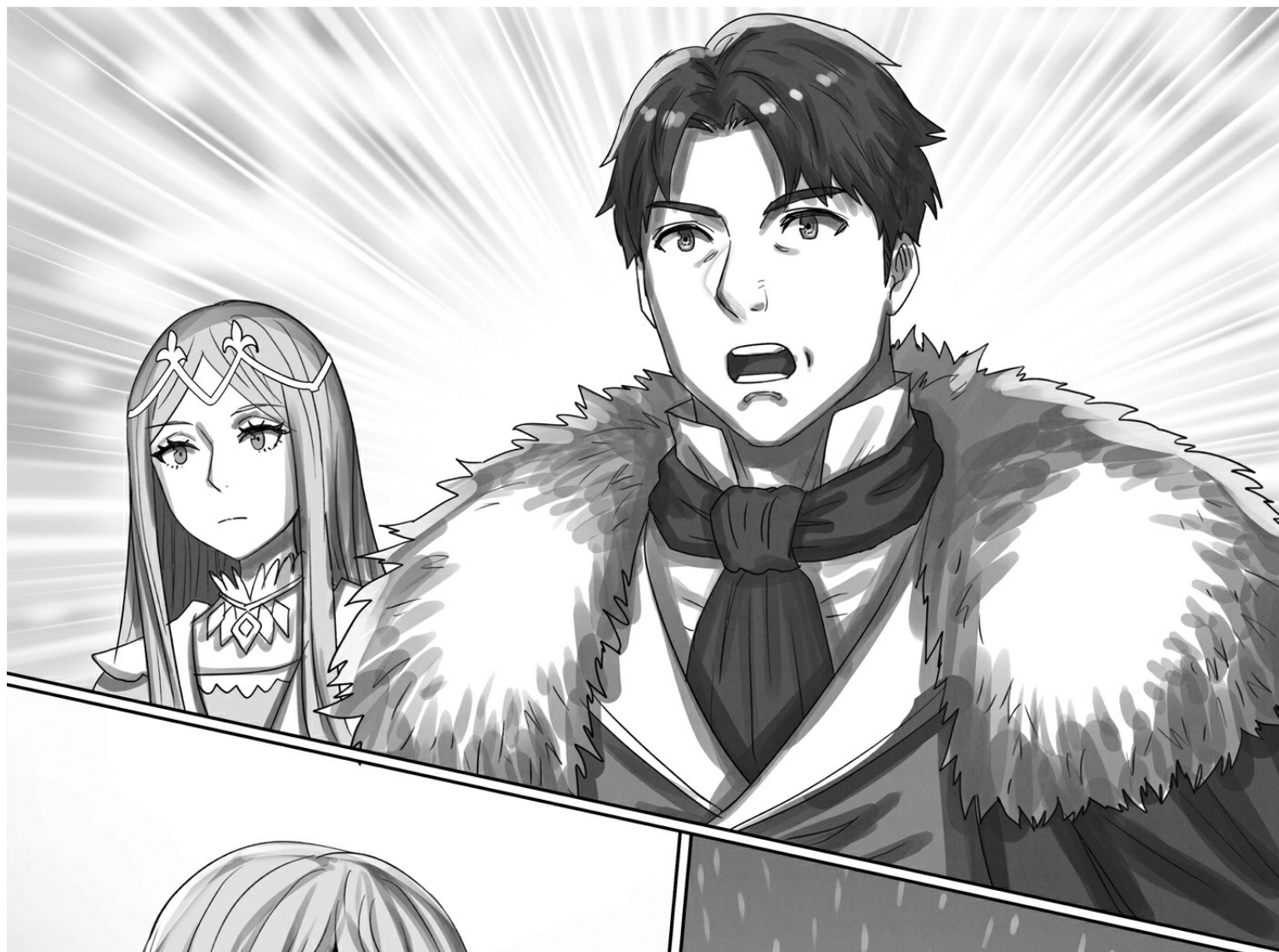
We all nodded, the weight of his words sinking in. The choice of the future leader of the empire was a decision that transcended personal biases. It needed to be impartial, and we understood the emperor would set aside his personal feelings to make this critical choice. I straightened up, my heart pounding as I awaited his announcement.

"One son of mine embodies the strength required of a ruler, the other, the charisma of a leader. It was not an easy decision, but after careful consideration of your merits, I have chosen the son worthy of being the empire's new steward—" He paused, his gaze intense. "Gilbert, my son. The responsibility is yours."

Our eyes widened, and looks of astonishment passed between us. For a few seconds, we remained frozen, absorbing the proclamation, and then...smiles slowly spread across our faces.

"Thank goodness!" I muttered over and over again, relief washing over me.

The newly proclaimed heir apparent let out a snuffle. "It's me... I'm the crown prince!" he exclaimed, almost in disbelief. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he clutched a fist in front of his chest in triumph.



At that moment, I was certain that we all shared a genuine sense of happiness for Prince Gilbert. For someone who had faced setbacks and yet had never ceased to strive forward, his triumph was not only sweet but richly deserved. Though this milestone might merely represent the starting line for him, it did not diminish the significance of his achievement. I was glad—so glad that his relentless efforts had at last been recognized.

As we offered our congratulations, Prince Gilbert was overcome with emotion and began to cry in earnest. I understood his tears; after enduring one challenge after another, to finally step onto the path he was meant to walk must have felt overwhelming. I was certain no one in the room thought any less of him for showing his emotions so openly.

We allowed the crown prince to embrace his moment fully, and soon, drinks and refreshments were brought in. With the entire imperial family gathered, what began as a meeting had transformed into a modest yet heartfelt impromptu celebration. We indulged in food and libations, and by the time the gathering had concluded, the night had deepened considerably. It seemed my stated intention of a full night's sleep ahead of all of us had been woefully premature, but the joy of the evening was undeniable. While I knew I might regret the lack of rest come morning, I couldn't help but admit that the celebration had been thoroughly enjoyable.

The next morning, I stifled yawn after yawn as we assembled in the castle hall, the space that had been designated for our departure. Our small group was joined by an impressive array of spectators: government officials and aristocrats keen to witness the Saint off to her first ceremonial occasion, as well as magical authorities eager to observe a rare display of teleportation magic. Noticeably absent, however, were the emperor and empress. I reminded myself not to feel disappointed; they had their own demanding schedules and had already spent the previous evening celebrating with us.

"Final checks are complete—Saint Carolina and His Highness, this way, if you would please," Theodore directed, laying down the magic circle at his feet. Ed and I, dressed in light coats and flanked by our attendants and guards, stepped forward. Then, Ed, Marisa, Owen, and I broke off from the group, positioned ourselves around the circle, and looked to Theodore to continue.

“For your safety, hold tightly to the hands of the people next to you. Do not let go until the teleportation is complete,” he instructed.

His cautions remained the same as on previous trips via teleportation. Giving him a nod, I took Ed’s and Marisa’s hands, squeezing them tightly, reassured by their warm, solid presence.

Teodore took a moment to ensure everyone was securely linked together, then meticulously proceeded through his checklist. When each and every detail had been set, he announced, “Teleportation commencing,” and his energy levels visibly surged. A soft breeze stirred around him, rustling our coats and cloaks, as the soft pressure of magic enveloped us, creating a palpable tension among the onlookers.

The magic circle vibrated with the force of Teodore’s power, growing increasingly brilliant under the focus of his magic until it was too intense to behold directly.

“We are teleporting...now!” The light engulfed us, and I reflexively closed my eyes. A minute passed in a soundless, blinding blur. As the magic finally receded, my senses were greeted by the sweet fragrance of perfume and the bustling sounds of people around us. Then, a familiar voice broke through:

“Saint Carolina Ruby Martinez, Prince Edward Ruby Martinez—the Kingdom of Celestia welcomes you.”

I opened my eyes and there he was—King Nathan Phillips. And beside him was my father, along with a bevy of retainers and advisers. The welcoming party approached us briskly; they seemed to have waited at the periphery of the grand hall to give us ample extra space in case the teleportation had gone awry. Along the hall’s edges, I noticed a small contingent of Pyreborn knights, and a wave of relief washed over me knowing they had arrived safely.

Under normal circumstances, entering another country would have required a thorough customs process, but it appeared that King Phillips had graciously waived these formalities for our arrival. Taking a moment to admire the familiar hall, adorned with stained glass and opulent chandeliers, I let go of the hands beside me. Ed and I stepped forward to greet King Phillips.

“Thank you for this heartfelt welcome, Your Majesty,” I said, striving to match

the occasion with the formality of my gratitude. “It is an honor to be received personally by the king of Celestia.”

“It is I who is honored, Lady Saint,” King Phillips responded warmly. “To witness your first official duty as the Saint is truly a blessing—in more ways than one.” He then gave me a wink and a knowing smile.

Yes, I’m sure it is, with all the international support the Faith Council was able to solicit for Celestia in its time of need, I mused. King Phillips appeared...well, like a king no longer burdened by grave concerns for his kingdom’s future. (Though I had to admit that I couldn’t help but miss what had been a slight and welcome tempering of his exuberance.)

“We shall strive to fulfill your every need during your short stay with us. Just say the word, and it shall be arranged,” King Phillips added.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I responded, lifting the hem of my skirts to perform a small yet respectful curtsy. As I endeavored to maintain the dignity expected of both my station and my status as a representative of the church, my gaze inadvertently met that of my father, who was standing just behind the king. His expression briefly darkened before he awkwardly looked away. Was he still troubled by the incident with Flora? Knowing him, his first instinct had likely been to blame himself. I understood he would harbor complex feelings about the matter, given that he was our only remaining parent, but I hoped he wouldn’t be too judgmental of himself.

My thoughts almost immediately drifted to my own shortcomings, and as I stood there pondering whether this was my fault for not addressing my issues with Flora sooner, the king spoke up again.

“Please, you all must be very tired from your journey. Allow us to show you to your quarters. Raymond, would you do the honors?”

Although this was a duty traditionally reserved for a chamberlain, he named my father for the task instead. He was clearly trying to be considerate. Though my father and I had met just weeks earlier, there was no guarantee of when we might meet again.

“Raymond?” King Phillips, prompted, noticing that his prime minister was responding in an unusually hesitant manner.

Finally, my father nodded and said in a low voice, “Yes, Your Majesty.” It was evident he had his reservations, but he couldn’t refuse a direct request from his king. “This way, Your Highnesses,” he added, motioning for us to follow. I gave him a nod and we filed out of the audience chamber.

As we walked down the castle corridor, I couldn’t help but think my father was maintaining his distance, walking far ahead of us, and the thought made me feel unexpectedly sad. The silence between us grew heavy, and unable to bear it any longer, I ventured cautiously, “How’s Flora, Father?” Almost immediately, I regretted my choice of inquiry, but the question was already hanging in the air.

Father glanced back at us. “She shows little interest in leaving her room, which is perhaps for the best, as she’s been confined to her chambers. She won’t speak to me. I’ve tried knocking, sliding letters under her door, but...nothing,” he confessed.

“I see,” I murmured softly. It seemed Flora was accepting her punishment with more resignation than I had anticipated. I had expected her to try to cajole a lesser punishment out of Father or perhaps to escalate matters further, but it appeared from her behavior that she was genuinely remorseful.

Though it’s Flora, so I shouldn’t be too quick to lower my guard...

The phrase “it’s always calmest before the storm” flashed through my mind, leading me to shrug internally. As I pondered what Flora might be thinking, my father’s gaze dropped to the floor. “Normally, I wouldn’t have respected her wishes and would have barged in to speak with her, but I’m...giving us both some space for now. I think we both need time to cool down and reflect. I apologize, Your Highness—you tasked me with guiding your sister, and I feel I’ve fallen short of that duty.”

“No, no, not at all. These things take time, I’m well aware!” I waved my hands in front of my chest dismissively. “And you’re a busy man, Father, I know that better than anyone!”

“No,” he interjected firmly and without pause. “I am done using my work as an excuse. If I fall back on that, then nothing has truly changed.” His fist clenched as he spoke.

He was committed to refusing to lecture Flora on her need to change unless he himself did the same—an attitude I both respected and expected from him. Abruptly, he halted and turned to face us directly. “I will facilitate Flora’s eventual reformation, but for now, I must beg for your patience,” he declared, his emerald eyes sparkling with a firm resolve, which dimmed as he bowed deeply.

Moved by his sincerity, my heart swelled and I nodded firmly. “Then you shall have it,” I said. “Just don’t be too hard on yourself, Father.”

“Thank you.”

Father smiled thinly at me, then resumed walking, now at much closer quarters to us. My eyes crinkled; it was a subtle change, but the fact that I could reach out and touch him now—oh, what a world of difference it made. Buffeted by joy and relief, I allowed my tense features to relax as we continued to our chambers. Though reluctant to part ways, I knew Father had other responsibilities to attend to, so we said our goodbyes as we reached the door.

I watched his retreating back until he rounded the corner, admiring his steely resolve as one befitting both a prime minister...and my father.

(Edward)

Lina and I took a short breather once we had unpacked our belongings. After commending our servants for a job well done, I dismissed them from our guest room, leaving Lina and me alone at last.

My heart soared. *How long has it been since I had some quality time with my beloved wife?* I caught my darling Lina’s eye, and she flashed me a smile, moved over to the chair by the window, and began to...embroider.

She worked quietly, eyes glued to her fingers as they placed stitch after stitch. When she noticed me watching, her eyes crinkled with a gentle apology; she explained that her task was urgent. Her explanation complete, she returned her attention to the delicate fabric.

Well, so much for quality time.

But that was all right. If Lina deemed her work of critical importance, then my

role was to support her with patience. Though my hands were idle, my eyes found solace in observing her. Watching Lina was never a chore—it was a privilege. Each moment spent admiring her revealed another layer of her beauty, each detail more enchanting than the last. Indeed, I could happily spend a lifetime just like this, discovering the endless facets of the woman I loved.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear—a simple, innocent gesture that meant nothing more than that she wished to keep it from obstructing her work. Yet, oh, how it stirred something deep within me. My breath caught, a soft sigh nearly slipping past my lips, but I quelled the sound—along with the sudden and overpowering urge to sweep her up from that chair, lay her down on the bed, and pin her beneath me. *She's holding a needle in her hand*, I reminded myself. *Are you trying to hurt her?*

And if I did cover her body with mine, what then? Would I be able to rein in my desire, to apologize and retreat if she protested? Or would that wilder, untamed part of me come to the fore?

No, I told myself, struggling to restrain the heat building within. I needed to distract myself, to divert my thoughts before her next innocent gesture shattered my self-control completely. The best course would be to distance myself, at least for now. Some time apart would cool my head and help me regain control.

I crossed the room and crouched beside her, bringing my gaze level with hers so that I might ask her sincerely. “Lina,” I began, my voice steady despite the turmoil inside, “would you mind if I went to pay Teo a visit?”

She glanced up at me and said, “Of course not,” so casually and so gently that it nearly undid me. I thanked her, to which she responded with a laugh sweeter than anything. “For what?” she asked, her eyes twinkling with amusement. I managed a smile, stood up, and made my way to the door, waving a final goodbye before closing it behind me.

Out in the corridor, I let out a heavy sigh. Walking away from Lina, from a rare moment alone together, was a sacrifice, but it was a necessary one. Better this than risking losing control, than letting my desire turn me into something I

wasn't.

I better actually go see Teo, I thought, knowing that a lie, even a small one, could chip away at the trust between Lina and me. And the thought of losing that trust—of losing her—was the most terrifying thing I could imagine.

The fear of falling from her favor stiffened my stride as I made my way to Teo's room. When I arrived, I knocked, but in the same motion, I twisted the knob and pushed the door open; I wasn't about to give him a chance to turn me away. "Teo, can I come—" The words died in my throat as I took in the sight before me. "—in..."

"You can, as you clearly already have," a half-naked Teo replied. His golden hair was still damp from a recent bath, and droplets of water clung to his skin. His hastily thrown-on shirt hung open, revealing a glimpse of his slender (but toned) chest. He sighed, running a hand through his wet hair, shaking his head slightly. "Perhaps next time, you'll consider that some doors are closed for a reason."

"It couldn't wait," I blurted out. "I had to see you."

"Excuse me?" He lifted a brow, a flicker of concern crossing his features. "What happened?" His eyes searched mine, silently questioning. *You've been in Celestia for all of half an hour—what could you have possibly mucked up already?* they asked in an accusing manner. He removed his fogged-up glasses, wiping them clean, and gestured for me to sit. I obeyed, taking the seat across from him as he slid his glasses back on. Crossing his arms, he asked again, "So? What happened?"

I hesitated, the words sticking in my throat, until they tumbled out all at once. "I... I nearly violated Lina."

My words dropped like a leaden weight into the room.

Teo gawked at me in disbelief. "Come again?"

I tried my best to explain myself, but the words came out jumbled and confused. "It was nothing—just a gesture, really. She moved to brush the hair from her face, but it...it undid me. I nearly lost control. Lina, she's...she's beautiful, and I was unprepared for the power of her allure in that moment. I'm

pathetic, I know.”

Teo said nothing.

“I must learn restraint,” I continued, my voice trembling. “What if I were to act on such impulses? That would be...that would be...”

“Absolutely fine, would it not?” Teo’s sharp voice cut through my self-recriminations. “How long do you intend on denying yourself what pleasures should have been shared on your wedding night?” There was a note of irritation in his tone, as if my fears were not just trivial, but insulting when compared to the magnitude of the situation he must have built up in his mind.

A flicker of frustration sparked within me. My concerns were not so easily dismissed! I was seriously, genuinely worried! As I brooded over his response, a sudden, startling thought hit me. “H-H-How do you know about what happened on our wedding night? I never told you about that...I never told anyone!” My voice rose in alarm, the realization twisting in my gut. “W-W-Were you watching us?!”

Teo heaved a soul-deep sigh. He stared up at the ceiling, then kneaded his forehead in frustration, ruffling his still-wet bangs. “I need not be physically present to deduce that the two of you have not crossed that particular threshold. The morning after such an event typically leaves the lady in a state of lethargy—at the very least, deprived of a proper night’s rest. Her Highness, on the morning following your wedding, appeared anything but fatigued.”

I nodded along, almost impressed despite the delicate nature of the conversation. Could one truly discern so much from mere secondhand observation? But as admiration flickered within me, a sense of violation smothered it out. This was our privacy he was trampling upon!

“Teo, I have nothing but respect for your keen eye for detail, but would you please refrain from using it to pry into my private life?” I asked sharply. “What happens between Lina and me is none of your business!”

He heaved a smaller sigh this time, then straightened up and looked attentively at me. “Allow me to remind you, Your Highness, that *you* came to *me*. And allow me to ask you this: Have you considered how Her Highness might feel about all this? Have you asked her? She is more sensitive than most, and I

would wager that your silence on the matter of your consummation, or rather, the lack thereof, has already planted seeds of anxiety in her heart far deeper than any action on your part ever could.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut.

“How much longer do you intend to take advantage of her kindness?” he continued. “If you believe her patience to be boundless, then you’ll have an unpleasant surprise when she eventually loses her faith in you.”

His mellifluous tone and wide grin belied the sharp and cutting nature of his words.

“But let us pray it doesn’t come to that,” he added, delivering a final, ominous blow.

Unable to refute his points, I felt my shoulders slump. An image of Lina filled my mind, her turning her back to me for the final time as she walked away. *Goodbye, Edward.* Her voice echoed with a painful clarity, and panic surged within me.

“She’s...going to leave me?” I whispered.

“Perhaps,” Theodore said coldly. “Oh, but of course, I only mean that she might do so emotionally. You two are bound in a political marriage, after all. Divorce is not a liberty allowed to either of you.”

“N-Not emotionally!” I cried out in alarm, my brow furrowing as fear churned violently within my chest. I clenched my fists, struggling to maintain my composure. The mere thought of her distancing herself from me, especially now that we had finally begun to grow closer, was too painful to bear.

Theodore gave a small, indifferent shrug. “Then you would be wise to heed my counsel. I am not asking you to stride at once to your chambers and take her right then and there. I am only requesting that you consider it with the gravity it deserves.”

I let out a pained grunt.

“As a matter of fact, why *are* you so reticent on the matter?” Theodore pressed.

The simplicity and directness of the question, coming as it did from my only childhood friend, froze me to the core. I tried to avert my gaze, but I found myself unable to look away from Teodore's chilling smile. A cold sweat broke out across my back, my instincts screaming at me: *Speak now, or you will never hear the end of this.*

"Teo." My voice was choked. "Promise me you won't laugh."

"I promise," he answered immediately, in a tone that was for once devoid of any mockery.

"The reason I haven't been able to bring myself to consummate my marriage with Lina is...I fear I would be unable to take her gently."

A crack formed in Teo's ever-present smile. "Excuse me?" The lines beside his eyes drew further taut, as if to say, *I knew you were an idiot, but this...*

He sighed deeply. "It is as I thought. You suffer from nothing short of abject cowardice. Poor Princess Carolina, my sympathy is with her—for she must have the patience of a *Saint* to deal with a man so utterly spineless."

I let out another groan.

The smile disappeared from Teo's face—a sure sign, as I came to recognize, that a serious lecture was imminent. "A woman's first time is often more inclined to be painful than not, and I have no doubt that Her Highness is far more aware of this than I," he said, his voice steady and unyielding. "Therefore—act. And soon—unless you want her heart to drift away."

A heavy sigh escaped me. Despite his stern tone, I knew that his advice came from a place of genuine concern. Teo had always been the one unafraid to take on the unenviable tasks, to say the harsh truths that needed to be heard.

I didn't want to hurt Carolina. I held that conviction close to my heart. But if the choice was between hurting her or losing her companionship forever, I wasn't sure I had the strength to stand by my convictions. I knew that she was the woman meant to stand by me for the rest of my life. I wanted her to know that her place was beside me, to feel safe and comfortable in letting me be her protector for all her days. And as I arrived at that conclusion, I finally felt a semblance of strength start to seep back into my voice. "All right," I said. "I'll

think on it—carefully.”

A satisfied glint appeared in Teo’s peridot eyes. He nodded, and I immediately began to consider my options. *At any rate, whatever happens—or doesn’t happen, as the case may be—should wait until the night of Noel at the very least. Lina is preoccupied with her ceremonial duties right now, and I don’t want to do anything that might disrupt her focus. Not that I intended to press her into anything she won’t be comfortable with, of course! I’m merely trying to anticipate the worst-case scenario, since this will be the first time for both of us.*

This was the kind of sad man I was. Even as I resolved to treasure Lina, my mind kept running with excuses, filling me with doubts. My cheeks flushed, my eyes darted nervously around the room, and I heard a derisive laugh escape Teo’s lips.

“You truly are a spineless coward, aren’t you, Your Highness?” he sighed, his tone dripping with amusement.

He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose, the glint of giddy impudence behind them unmistakable as he began fastening the buttons of his shirt.

(Carolina)

I devoted the days leading up to Noel to crafting Owen’s and Marisa’s gifts, working feverishly until the very eve of the celebration. Time slipped away unnoticed until, suddenly, the day of Noel was upon us.

As Marisa assisted me into my Saintly attire, a great yawn threatened to escape my lips. I stifled it, feeling my lack of sleep. My recent endeavors had left me little time for rest, yet there had been no alternative. The gifts had to be ready before the festivities in Malcosias. Of course, my foremost priority as the lighter of the sacred flame was the ceremony, but every moment beyond that was dedicated to completing presents for my most loyal companions.

Once dressed, it was time to attend to the other aspects of my appearance. I exhaled slowly, steadying my nerves, and settled before the dresser. Marisa, ever efficient, moved behind me with her tools in hand and began her work with practiced grace, moving deftly as she masked my tired features. The dark

circles beneath my eyes were the first to be banished, replaced by the softest hint of pink on my cheeks. The religiosity of the occasion called for simplicity—an emphasis upon purity over grandeur—yet Marisa’s touch was no less exquisite for its restraint.

“Your skill never fails to astonish me, Marisa,” I murmured, admiration coloring my voice as I gazed at my reflection and the transformation she had wrought.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” she replied simply, as she always did in response to my praise. But as she bobbed her head and tucked away her brushes and sponges, I noticed the faintest curve of a smile gracing her lips.

Now, that’s new. My eyes crinkled fondly at the thought. Indeed, I had wanted to believe that perhaps Marisa and I had been getting closer, and seeing tangible proof of that—why, what a most delightful surprise!

Next came my hair. Marisa’s hands moved over my ashen-pale strands with meticulous care. My mood buoyant, I took the opportunity to review the proceedings for tonight one last time. Given that the upcoming ceremony was to place me in close proximity to a live flame, Marisa coiled my hair into a bun, securing it with ornate hairpins adorned with the finest sapphires. Necklaces and earrings set with glittering peridot gleamed around my neck and dangled from my earlobes. The colors of purity and healing were present in every aspect of my ensemble, extending from my head all the way down to the very tips of my toes.

“And now, the final touch,” Marisa announced, spreading a delicate lace shawl before me. The veillike shawl, its diaphanous fineness reminiscent of a bridal garment, commanded my attention as I rose gracefully from my seat. She draped it over my shoulders, the gossamer fabric barely grazing my skin, so light that each movement sent its edges fluttering softly.

“You look beautiful, Your Highness,” Marisa declared.

“Thank you, Marisa,” I replied. “Though it must be said that I owe it all to your handiwork.” I tried to convey the extent of my sincerity through a gracious smile.

She humbly deflected my praise before reaching for the white scepter resting

on the nearby table. She held it out to me with reverent care. As I took hold of the high pontiff's gift, I released a slow, measured breath. The preparations were now complete. As I stood there, fully attired, the gravity of the occasion began to settle upon me—the weight of it pressed down, and a tinge of anxiety surged through me.

Oh, I just hope I'll be able to do the ceremony justice, I thought nervously. My grip on the scepter tightened as a wave of self-doubt washed over me. But then came another, more determined voice. *Cold feet now? Really, Carolina?* it chastised me. *It is no longer a matter of whether you can or cannot; nothing matters now but the force of your resolve.*

Just then, three sharp knocks echoed from the door. “Lina, it’s me,” came the voice of my beloved husband, causing my heart to flutter. “May I come in? If you’re still preparing, I can return later.”

“Of course you may enter!” I called, and at my acquiescence, Ed, Theodore, and Owen filed into the room. Plates of silver armor glinted upon their imposing forms—a sight I had seen countless times before, yet today, they appeared especially striking. It seemed they had taken extra care with their appearances—Theodore looked well-rested for once in his life, while Owen’s hair was actually styled. As for Ed...at first glance, he appeared unchanged, but upon closer inspection, I noticed a brand-new cape draped elegantly over his shoulders.

Ed strode towards me. “Hello, Lina.” His eyes swept over me from head to toe, a faint blush rising to his cheeks. “You look...stunning, my darling. You do.”

A quick elbow jab from Theodore brought Ed back to his usual self, his blush fading as the blond lord stepped up beside his prince, clearing his throat conspicuously.

“Indeed, what magnificent regalia,” Theodore observed. “Leaving the matter of its design to Her Majesty was a wise choice indeed.”

A sheepish smile tugged at my lips. “Thank you,” I mumbled, feeling a bit abashed by their praise. “So, how are the preparations coming along? Is everything in order?”

“Yes, everything is going quite smoothly,” Theodore assured me. “The brazier and platform for the sacred flame have been installed, and the carriages await

our departure.”

“All that remains is for us to proceed to the capital square,” Ed added.

Everything was progressing as planned. “Excellent,” I said, smiling warmly. *Which means the pressure is now on me to perform my duty well*, I mused, a thought that was decidedly not as warm. I turned my gaze out the window to hide my unease. Through the panes of glass, I could see that the streets of the royal capital were alive with vibrant energy, the air thick with the joyous anticipation of Noel. From this lofty perch, I could glimpse the dancing lights and bustling figures below, their merriment palpable even from afar.

The roads had all been prepared for the upcoming parade. The event was intended to raise public awareness of the newly established Faith Council and its Saint. Although the carriage ride was essentially little more than a scenic route through the town to reach the square, it was undoubtedly a parade, one that positioned me as the central figure to be celebrated...

“It’s almost time.” Ed’s voice gently pulled me from my thoughts. “Let’s go, Lina.”

As he glanced from the clock on the wall—one that signaled that it was an hour past noon—back to me, he extended a hand. Shifting the scepter, I reached out and entwined his firm, large fingers with mine, allowing him to help me to my feet. The warmth of his touch was enough to soothe the turmoil churning within me.

Now then, let’s bring this affair to fruition, shall we?

As our party exited the castle and approached the convoy of carriages awaiting us outside, I found myself filled with determination. I held on to that feeling as we settled ourselves comfortably, and then the convoy set off, with Pyreborn knights and paladins leading the way and guarding the rear.

As we rolled away from the castle and into the city streets, the pace of the parade slowed to a deliberate crawl, allowing the people to take in the sight of us. Theodore’s magical barrier hummed softly, a protective shield shimmering around us, while rows of knights and paladins lined the streets to ensure that no one could breach the convoy. I peeked out from the small carriage window, donning a kind smile and waving regally to the crowd that had gathered. That

simple gesture seemed to stir something deep within the people's hearts, and their cheers grew louder, their returning waves more fervent.

Sitting across from me, Teodore's lips quirked ever so slightly upwards. "Your popularity is truly frightening to behold, Lady Saint. The complete absence of mana-beast attacks last night seems to have solidified the citizenry's faith in your power." His attention remained fixed on the spectacle outside, his eyes unusually wide with a rare expression of surprise, as if even he hadn't anticipated such a turnout.

Celestia had been steadily embattled by mana-beasts ever since my departure, so the reprieve the people now enjoyed in my presence must have seemed like nothing short of a miracle. And yet...I couldn't quite bring myself to feel responsible for this outcome, given that it was one that had occurred without my conscious intent. The cheers, though warm, rang a little hollow in my ears because I felt that I was being praised for a deed I hadn't truly accomplished. Not to mention that it was my absence that had allowed the mana-beast scourge to take root in the first place...

Still, I accepted their accolades with grace. If their hearts were uplifted, then mine was too; my guilt was not theirs to bear. I swept my gaze over the joyful faces of the capital's populace, content to let their joyful cries wash over me...until my attention was caught by a glint of silver flashing in the crowd—like that of platinum-blond hair catching the light. Was Father here? It seemed unlikely. He was meant to be at King Phillip's side, the guest of honor at the sacred flame ceremony.

Then who else could it be? A stranger with hair of the same striking hue? I blinked a few times. The flash had been so brief, perhaps it was merely a trick of my mind. Pushing the thought aside, I refocused my smile and continued waving to the crowd.

In what felt like mere moments, the parade came to an end, and our convoy rolled to a stop in the central plaza. The sheer number of citizens who had gathered was nothing short of astonishing—a vast sea of people filling every inch of the square. Faced with the sight of so many standing shoulder to shoulder, I breathed out an awed "Goodness..." Before I could fully absorb the magnitude of it, the coachman opened the carriage door, signaling that it was

time to alight. Instantly, I felt the weight of countless gazes swivel to us, all eyes in the plaza fixing upon the arrival of the Saint. The gathered multitude fell silent.

Ed and Teodore stepped out first, ensuring the area was secure. After a moment, Ed turned and extended his arm to me. “Lina, here.”

I thanked him softly, and with my hand securely in his, I spurred my stiff limbs towards movement. I felt my face start to slacken, the warmth of his touch threatening to unravel the composure I so carefully maintained, but I steeled myself. I was the first Saint; I could not allow my personal feelings to tarnish the dignity of this sacred role, nor would I let a single mistake on my part cast a shadow over those who would follow.

With a poise befitting one who carried the hopes and expectations of Celestia’s people in my heart, I descended from the carriage gracefully. As my heels made contact with the pavement, the sharp clack echoed through the plaza, and the crowd erupted into a thunderous cheer. A sea of hands lifted, waving with fervent joy.

Pride swelled within me. To be greeted with such overwhelming love and genuine enthusiasm was beyond anything I could have ever hoped to experience. The tiniest bit of confidence crept into my being, and I held my head high. Though a bashful smile doggedly continued an attempt to break through my calm facade, I held it in check with every ounce of my will, preserving the solemnity of the moment.

Just then, Collett approached and took a knee before us. “Commander, I offer you this,” he intoned ceremoniously, presenting what appeared to be a wooden stake that flared slightly at one end—the torch, I realized.

Ed accepted the unlit brand, and with a swift motion he ignited the flared end with his fire magic. The torch sprang to life, a bright, crimson flame roaring at its tip—the very sparks with which I would ignite the sacred flame. While a torch lit by conventional means would have sufficed, we had all decided that, given our access to a fire mage, it would add to the spectacle of the moment to use magic. Magical fire, after all, carried an additional advantage of being safer, as it was able to be extinguished at a moment’s notice—provided the mage could

maintain control, of course...

I stole a glance at my husband; his gaze was locked on the flame, his face taut with concentration. It was clear that all his mental energy was focused on fine-tuning the fire's intensity. *You can do this, Ed!* I silently cheered him on.

After what felt like an eternity of painstaking adjustment, Ed finally seemed satisfied with the steadiness of the flame. He handed the torch to me with the utmost care, as though entrusting me with a perilous artifact. "Careful, Lina," he urged, his voice tinged with concern.

"I will be. Thank you." I passed the high pontiff's scepter to Owen for safekeeping and cautiously accepted the torch, the live flame dancing mere inches from my grasp. Ed's eyes were fixed on me, his anxiety palpable as he monitored my every move. Though his expression remained inscrutable, I could sense his protective instinct simmering just beneath the surface, ready to spring into action at the slightest sign of trouble. *I can handle a torch, darling,* I wanted to assure him.

Holding in the exasperated sigh that threatened to escape, I gave the tiniest shrug of my shoulders instead. I tightened my grip on the torch, grasping it firmly with both hands, and began my solitary journey towards the brazier—Ed and Teo wouldn't be accompanying me any further. But before I took my first step, I paused and glanced back.

"Ed, you'll be watching over me from right there, won't you?" I asked.

"Always," he replied with a confident nod, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

His response warmed my heart. I turned back and willed my trembling limbs forward. Each step was careful and deliberate as I approached the brazier. My head held high, my expression carefully composed, I felt the weight of the plaza's collective gaze upon me, their eyes tracing my every movement. The evening's chill licked at the flame, causing it to crackle softly, while the breeze teased the edges of my shawl, the sheer fabric brushing lightly against my skin.

The brazier loomed before me, an exquisite piece of craftsmanship—an ovular objet d'art, adorned with intricate carvings and imagery that spoke of its sacred purpose. The magical flame required no tinder or firewood; all I needed to do was touch the torch to the wick that lay within. The task sounded simple

enough, but as I stood before the vessel of the sacred flame for the first time, the reality of the moment overwhelmed me, and a wave of nervousness washed over me.

I expelled a breath to steady myself. Dipping my head with respect towards the holy object, I took one final step forward. The entire plaza seemed to hold its breath in a dead silence, the soft whisper of the wind the only sound to reach my ears. I bent slightly and gently tossed the torch into the brazier. Then, as we had rehearsed, I spun gracefully on my heel to face the crowd and spread my arms wide.

“In the name of the Heavenly Guardian, I, Saint Carolina, herald the season of Noel! May the light of our Lord’s blessings descend upon and favor every soul within the Kingdom of Celestia!” I proclaimed, my voice ringing out as powerfully as I could manage.

As the last syllable left my lips, a brilliant pillar of fire erupted behind me. The flame roared and crackled, sending a cascade of harmless sparks into the air. The mesmerizing crimson reflection danced in the pupils of all those present, and a wave of awe swept through the gathered masses. Cheers and applause erupted, the voice of every man, woman, and child filling the air with joyous celebration.

These little theatrics had clearly served their purpose—Ed had done a magnificent job of making the flame a true spectacle. I glanced back in the direction I had come, finding him standing there, his gaze fixed on the blazing fire behind me, his brow furrowed in intense concentration. *He truly is giving his all to control that flame*, I thought with a touch of amusement. A smile finally broke through my composed facade as I stepped away from the brazier. At that moment, Ed’s tense expression softened, and I saw him relax, his shoulders slumping ever so slightly in relief, no longer burdened by the need to keep the flame from leaping out at me.

I began to cross back to the waiting carriage, but I was almost immediately halted by the cries of the people:

“Lady Saint, we’re so grateful! Mana-beasts didn’t trouble us yesterday, all thanks to you! Bless you, truly!”

“Lady Saint, please, take these! They’re the best thing I’ve got in my shop, and folks can’t get enough of them!”

“Lady Saint, you’ll come back soon, right? Celestia’s always got a place for you!”

“O, blessed am I to have seen the Saint with my own eyes!”

The outpouring of gratitude and warm welcomes didn’t end there. I bit back tears. For someone like me—the Sanchez family disgrace—to be recognized and embraced so fully... Oh, the happiness that surged within me was beyond words.

Clinging to the joy that filled my heart, I turned to face the crowd, determined to etch this moment into my memory. The beaming smiles, the brilliant flame burning brightly, the sounds of their cheers and adulation...

Oh, how glad am I to have become the Saint.

(Flora)

On the morning of Noel, I rose with the sun. I draped a dark cloak over myself and pulled the hood low, carefully concealing my hair and any other telltale features.

I eased the door to my room open, the ancient hinges groaning in the stillness of the early morning. I slipped a hefty purse of coins into the guard’s hand—his eyes widened in surprise, but he said nothing as I quietly made my escape from the estate. Today was the day. The day I would rid the world of Carolina...or die in the attempt.

My father’s schedule was my ally; he was to go directly from the royal castle to the site of the festivities, and he was not slated to return until the early evening. This would give me ample time—time to bring my dark plan to fruition.

A twisted smile curled upon my lips as I moved through the quiet streets, the malice within me simmering like poison in my veins. *It ends today*, I thought, my mind twisting with malevolent purpose as I made my way towards the capital plaza. On the way, I purchased the instrument of her impending demise—a plain, unremarkable pistol—and concealed it within the folds of my robe,

ensuring it remained hidden as I navigated the streets, already beginning to fill with people.

Suddenly, a gust of wind caught my hood, blowing it back. “Ah!” I gasped, hastily pulling it back over my head, my heart lurching with fear. *No one saw that, right?* My eyes darted around, scanning the crowd for any sign that someone had noticed, when abruptly, a wave of cheers erupted.

What is happening? I wondered, my pulse quickening as I searched for the source of the commotion. My gaze settled on an opulent carriage rolling by, its design oddly familiar. A chill crept down my spine as I squinted, trying to place the nagging feeling. *That isn’t...Carolina’s carriage, is it?* From my distant vantage, I could make out nothing more than a gray smear in the carriage window, but that shade—that cursed, ashen shade—I would recognize it anywhere. *This is the parade, isn’t it?* The procession meant to present the people with their new Saint. They were cheering because they were seeing their beloved Saint Carolina up close.

The sight made me sick to my stomach. Every cry of “Lady Saint!” echoed in my ears, each one amplifying the bitter disgust that churned within me. Carolina basked in their adulation as if it were her birthright, her due—every last bit of it. My teeth creaked against each other. Violence, passion, and darkness roiled within me.

But no, it isn’t time yet, I reminded myself, forcing the seething emotions back down. *Enjoy it while you can, Carolina. We’ll see who’s laughing in the end. This will be the first and last time you ever taste such universal adoration.*

My fingers brushed dangerously close to the trigger of the pistol hidden beneath my cloak. *Patience, Flora. Your moment will come.* Repeating this like a mantra, I managed to tear my gaze away from the revolting spectacle and continue to push through the crowd towards the plaza.

Soon the parade came to an end, and Carolina, along with her Faith Council, ignited the sacred flame. The towering pillar of fire licked at the very heavens. As the crowd around me erupted in warm, joyous cheers, within me was a frozen lump of nerves. This was it—my only chance. With the Saint having completed her sacred duty, surely the knights guarding her would relax, if only

for a moment. If I was going to strike, it had to be now.

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight of the moment press down on me. Carolina was passing right by me, close enough that a shot from this range would be impossible to miss. My finger found the trigger of the gun. All I had to do was pull the weapon out, aim, and squeeze my finger—a task so simple, even a child could do it.

So simple, even a child could do it...! And yet...not...me?

My hand remained frozen by my side, buried in the folds of my robe, as if it had turned to stone. I tugged and pulled; it quivered and shook, but my body refused to obey.

Why?

Was this not it? The moment I had spent days, weeks...anticipating, savoring, relishing the taste of it as if it were already on the tip of my tongue? So why now, when I was on the brink of executing my plan, did I...hesitate?

I despised her. Loathed her with every fiber of my being, didn't I? Yet the act of ridding this world of her would be where I drew the line?

When had I grown so *weak*?

My body didn't obey my commands. I stood as still as stone, glaring at Carolina as she passed by. The way she held her head high, the way that serene smile graced her lips, the way she accepted the people's cheers without a hint of arrogance or self-importance...

It all reminded me of someone I had loved with all of my heart.

Hatred gripped one side of my soul, while love clung to the other. I felt as though I were being torn apart from within, until a realization struck me.

Ah, I see. The truth pierced through me, shattering the walls I had built around it: I couldn't bring myself to harm her—not when she looked so much like Mother.

The heart-wrenching truth, the one I had spent my entire life fleeing, had finally caught up with me. It had cornered me, leaving no route for escape except the path that led right through the center of it...that painful path known

as acceptance.

A wry smile floated up to my lips. As the hatred I harbored for my sister crumbled, so too did the veil that had clouded my vision. For the first time in sixteen long, agonizing years, I saw clearly, I *thought* clearly. *To imagine that it would take me until the very end to realize the folly of my ways*, I mused with a hint of self-deprecation. An eerie calm settled over me, as though I were observing myself from afar, watching as the truth unfurled before me.

At my mother's funeral, sorrow and regret had consumed me. With no one to turn to, no shoulder to cry on, the weight of that sorrow had been too much for my young heart to bear. In desperation, I had twisted that sadness into hatred. In Carolina, I had found a perfect target, an ideal outlet—a sister towards whom I could channel all of these dark, overwhelming emotions so that I could stave off madness. Now I recognized the reprehensibility of my actions, yet I also understood that without them, I might have shattered completely.

It was a means of self-preservation, I realized with detached clarity. In my weakness, I had deceived everyone, including myself. *How pathetic I was, how utterly deplorable*, I lamented. My mind might have been sharp, my body resilient, but the heart...the heart was so unbearably weak.

All the petty acts of revenge I had inflicted upon Carolina came flooding back in a rush of shame and self-loathing. I had committed countless sins, each indefensible, and as the weight of these realizations mounted, my mind reached an inevitable conclusion, one that settled with the finality of a writ of execution.

I must be punished for my sins.

At this point, did I...even deserve to live? Was there any meaning left in my life? I had very nearly attempted to kill my own flesh and blood. It was only an attempt, yes, but the very fact that I had been swayed so close to such an act spoke volumes about my own irredeemability.

"I... I must die." The roars of the crowd drowned out the sound of my soft, bone-chilling words, but the thought echoed endlessly in my mind.

My gaze drifted back towards Carolina. By now, she had long returned to the safety of her knights. I felt my grip on the pistol tighten. *Here is the means to*

achieve my penitence, I thought blankly. Spinning on my heel, I began to weave my way through the throng of people. As I pushed through the crowded confines of the plaza, I passed by the dais upon which the guest of honor was seated—and I noticed my father.

Did our eyes meet? I couldn't be sure, jostled as I was by the sea of bodies around me.

I'll pretend they didn't. Even if he had seen me, it was impossible that he could have recognized this hooded figure as his daughter. No, it didn't matter. Clinging to that hastily constructed and slipshod conclusion, I tugged at the edges of my hood and quickened my pace.

I arrived at a deserted alleyway. With a numb sense of detachment, I pulled the pistol from beneath my cloak, relieved that *now* my body was willing to obey. No fear of death remained, only the crushing weight of guilt which I was desperate to escape. Without hesitation, my hand rose before me. The barrel of the gun pressed against my temple like a cold kiss of death.

In that moment, a profound sense of relief washed over me, as if the entire tragedy of my life was drawing to a close, and now I could finally find catharsis, a release from the torment that had consumed me for sixteen long years.

"I'm sorry, Carolina," I whispered through numb lips. "And Father, for everything I've done. Forgive me, but I'm going to Mother now."

The words spilled from me like a final confession. My eyes fluttered closed; I was at peace with the world. My finger found the trigger, gently squeezed, and...

Footsteps pounded towards me.

"Flora?! What are you doing?! Drop the gun. Drop it now!" a familiar voice thundered. The command startled me, making me hesitate for just a moment—but that moment was all he needed. The gun was knocked from my hand, clattering to the ground with a sharp metallic sound.

My eyes snapped open. "F-Father? What are you doing here? How...?"

"That is my question to you!" he roared back. "How did you escape your room? You had guards—what happened to the guards?!"

It was the first time I had ever seen him show such raw emotion, and it was neither disappointment nor sadness—but pure, unadulterated fury. His anger wasn't about my defiance of his orders or the potential tragedy he had just thwarted, but it seemed rooted in his utter and apparent disbelief at the sheer stupidity of my actions.

I recoiled at this new, unfamiliar side of him, my usual composure slipping away. Normally, I would have brushed him off with a smile and a few well-crafted lies, but this...

“No, it doesn't matter how you managed to escape!” he bellowed, jolting me from my thoughts. “What were you doing just now? Answer me!”

His tone was powerful, authoritative, and almost instinctively, I found myself speaking the truth.

“The world...” My voice was barely above a whisper. “The world doesn't need someone like me. The only way for me to atone for my crimes against Carolina...is death.”

I couldn't summon the strength to temper my words with wit or soften my tone with grace. Father's eyes widened, his fury momentarily replaced with shock. “You wish...to atone?” he asked, his voice now low, almost disbelieving. “You recognize that your actions against Carolina were unjust?”

Ah. Of course. He couldn't have known about my change of heart. The revelation seemed to physically knock the wind out of him. I lowered my gaze, unable to bear the sight of his thunderstruck expression. Instead I stared down at the grimy cobblestones beneath my feet. “Yes,” I said simply. “I wouldn't blame you if you were to believe this to be another one of my lies, but I have come to see the truth of things. My actions... They were nothing more than the desperate outbursts of a girl too lost in her own emotions to know any better.”

“I see,” he murmured, his voice almost lost to the wind. “No... No, I believe you, daughter. But know this—” He took a step forward, the heel of his boot tapping sharply on the pavement. “You will not atone for this sin by seeking death. Your atonement will come through living...and facing what you've done.”

A pair of hands descended upon my shoulders, grasping them tight. I looked up into my father's face—his expression was as serious as I had ever seen it.

The emerald glint in his eyes pierced through me, reaching the very core of my being, forcing me to take a step back.

But this alley had no escape. My back met cold, hard brick...

“Live?” I stammered. “I... I can’t. I tried to kill Carolina today, you know? I stopped myself just short of the act, but I was there, in the plaza, ready, waiting...”

“You were... *What?!?*”

Horror, shock, and disgust flashed across his face.

This confession should have been enough to convince him that I was beyond redemption. He and I were too much alike for love to ever grow between us. No doubt he favored Carolina, who took after Mother—my sister was everything I was not. After what I had done, I had forfeited any right to exist.

“Let me go, Father.” My voice cracked, choked with emotion. “Leave me to my fate.”

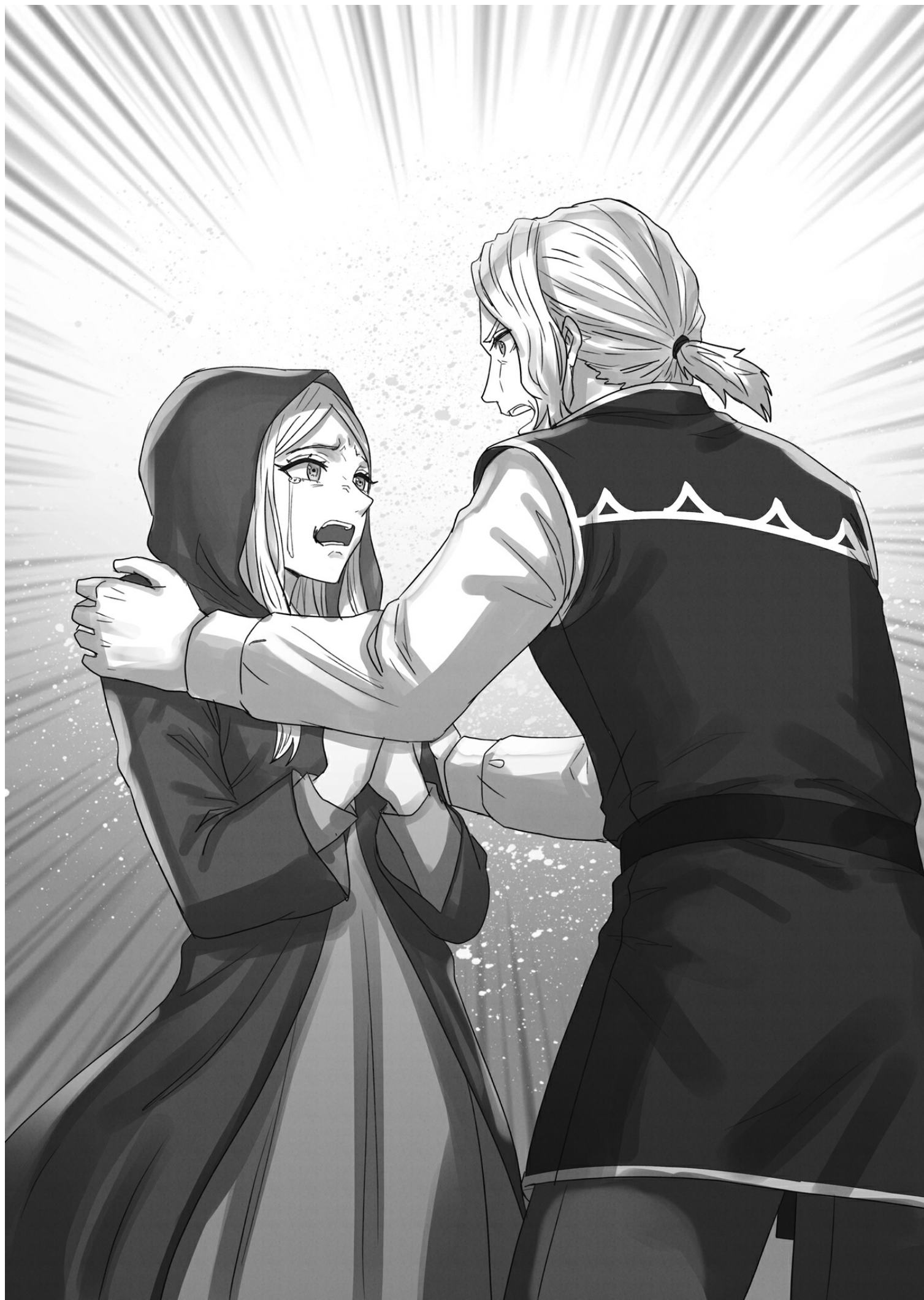
I placed my hands on his, trying to pry them away, but his grip was unyielding, like iron.

“You have committed a crime that, by all rights, should see you facing a public beheading. There is no denying that,” Father said.

Good, then get on with it—!

“But I refuse to be the one who sends you to your death! I am not strong enough to condemn my own flesh and blood to the block. Hear me, Flora—even if the entire world were to demand your life, I would stand between you and their fury. I will protect you from everyone, even if it costs me everything!”

What? His words echoed in my ears, louder than the pounding of my heart. At that moment, he wasn’t Duke Sanchez or prime minister of Celestia—he was just a father, desperate to keep his daughter alive. His plea, so raw and frantic, broke something inside me. The flood of tears that followed felt like they had been held back for a lifetime.



My mask of the perfect lady had been riddled with cracks for a good long while, but now a fragment of it fell away for the first time.

“I... You’d protect me?” I choked out between sobs, my voice trembling. “Even after everything I’ve done?”

“What you’ve done is no longer the issue at hand!” His voice, firm yet tempered with a father’s love, cut through my doubts like a blade. “You must *live*, my dear girl! If not for you, then for me. You cannot die—not when I have yet to fulfill my duty of providing you with a life of joy, a life free from fear!”

With that, he pulled me into an embrace. It was the first time I’d truly felt my father’s warmth, and the tears poured forth in a greater torrent than they ever had before. We stayed that way, locked in each other’s arms, as the minutes stretched into what felt like an eternity, maybe longer. My sobs gradually quieted, the storm inside me finally beginning to abate. Throughout it all, he remained still, holding me with a patience I’d never known he possessed, as if he were willing my pain to pass.

When the last of my tears had ebbed, he gently pulled away, his thumb tenderly brushing the wetness from my cheeks. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cry like that before,” he murmured, a sad smile tugging at his lips as he handed me his handkerchief. I accepted it without a word, dabbing at my eyes while he awkwardly stroked my hair.

“We will go to Carolina and apologize together,” Father continued, his voice steady. “This burden is as much mine to bear as it is yours. I wasn’t there for you when your mother passed. That is my greatest and most unforgivable mistake.” He paused, his face tightening into a frown. “I should have held you then, like I’m holding you now.”

I gently shook my head. “No, Father, you don’t need to blame yourself. What I have done is entirely my responsibility.”

“I don’t deserve that kind of grace,” he replied softly. “Not when I ignored all of your mother’s warnings. I had so many chances to prevent this tragedy, but I failed you each time.” His gaze locked with mine, filled with a despairing plea. “Can you ever forgive me, my daughter?”

His resolve was unshakable; I could see it in every line of his face. Nothing I could say would change his mind. It pained me to draw him into the consequences of my actions, but denying him his culpability—and a chance to atone for it—would it not only deepen his sorrow?

Yes, Flora, remember this pain, for it is part of your penance. And remember what it feels like to have someone share the burden of your mistakes—for that is what it means to be loved.

“Very well, Father,” I said quietly. “If that is what you wish, let us atone together.”

“It is,” he affirmed with a faint smile. He gave my head another gentle caress before casting his gaze towards the royal castle looming over the city. “We will go to her immediately. Carolina is set to depart for Noir tomorrow. As the victim in all this, she must decide how we are to make amends.” He extended his hand towards me. “Let us go.”

My eyes began to well up once more. I knew that any sound I made would turn into fresh tears, so I simply nodded in silence and placed my hand in his.

Chapter Six

After the ceremony of the sacred flame had concluded, we found ourselves gathered once more within the privacy of my guest chambers for a debrief. Ed, Theodore, and I addressed the finer details of the proceedings that could have been sharpened, debated potential improvements, and adjusted our plans accordingly. Despite our critiques, however, it was certainly the case that the ceremony had been executed as well as anyone could hope for a first attempt. Our list of amendments was brief, our labors light, all thanks to the meticulous preparations we had seen to in the days prior and the competence of the trustworthy individuals who surrounded us. From the steadfast knights who had held the eager crowds at bay to the diligent clergymen who had kept everything moving smoothly—I owed them all my sincerest gratitude.

But it wouldn't do to just thank them all in my thoughts, would it? I reached for another cup of Marisa's delightful tea, resolved to extend my appreciation in a more formal manner to all those who had been involved, when a firm knock echoed from the door. A voice, muffled but unmistakable, called out:

"Carolina, it's me. And Flora, as well. May we enter? We wish to speak with you."

Father? My heart quickened at the sound. His tone seemed strained, and that alone was enough to set me on edge. *And wait, did he say Flora is with him as well?* What a curious turn of events! My mind immediately leaped to darker possibilities—that it was some sort of ploy, perhaps a trap—but before I could give my imagination free rein, Theodore's voice sliced right through the clamor of my thoughts.

"Your Highness, I believe it prudent to allow them entrance. I no longer sense ill intent—not like I did this morning."

He seemed almost eager to see this meeting come to pass, rising swiftly from his chair and stepping aside with grace. He gestured to Marisa, who hurriedly cleared his cup from the table.

“Wait, what do you mean, ‘this morning’?” I demanded, the shock plain on my face. “What did you sense this morning?”

A faint smile played at his lips as he bowed his head. “You shall know soon enough, Your Highness.”

Well, I wasn’t sure what else I expected, to be honest. Returning Theodore’s cryptic remark with only a polite smile, I looked to my husband sitting next to me. “What do you think, dear?”

Ed’s brow furrowed slightly as he spoke, a touch of disdain threading through his words. “Frankly, I don’t believe your sister deserves even a moment of your time. But the choice is yours to make. Leave no regrets, my dear.”

His voice carried a quiet sincerity, and his gaze held a steady warmth that I found to be reassuring. I took in his palpable show of support and turned my thoughts inward once more. *I’m admittedly a little suspicious of Flora’s sudden appearance, but if Theodore is confident in her intentions, perhaps it would be fine to hear them out? And besides, I’m not without protection—Ed and the others will see to my safety if need be.*

More than anything, I found myself longing for closure. It was time to settle matters with my past. I refused to continue to carry this burden with me, lurking in the corners of my mind. Today, I would face it. Today, I would be free.

Once my resolve had crystallized with that rousing thought, I thanked Ed softly and straightened my posture. I allowed a hint of steel to seep into my voice as I called out, “Enter.”

The door swung open with immediate and surprising force, and as my gaze fell upon the figures entering the room, I could not suppress a sharp intake of breath. My body stiffened, frozen in place.

What in the world was Flora wearing? Alarm prickled at the edges of my awareness as I took in the sight before me. My sister stood there, draped in a peculiar and uncharacteristically plain robe that clashed violently with the dignified presence of my father, who still wore his full ceremonial attire. Was Flora attempting to start some ridiculous new fashion, or was this something else entirely?

My mind raced with questions as the pair of them approached. They offered their apologies for the sudden intrusion before settling into the seats Theodore had indicated. My eyes never left them, tracing their every movement with careful scrutiny.

As I gazed at them seated across from me, a slow tilt of my head betrayed my growing perplexity. Something was undeniably amiss with Flora. She neither wore her usual saccharine smile glued to her face, nor did she appear poised for another childish outburst. If I didn't know any better, I might have thought she looked...repentant. Her shoulders were slumped ever so slightly, her eyes downcast and fixed upon the floor at her feet. But that couldn't be, could it? Flora was an excellent actor. She had fooled many before with various postures of feigned remorse, and I had little doubt she was capable of doing it again. Yet what purpose would there be in such a charade now? Every soul in this room had seen her for what she truly was. What, then, could she hope to gain by donning this mask of penitence?

I searched fruitlessly for an answer, my mind fumbling to make sense of her strange behavior. If this posture was an authentic one, it was a side of her that I was seeing for the very first time.

"So, um," I began, my voice faltering slightly as I pushed past the awkward tension. "What did you wish to speak with me about?" Unable to pin down the root of my unease, I chose to cut directly to the heart of the matter.

Father and Flora looked at each other. A silent conversation flickered between them. Then, with a solemnity I did not expect, they turned their eyes back to me. It was Flora who spoke first.

"Carolina. We've come today...to apologize."

I blinked, incredulity creeping into my tone as I repeated her words. "Come...to apologize?" *Did I truly just hear her right?*

Flora nodded swiftly. "You may find it difficult to believe, sister, but it is the truth."

"Apologize for what, exactly?" I asked.

"For all the wrongs I've done unto you. For every bit of cruelty, and...for my

intention to end your life this morning.”

Her tone was calm and eerily steady. There was no tremor in her voice, no hesitation as she confessed to the gravity of her—

Wait—what?! Flora wanted to...kill me?! When? And she intended to do so this morning? Is this what Theodore was talking about?!

Her words ricocheted against the walls of my mind for a brief while, before the admission...settled at the bottom of my soul with a surprising rightness. I was shocked by the confession, yes. Horrified to learn that my own sister had truly desired to take my life, and yet...the acute emotions one might expect me to feel simply didn't take root. Perhaps this was a consequence of having endured one too many such threats over the past several months.

As I sat there, grappling with how strangely numb I'd become to the idea of assassination, Flora stood up from her seat and, to my shock, knelt before me. “For all this time, I couldn't bear the weight of our mother's death,” she began, her voice trembling, “and I used you as a vessel for my anger, my grief. For that, I am sorry. Truly, deeply sorry. I know an apology cannot erase the years of hurt I have caused, but I...needed to say it nonetheless.”

She cast aside every ounce of her pride, the carefully crafted mask of the perfect lady she had worn for so long, and bowed deeply—so deeply that strands of her platinum-blond hair pooled on the floor before her. I gazed down at her in stunned silence, my heart caught between two opposing forces. The discomfort of seeing my sister, once so haughty, now humbling herself before me mingled with the overwhelming sense of release that her words stirred within my soul. It was a clash of emotions that left my mind swimming and my head throbbing. Almost unconsciously, I lifted a hand to my temple, as though pressing it there could somehow hold back the chaos in my head. Just then, my father, who had remained silent until now, shifted in his seat. His voice, when it came, was heavy with regret.

“I, too, owe you an apology, Carolina. I'm deeply sorry, my daughter.”

With a grave solemnity, he stood and joined Flora, bowing his head low beside her.

“Father, you too...?” I tried to protest. But my father remained undeterred,

resolute in his confession.

“I am to blame for all of this,” he declared with a grim certainty. “When your mother passed, I left Flora to fend for herself. No—worse, I abandoned her to grieve alone. Had I acted with any semblance of a father’s care, had I been there when she needed me... Everything might have been different.”

Different. The word echoed within me, conjuring images of a world that seemed impossibly exotic—a world in which Flora and I might have been sisters who loved and cared for one another. It was a world I could scarcely envision, but before I could spend too much effort on the attempt, another murmured apology tumbled from my father’s lips, pulling me back to the present.

As I faced the two figures kneeling before me, a frown tugged at the corners of my mouth. For all the gravity of their confessions, for all the remorse they’d laid bare, neither one had uttered a single plea for my forgiveness. It wasn’t as though I would have granted it freely, and certainly not simply because they asked. But the fact that they hadn’t even tried—it gnawed at something deep within me. Did they truly believe I would wish to hold this grudge forever, to let it fester and bind all three of us in its chains?

At last, Flora timidly lifted her head, her gaze tentatively meeting mine. “Carolina,” she began, her voice trembling with hesitation. “I know I have no right to make requests of you, but...please, sister—allow me the chance to atone for my sins. I want to live—truly live—without the weight of my misdeeds crushing me, haunting my every step. If you command me to confess my wrongdoings to the public, I will do so gladly. If you wish to strip me of my title, I will leave this house today. Anything to make amends, my sister. I beg you.”

And just like that, Flora had placed her very fate in my hands. I glanced towards Father; his expression mirrored Flora’s—clearly, he wished to join her in atonement. The moment I had once dreamed of, the perfect opportunity for revenge, had fallen neatly into my lap. But instead of reveling in the triumph I had imagined, a heavy weight settled deep within my stomach, dragging my heart down with it.

In truth, I hadn’t the faintest idea of what to do. I didn’t have any desire to inflict pain upon Flora, nor did I wish to cause Father undue suffering. Yet the

thought of simply accepting their apologies and pretending that the past sixteen years didn't weigh heavily on my heart didn't sit well with me either. Particularly when it came to Flora. *Especially* if her confession was true—that she had indeed set out to end my life this very morning.

As these thoughts warred within me, it was Teodore, standing vigilant by the wall, who saw fit to offer me an idea. “Your Highness, forgive the interruption, but if I may offer a word of advice. Punishment need not come in the form of *direct* suffering. Prescribing unto someone, say, a task that stretches the limits of what is fair and reasonable, may serve the same purpose.”

A task...unreasonable enough to be considered a punishment? His smile was as knife-thin as ever, but his words were wise.

Yes, perhaps I could craft a sentence that would test Flora and Father—a challenge they would struggle to meet, yet one that would offer them a chance to redeem themselves.

With my decision made, I met their eyes, my voice steady and deliberate. “If it is my forgiveness you seek, then dedicate yourselves to Celestia’s revival. Give your hearts, your toil, to rebuild what was lost.”

Their jaws fell open ever so slightly, and surprise flickered across their faces as they blinked, clearly taken aback by the nature of the punishment I had laid upon them. It seemed my interpretation of retribution was far more generous than they had anticipated. I had to bite back a smile, even a soft laugh, at the sight of Celestia’s perfect lady and stoic prime minister, caught so off guard in such an unseemly manner.

“What methods you choose, I leave to your discretion,” I continued, my tone measured yet firm. “Through your cunning, your strength, you must ensure that my homeland—our mother’s homeland—flourishes once more. Only then will you achieve the atonement you seek.”

Between Flora’s vast array of talents and Father’s wealth of experience, I had no doubt that they could accomplish this together. Though, truth be told, I suspected that even without my command, Father would have devoted the rest of his days to Celestia’s revival. The thought of his steadfast diligence and unwavering kindness warmed my heart, easing some of the tension that had

constricted it within my breast.

Flora leaned forward slightly, her voice taut with uncertainty. “And that will...help you reclaim your peace of mind?” she asked, eyes searching mine. Her genuine uncertainty and trepidation pricked at my heart in a way that I hadn’t anticipated.

The notion that Flora would place my peace—her sister’s peace—above even the welfare of her country was...startling. *Could it be true, then? Has she truly changed?* Faced with this first glimmer of her kindness, however small, I felt something within me soften. I couldn’t meet her gaze any longer, and my eyes fell away from hers.

“I...don’t know,” I confessed, my voice quieter than before. “But I didn’t choose this punishment in order to help me reclaim my peace.”

“Then...what is it for?” Flora asked.

A sad smile crept onto my lips as I lifted my gaze once more. “It’s meant to give me time, Flora. Time to come to terms with everything. To allow myself the space to heal... And perhaps, in time, to find it within me to forgive you and Father.” I shook my head. “No—just you.”

A soft gasp escaped her lips. “What...?” she whispered, eyes widening in bewilderment.

“Though there’s no guarantee that I’ll find what I’m searching for,” I amended hastily. *Your forgiveness isn’t assured, sister. Not just yet.*

But I pray that I may find that grace within me one day.

Flora blinked herself free from her stupor, her voice gaining strength as she spoke: “That’s all right. No—it’s more than all right.” She drew in a steady breath, a newfound resolve filling her eyes. “Thank you, Carolina. As you decree, I shall devote myself, heart and soul, to Celestia’s restoration and revival.”

With a single swift and graceful motion, she straightened herself. Now standing tall, Flora gazed down at me with a smile that radiated a profound relief, though one stained with an unspoken sadness. It was a look I recognized well, one of quiet desolation and loneliness. It was the same look Father had

worn when he'd bid me farewell as I departed for Malcosias that very first time.

Father, too, raised his head. He rose to stand beside Flora, shoulders squared and head held high. "I, too, accept this punishment," he declared, his voice solemn and resolute. "Alongside Flora, I will see to it that Celestia—your mother's homeland as well as your own—is protected and restored."

I have no doubt that you will, Father. Though my mind couldn't help but inject a dry note of concern: *But I do fear you may overexert yourself. Well, at least King Phillips will be there to intervene.* From what I knew of him, His Majesty wouldn't be one to let my father work himself to collapse.

I gently nodded. "Thank you both. I expect nothing less than greatness," I concluded with a quiet resolve. They responded with firm nods of affirmation, and a silent pact formed between us. Then, as swiftly as the meeting had begun, it came to an end. Both Father and Flora excused themselves, remarking on my early start the next day, and they quietly withdrew from the room.

How...considerate of them to be mindful of my schedule. A part of me longed for them to stay a little longer. There was so much unsaid between us. Yet perhaps there truly wasn't time for such a personal indulgence. My duties were pressing, and who was I to assume that my family's time wasn't equally scarce?

Resigning myself to the relative brevity of our exchange, I listened as their footsteps faded down the corridor; the sound was oddly soothing. Abruptly, the taut thread holding me together snapped, and I let out a deep, shaky breath. Ed slipped his arm around my waist and gave me an understanding look. I, taking that as an invitation, nestled against him, finding comfort in his warmth, his solid presence. *So steady...so safe...* My face relaxed naturally into contentment as his hand gently stroked my hair.

"I admire you, Lina," he remarked softly. "I could never show such mercy to my enemies."

"Likewise," Theodore added from his place by the wall. "I would have assigned them a task so bleak, so impossible, they'd never have had the opportunity to see the light of day again."

They both shrugged with casual acceptance of my forbearance, and I couldn't help but cast a glance towards Marisa and Owen. Their demeanors radiated

quiet approval, and they nodded their heads in a manner which echoed Ed's and Teo's assessment of my choices.

Well, perhaps my choice barely qualified as a punishment, considering the severity and duration of the wrongs that had been committed against me. But still...

"This compassion...this part of me wouldn't have existed without all of you," I explained, my voice gentle as I addressed the room. "It's your kindness, your warmth, that has helped me find the strength and desire to forgive." My hand rested over my heart as I offered all of them a sincere smile. "Thank you all, truly."

The room erupted into a chorus of heartfelt words, each voice filling both the space and my heart with sentiments of "It's we who should thank you!" and similar affirmations. Though my smile remained tinged with wry amusement, the tenderness in every gaze fixed upon me filled the room with an undeniable benevolence for which I found myself deeply grateful.

(Flora)

The air in the carriage was light as Father and I made our way home from the royal castle. As we rolled through the city streets, the capital plaza came into view, and the pace of the carriage slowed just enough for me to take in the scene. Though the sacred flame ceremony had long since concluded, the plaza still teemed with people. The vast space echoed with jubilant voices praising the Saint, and radiant smiles danced upon every face. The joy in the air was palpable, and it filled me with an unexpected surge of elation and awe.

The sight of genuine joy was one I might have overlooked only a few months ago—something I would have taken for granted without a second thought. But now, it struck me as the most precious, the most fleeting thing in the world. These were ordinary people, living ordinary lives. It took so little to bring happiness into their hearts, and yet, I had come to understand just how much labor and care were required to nurture even that modest pleasure.

Father had toiled tirelessly to uphold the peace of this kingdom, his life devoted to the preservation of this fragile happiness; Carolina had (unwittingly)

dedicated herself to the well-being of the people as well. But what had I done? What part had I played in bringing forth this joy?

Nothing. The thought slipped into my mind with the softness of a whisper, but its weight settled heavily upon me. My ambitions had been petty, my goals nothing more than narrow-minded attempts at securing my own position, or at best, the position of our family's duchy. Never once had I paused to consider what I might do to help the kingdom and her people—those very souls whose gladness now radiated so brightly before me.

What a foolish waste of a life I had lived. All my talent, all the connections I had amassed, and for what? To tear down a single person who had never deserved my wrath. I could have used those gifts for something far greater. Compared to my accomplished father and my literal Saint of a sister, I was...nothing. The thought filled me with shame, and I dropped my gaze onto my lap.

I clenched my fists tightly, feeling the uncomfortable mix of mortification and inferiority churning within me. *This is what you get for never moving on from Mother's death*, I chided myself, a bitter, self-deprecating smile curling at the corners of my lips.

I forced my gaze upwards once more, watching the plaza slowly pass by. My eyes lingered on the sight of those jubilant faces, their laughter and lighthearted movements filling the square. I burned the image into my mind, committing every smile, every moment of happiness to memory. *This*, I swore to myself, *this is the joy you shall endeavor to bring about, Flora Sanchez*. In that moment, I made a vow: this same joy that these people felt on this sacred day, I would strive to provide for them every other day going forward. No longer would I squander my life in selfish pursuits. I would dedicate myself to the well-being of the people.

With renewed resolve, I turned my gaze towards my father. "I have a request, if I may, Father."

He tilted his head slightly, a trace of confusion flickering in his eyes at the shift in my tone. "What is it, my daughter?"

I met his calm gaze, my own eyes hardened in determination. "To aid me in

atoning for my wrongs against Carolina, and to help me achieve my own goals—I wish to be named successor to you as duchess and prime minister.”

His eyes widened, his entire body going still as he absorbed the weight of my words. I had anticipated his surprise. After all, my request was bold—perhaps even reckless—especially coming from me in such sudden fashion. In the male-dominated hierarchy of Celestian society, women rarely occupied positions of power. I knew that I would be better able to inherit the title of duchess than the office of prime minister. That lofty goal wouldn’t be as easily achieved—Celestia had never seen a female prime minister in all its long history. I would be the first, but were I to climb to this height, I would not do so alone. It would only be with Father by my side that I even stood a chance of accomplishing my aims.

“I understand fully the difficulties to which I’m committing myself,” I replied, my voice steady and unwavering. “But I want to protect them—the people of Celestia. Their smiles, their way of life—just as you and Carolina have done. I want to serve our kingdom. And,” I added, “I wish to atone for my sins!”

I held his gaze with unwavering resolve, determined to show him that this was not some impulsive whim, but a carefully considered decision. Despite the many talents I possessed, I knew this path would not be easy. But I had chosen it with a clear mind and a willing heart.

The silence stretched between us, our eyes locked in a wordless contest. The seconds ticked by—one heartbeat, then another. My gaze never faltered, my conviction never wavered. Finally, Father looked away, furrowing his brow as he mulled over my words. At last he let out a resigned sigh.

“Very well,” he muttered.

He straightened, his expression softening but still etched with concern. “You have made your resolve abundantly clear,” he said, his voice carrying a hint of weariness. “But understand, my daughter, what I ask next, I ask not as a question of your capabilities. Nor do I ask it to discourage you before you have even begun. It is simply my duty as your father to do so.” He paused, his hands finding my shoulders, gripping them firmly as he peered into my eyes. “Are you certain of this, Flora? I fear the path you seek may be far more perilous than you have anticipated. You could marry well, as the daughter of a duke, and still

find a way to fulfill your promise to Carolina. Given that option, do you still wish to follow in my footsteps?”

His words were sharp and his gaze was sharper, intended to dissuade me as any parent would try to steer their child away from a path so treacherous. But beneath the firmness, I could sense his true emotions—his worry, his fear. As a father, he longed for me to live a life as unburdened as could be. But some hardship was an inevitable part of life. We all had our battles and our certain convictions that we could not simply cast aside. Even me.

Sorry Father. And thank you...for your concern. For everything really.

“I do, Father,” I replied firmly, without so much as a blink. “And I regret to inform you that you will not dissuade me. My mind is made up. So I ask that you pass on your knowledge and your experience. I will master it—every bit of it.”

I smiled then. It was a smile imbued with confidence, the confidence of a woman who, at the age of twenty, had finally discovered the proper outlet for her talents. I would become the woman I was meant to be—the wisest, most respected among them all.

Father nodded with an air of resignation. “Very well,” he agreed softly. “You shall have my help.” But then, something playful sparked in his eyes, a glint of mischief I had not expected. “But I can be a tough teacher, you know? Don’t think for a moment I’ll go easy on you just because you’re my daughter.” An almost wicked smile, alien in its impishness, tugged at his lips. “This should prove fun,” he added ominously.

As I imagined the days of intense lectures and rigorous instruction that were likely to come, I felt an errant twitch in my cheek. Despite my apprehension, the desire to protect the people (and to atone for my past sins) still burned fiercely in my chest.

“Thank you, Father,” I said, dipping my head in a gracious bow.

This Noel, I was certain, would be one that neither I nor the people of Celestia would soon forget.

(Carolina)

The morning after Celestia's Noel celebrations, we traveled via Theodore's teleportation magic to the Kingdom of Noir. There, I performed for only the second time in my life the lighting of the sacred flame. With that duty fulfilled, we returned to Malcosias.

I was elated at the prospect of resting in my own bed once more. The past week had been a whirlwind of ceremonial responsibilities. But before I could enjoy the comfort of my familiar cushions, one last obstacle remained—an audience with the emperor and empress.

Within the towering walls of the imperial castle, in the great hall adorned with the banners and emblems of the empire, the two imperious figures sat upon their thrones. Following Ed's lead, I walked the length of the plush crimson carpet that stretched before the dais. We halted right by the foot of the thrones and offered a synchronized bow of our heads.

"Radiant suns of Malcosias, Emperor Eric; Empress Vanessa," I intoned with a ritualistic grace. "I, Saint Carolina Ruby Martinez, have returned."

"And I, Edward, commander of the Pyreborn, have come to report the success of my mission," my husband added, his voice steady and resolute.

As our voices echoed and faded into the vastness of the throne room, we waited for the emperor's response. Though the occasion was rigid with formality, the emperor's relaxed expression offered us a hint of relief. His demeanor revealed his mood long before he spoke. With a slow and measured gesture, he raised his hand. "You may be at ease. News of the success of the Faith Council's inaugural assignment has already reached my court. Well done, both of you." His eyes softened, pride shimmering in their depths. "The empire's Noel festivities yet remain, but I trust that you both will execute your roles flawlessly. I'm looking forward to it."

The empress spoke next. "We will be hosting a grand soirée on the night of Noel at the imperial castle. You are both formally invited. It is during this celebration that we will be officially announcing that the matter of succession has been settled."

Such important news had never been delivered more nonchalantly. "Though the investiture will not take place for some time," she added, as if it were

merely an afterthought.

The suddenness of it all took me aback. An unseemly “huh?” escaped my lips as I looked at Ed and he at me. He seemed just as surprised by the news, his large, golden eyes blinking in disbelief. His reaction confirmed my suspicion: this was news that should have been delivered to us well in advance! And was it indeed wise to announce it already? Prince Gilbert’s efforts had helped massage the factionalism within the nobility. Surely this new incitement could wait?

But then I realized that this wasn’t solely about the nobility. It was about the people. The ordinary citizens had lived under the shadow of uncertainty regarding the future of their kingdom for far too long. The emperor and empress owed them clarity and security, and it seemed they intended to deliver it without delay.

“Of course,” I replied, regaining my composure. “I will most certainly be in attendance.”

“I’ll be there as well, to witness my brother’s big day,” Ed added.

A look of satisfaction crossed the emperor’s face, the corners of his eyes crinkling with approval. The empress, too, allowed her lips to quirk ever so slightly upwards—a pleased acknowledgment of our readiness to comply.

“For accepting this most belated invitation, you have my gratitude,” the emperor said, his voice resonating with regal authority. Then his tone slipped into something more familiar. “That’s all. You may retire. My apologies for calling you here so suddenly after your return. Tomorrow will demand much of you. Go now, and rest.”

“Well done, both of you,” the empress added, her voice serious but kind. “We will hear your detailed report later. For now, rest.”

Her Majesty’s solemnity remained unbroken, even as she gave the most practical advice—don’t stay up too late. Her genuine concern brought a smile to my lips, though I quickly bowed my head in gratitude.

“Yes, Your Majesties!” Ed and I chorused in unison. Then, with the precision of a choreographed dance, we rose from our bows at the exact same moment, our postures straight and formal. With polite farewells, we turned and exited the

grand throne room, retreating along the same path we had entered.

The briefness of our audience was a welcome relief. With our duties momentarily behind us, Ed and I spent the remainder of the day enjoying some much-needed leisure at the Emerald Palace. As evening fell, he departed for the night, and we both finally found rest in a peaceful slumber.

It's not over until it's truly over, I reminded myself the next morning as I prepared for the day ahead. As always, Marisa deftly dressed me, carefully draping the gossamer shawl over my shoulders before turning her attention to my hair and makeup. When she was done, Saint Carolina was ready to step into the world once more.

"You still have some time before your departure, Your Highness," Marisa observed as she tidied away her tools and hair oils. Then, with a soft gesture of care, she draped a blanket over my lap. "Why not take a moment to relax?"

I felt blessed beyond words to have a handmaiden so equally capable and considerate. I nodded and offered her my thanks, feeling the warmth both on my legs and in my heart. But, as ever, she brushed aside my gratitude with a humble "I am your handmaiden, Your Highness. It is what I do."

A wry smile crept onto my lips as I turned my gaze towards my bodyguard standing vigilantly by the door. "Owen, could you assist me with something?"

"Anything, Your Highness," he replied promptly.

I gestured towards that side of the room. "In the largest cabinet there, in the drawer, there should be two boxes. Could you fetch them for me?" I asked. "They should be blue and orange."

Though it was a task far beneath a knight of his stature, Owen moved towards the cabinet with swift efficiency without hesitation or complaint. I hated to trouble him with such menial tasks, but dressed as carefully as I was, the last thing I wanted was to risk tearing or staining my garments. This shawl in particular had a way of catching on anything it could, and with the ceremony fast approaching, I wished to avoid any mishaps by minimizing my movements.

If only I had a spare, I thought ruefully, my fingers absently caressing the delicate fabric. *But alas, we didn't have the time*. Its smooth, glossy texture was

a pleasure to touch, and I couldn't help but smile as I admired it. My musings were interrupted by Owen's return, the blue and orange boxes in hand.

"Have I brought Your Highness the correct boxes?" Owen asked, his tone polite and formal.

"Yes, perfect," I replied. "Thank you. Could you place them on the table next to me?"

"As you will," he said with a nod, carefully setting the two wrapped boxes on the small table beside me. The vibrant colors and neatly tied ribbons made it clear that these were gifts—ones I had prepared myself.

"If that is all, I shall resume my post," Owen said, beginning to turn back towards the door.

"Ah, wait," I called after him, smiling. "Stay for a moment, if you will."

He hesitated for a brief second, his brow furrowing slightly in confusion, but complied nonetheless. I thanked him softly before summoning Marisa to join us. She stepped forward and took her place beside Owen, and there we were—a princess flanked by her two loyal attendants, standing on opposite sides of a small end table.

It felt strange, seeing them both before me when they were so often behind me—watching over me, supporting me. Strange, yes, but also...nice. My eyes softened into a smile, but then I readjusted my expression, fixing my stalwart guardian and my ever-attentive caretaker with a sincere gaze.

"Owen, Marisa," I began, my voice earnest, "I wanted to express my gratitude. It's because of your tireless efforts that I'm able to live without worrying about the small things—because of you, I'm able to give my full attention to what truly matters in my life."

I smiled then, and I imbued every word I spoke with the deepest honesty. But even so, I knew that mere words would never be enough to convey the depth of my appreciation. It went beyond expression—it was rooted in something I could never fully articulate.

"You've both been with me since the day I first arrived in the empire, and I wouldn't have made it to this moment without you," I continued, my heart

swelling with the truth of it. “You’ve humored this often clueless princess far more than she deserves, and for that, you have my deepest gratitude. Always and forever, I hope that you’ll continue to remain by my side.”

With those words, I gently pushed the blue box towards Marisa and the orange one towards Owen. “These are my gifts to you. It would mean the world to me if you accepted them. They’re homemade, so...I’m not entirely sure of their usefulness.” My voice faltered as a familiar doubt crept back in. *Perhaps I really should have gotten them precious gems instead? I know they asked for homemade, and that’s what I did, but...oh. What if they were just being polite?*

Their silence and blank stares seemed to speak volumes. I feared I might have committed the worst kind of faux pas. *What have I done?* I wondered in panic. What had possessed me to think that homemade gifts would suffice? Why had I been so naive, assuming that they would appreciate something so simple just because it came from me, a royal? My thoughts spiraled rapidly, and I was half tempted to pull the gifts back and retract the entire offer, saving us all from this potential embarrassment.

But just as I was bracing myself for the worst, after what felt like an eternity, Owen and Marisa suddenly snapped out of their stupor. In one fluid motion, they reached for their gifts as one. Each hugged the brightly wrapped boxes tightly to their chests.

“Your Highness, thank you so very much! I’ll treasure this with my life!” they both exclaimed in perfect unison, their voices filled with such childlike enthusiasm that it caught me completely off guard. Their eyes sparkled with unrestrained joy, wide smiles spreading across their faces—so pure, so innocent, it was as if they had momentarily forgotten they stood in my presence.

I blinked once, twice, but that didn’t help me comprehend what I was seeing. “Huh?” I muttered, unable to mask my confusion. This pure, unadulterated gladness—they weren’t acting, were they? No, surely not. Neither of them would ever risk breaking protocol in front of me just to feign excitement. They were far too diligent for any such thing.

Realization slowly dawned on me: their joy was genuine. I sat quietly for a

moment, letting the scene unfold before me. They cradled their boxes gently, almost reverently. After a long moment, Marisa finally spoke again.

“Your Highness.” Her voice was oddly high-pitched and bouncy. “If you wouldn’t mind, could we open them here?”

“It may be improper,” Owen added quickly, his tone equally eager. “But I just can’t wait!”

They both stared at me with wide, hopeful eyes, their expressions so acquisitive that they reminded me of puppies waiting for a treat. The sight was so unexpected, so utterly foreign, that I couldn’t help but let out a soft laugh. “Of course,” I replied warmly. “If that is what you wish.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” they exclaimed with a synchronized bow, and then they were off to unwrapping. I watched with a flutter of nerves in my chest as they removed the lids from their boxes. From Marisa’s emerged a hand-knitted scarf, and from Owen’s, an embroidered handkerchief. Each stitch, each thread, had been woven with painstaking care over long, deliberate hours. In a way, these gifts were the physical embodiments of my feelings towards them. I could only hope they felt that same warmth in return—I wasn’t sure my heart could bear it if they didn’t.

For a brief moment, the image of their disappointed faces flickered through my mind, but I pushed it away, focusing instead on the reality of unmistakable wonder radiating from each of them.

“This is...beautiful,” Marisa whispered in awe. Her eyes shone with admiration as she ran her fingers over the soft, ocean-blue yarn. “So much so that I would hesitate to believe it was hand-knit. I’m envious. This care, this...meticulousness—it’s beyond anything I could have ever managed. I will treasure this, Your Highness. It will become a cherished family heirloom. I’ll hold on to it with the utmost care.”

She hugged the scarf tightly to her chest, her smile so sweet and sincere that, for a moment, I wondered if this could be the same cool, composed handmaiden I had always known.

“A family heirloom? Why, you flatter me,” I replied, feeling a soft warmth spread through me at her words. “I’m just glad you like it. But please, Marisa,

I'd much rather you wear it than keep it locked away in some dusty attic."

"I'll see if I can't try," she said, though her words were evasive as she glanced away awkwardly.

I suppose she was serious about keeping it a family heirloom, I thought, surprised but content. After all, it was her scarf now, and I had no right to dictate how she chose to use it.

Reassuring her that she could do with the scarf as she wished, I turned my attention to Owen, who was beaming as he unfolded the handkerchief in front of him.

"So this is what the finished product looks like!" he exclaimed in boyish glee. "It's beautiful! If I saw this in the windowsill of a shop I wouldn't bat an eye!"

He traced the lilac embroidery over and over again with his fingers, clearly overjoyed. The handkerchief was more than just a gift to him—it was a symbol of his growth, his journey to become a fully-fledged knight. The events of the Founder's Day Fete felt like a distant memory now, and I knew that Owen, more than anyone, had felt the weight of that progress.

"I am grateful beyond words, Your Highness!" he cried. "I shall carry this with me into battle! It shall be my good-luck charm until the end of my days!" He squeezed the handkerchief tightly with both hands, then swung his head low in a bow.

Marisa's bow followed right on Owen's heels. "Thank you, Your Highness, for this most wonderful gift."

Goodness, I thought, a warmth blossoming in my chest, *if I had known my gifts would bring them this much happiness, I would have done this much sooner.*

"There is no need for thanks," I replied softly, my smile gentle. "The joy on your faces is the only reward I could ever ask for."

I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of fulfillment as I had watched them unwrap their gifts, their hands so careful with the ribbons, neatly undoing them rather than tearing them apart in haste. Their reactions were everything I could have hoped for and more. It was as if every painstaking moment I had spent on

these gifts had been worth it a thousandfold. Gratitude and contentment swirled within me, and I couldn't help but think, *I'm so glad I put in the effort*, as I basked in the happiness of the moment.

Soon enough, we were off. Marisa and Owen had arranged to have their gifts safely transported back to their homes, and as we made our way towards my rendezvous point with my husband and the vice commander, I overheard them discussing the necessity of purchasing new safes or strongboxes to safeguard their presents—a discussion which concerned me, but one that I chose to ignore. It didn't take long until we had met up with Ed and Theodore, and after a brief final meeting before our departure, we filed into the parade carriages.

Just as similar carriage rides in Celestia and Noir had been, our victory lap through the capital was immensely successful and met with exuberant warmth. As we neared the square, muffled shouts of “All praises to the Saint!” could be heard even through the thick walls of the carriage. When the door finally swung open, I took a deep breath, ensuring that my smile remained as natural as possible, and accepted Ed's hand as we descended onto the pavement.

Oh my. The sheer scale of the crowd took my breath away. Though I had glimpsed the throngs through the carriage window, stepping outside and facing them directly made the crush of people feel all the more staggering. The turnout here in Malcosias easily dwarfed the crowd that had gathered for me in Celestia—though given the empire's far larger population, I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was. Surrounded by a seemingly endless sea of faces stretching in every direction, I did my best to greet their cheers and applause with grace. With my smile fixed firmly in place, I waited as Ed carefully lit the ceremonial torch.

“Be careful, Lina. That's a live flame,” Ed cautioned.

“I will, thank you,” I replied, giving my worrywart husband a nod. With steady hands, I grasped the torch, its crimson flame flickering and dancing in the wind. My gaze drifted towards the ornate brazier that awaited me—a grand structure inlaid with rubies of the purest red, a stunning tribute to the empire's grandeur. My eyes widened ever so slightly at the sheer extent of the opulence before me, but I didn't allow myself to dwell on it. With a final glance towards Ed, I

began my slow and deliberate trek towards the brazier.

The eyes of the crowd were on me like so many hawks, tracking my every movement, heads turning in unison as I proceeded down the path with measured and graceful steps. The plain, regal smile never wavered from my lips, a practiced expression that maintained the virtuous image of the Saint—calm, composed, and unwavering.

After what felt like somewhere between five seconds and five hours, I arrived in front of the grand brazier. This time, I allowed myself a moment to peer over the edge of the egg-shaped structure, expecting a hollow space for the flame. But to my surprise, it was far more than a mere vessel. The interior was adorned with delicate carvings, holy scripture etched meticulously into every inch of the surface, swirling around the inner rim. Even these unseen parts of this ritual object had been crafted with painstaking care—a testament to the devotion of the artisans who had poured their hearts into this masterpiece.

As I was reminded once again of what this ceremony meant to everyone, the small smile on my face blossomed into something warmer and more human. With deep emotion blooming in my chest, I cast the torch into the brazier. Then, I spun around and stretched my arms out wide. “Blessings upon the Empire of Malcosias!” I declared, my voice ringing out louder than ever before—louder than in Celestia, louder than in Noir, louder for each additional soul gathered here today. My vocal cords stung from the force of my cry, but I cared little. The people had to hear, and oh, did they ever hear me.

“Blessings upon the empire!” The crowd roared back in unison, their voices a wave of energy crashing against me. Then, the pillar of flame erupted behind me, and flower petals, seemingly conjured from nowhere, began to rain down across the plaza in a miraculous display. Not a moment later, fireworks funded by the imperial family exploded into the sky, painting it with brilliant blossoms of color and light, igniting the fervor of the crowd to a fever pitch.

I had known there would be a touch of flair added to the Malcosian ceremony, but I hadn’t expected anything this spectacular. Ed’s towering pillar of flame, Theodore’s magical rain of petals, and the imperial fireworks combined into a display so magnificent, so breathtaking, that I found myself momentarily dumbstruck by it all.

A grin naturally spread across my face as I stood amid the dazzling pageantry, savoring the sense of accomplishment that bloomed within me. My first chapter as Saint had drawn to a triumphant close, and the realization filled me with a bittersweet joy. A smidgen of loss crept into my heart, which seemed natural, considering that these past few weeks had been so incredibly rewarding. I could only hope that in the year to come, I would have the opportunity to bring this same joy, these same smiles, to everyone's faces once again.

As I made my way back towards my escort, the jubilant cheers of the citizenry echoed all around me:

"All praises to the Saint! I'll come to see you again next year!"

"The lighting of the sacred flame simply *must* be the Saint's duty from now on. I'll have it no other way!"

"The flame, the petals, the fireworks! What fun!"

"You've made this Noel an unforgettable memory, Lady Saint! God bless you!"

Try as I might to maintain my composed demeanor, I couldn't help but let a genuine grin break through my maidenly facade. Oh, how I longed to linger, to bask in the pure happiness of the moment just a little longer. But, as always, duty called. With a soft sigh and a reluctant heart, I climbed into the waiting carriage, still feeling the echoes of the people's cheers wrap around me in a warm, comforting embrace.

Even as the carriage rolled closer to the imperial castle, the vestiges of those cheers still clung to the air, ringing in my ears.

"What a turnout," Teodore sighed, his gaze wistful as he stared out the carriage window. "At this rate, I fear they'll be making portraits and picture books of the Saint in very short order."

It seemed that even he hadn't anticipated how much my popularity would grow in the few short weeks since my triumph at the trials.

"Portraits and picture books of Lina?" Ed chimed in. "Now that's something I'd be very interested in."

“Please, no...” The words tumbled out before I could stop them, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

Creative works made in my likeness? I can tolerate that, just...please keep them away from people I know! I could already imagine the embellishments, the dramatizations in such works—the portraits of a Saintly figure so lovely and charming that even I would have to do a double take, picture books filled with stories so exaggerated, I’d find myself muttering, *Well, that certainly didn’t happen!*

I understood that such works would be a sign of the people’s respect and admiration, and I had to admit that I didn’t *entirely* hate the idea. But if I were honest with myself, it did bother me—a little more than I’d care to admit. *I suppose the people can do as they wish, as long as I never have to see or hear of it!*

“All right, Lina, if that is your desire,” Ed said. “I don’t need reproductions anyway—not when the real Saint is right in front of me.” He gently stroked my hair, his eyes crinkling in affection.

I... I swear this man has no idea how much of a flirt he is! My heart raced, and my cheeks flushed even more. Ed’s teasing was as effective as I was sure it was unintentional! Despite the stir he caused within me, I miraculously held on to my composure.

“S-So, when is the party tonight slated to begin?” I asked, in a voice that sounded (mostly) calm. “I don’t think Their Majesties informed us of any details beyond the fact that it’s happening.” I turned my gaze to Theodore, hoping to distract myself from Ed, but also because if anyone would know the specifics of the agenda, it was certainly him.

Theodore met my gaze, then adjusted his glasses with a practiced motion. “It shall begin this evening at six, if I’m not mistaken. A white tie event, as it were, so it might be wise to change. Though I’m certain no one would object if you were to attend as you are. The party is, after all, ‘officially’ to celebrate Noel.” He gave me a knowing smile.

But we all knew there was a secondary, less ostensible reason for the gathering, didn’t we? Given that, my course of action seemed clear.

“Perhaps so,” I replied thoughtfully. “It might not be improper for me to attend in my Saintly regalia. But personally, I’d prefer to attend this party not as the Saint, but as the princess consort to the second prince.”

Indeed, since this evening was actually going to be about Prince Gilbert and the announcement of his ascension as crown prince, it seemed fitting that I should embrace my other, more stately role.

“Very good,” Theodore agreed with a curt nod, his lips curling with approval.

Seems like I made the right choice...

Glad that I had correctly read the situation and avoided a lecture, I let out a breath and turned my gaze out the window...only to realize we were less than twenty paces from the castle. All too soon, it would be time to prepare myself for the grand ball and for the announcement that would rock the entirety of Malcosias.

And thus, a few hours later, the second grand event of my day began. After a brief moment of relaxation—though “relaxation” was a generous term, as my mind was swimming with the weight and importance of the forthcoming occasion, and I had been swept up at once into the complex tasks of dressing and readying myself for the evening. Now, that whirlwind of preparation complete, and adorned in a new and gorgeous gown, I stood with my stalwart companions just outside the grand hall, allowing my nerves to settle before our entrance was announced.

I glanced down at the dress I had chosen to wear—a gown of purest white, selected to honor the festive spirit of Noel. When I looked back up, I caught Ed staring at me.

“You look beautiful in white too, my darling,” my husband murmured softly.

“And you as well, my dashing husband,” I replied with a smile, admiring him in his full dress uniform. It was a rare sight, and one I hadn’t seen in some time, so I took an extra moment to savor it.

“Ahem,” came the sound of a pointed throat clearing I’d come to recognize all too well. I turned to see Theodore. *Must you two do this right before our entrance?* his long-suffering expression seemed to say.

Ed and I straightened up immediately and shook ourselves from our reverie in one another, forcing our bodies back into our slightly rigid formal positions. *Really, Theodore, you can't cut us some slack, even on the eve of Noel?* a sulky voice in my mind protested. *Not even after my exemplary performance over the past few days?* But I kept those thoughts to myself, maintaining a polite and neutral expression as I awaited whatever choice words Theodore had prepared.

But no such words came—at least, not immediately. Instead, a resigned smile floated onto his face, as if my thoughts had somehow reached him. With a resigned shrug of his shoulders, he said only, “It’s almost time for your entrance. Carry yourselves with dignity, Your Highnesses. The nobility will be watching.”

That was perhaps the kindest way he could have phrased his reminder. Theodore dipped his head ever so slightly before retreating a proper step behind us, and Ed and I both let out synchronized breaths of relief. But before we could truly relax, a regal fanfare rang out, muffled behind the thick doors. The trumpets were followed at once by the booming voices of the royal guards.

“Presenting Their Imperial Highnesses, Prince Edward Ruby Martinez and Princess Carolina Ruby Martinez!” they announced with perfect cadence. The doors were pulled open, revealing the grand hall before us.

As the echo of the announcement faded away, silence rushed in to fill the void. All eyes turned towards us as we strode forward, taking our first steps down the red carpet. The crowd appeared unusually...diverse for an imperial gathering—nobles not just from the capital and central regions, but also some who appeared to be from the empire’s far reaches. Perhaps they had come to appraise their new Saint in person? If so, that was a fortuitous development. The presence of regional members of the nobility would ensure that word of the crown prince’s selection would spread to every far-flung corner of the empire.

Quite the happy coincidence, I thought to myself, amused. We proceeded down the red carpet to the empty thrones atop the dais, bowed respectfully, then stepped aside—a formality we executed flawlessly, just as we had done at the Founder’s Day Fete.

“Lina,” Ed’s voice gently caught my attention. “Would you like to sit? We haven’t had much time to rest since the lighting of the flame.” He gestured towards a nearby sofa, his eyes filled with concern.

Though the offer was tempting, I didn’t feel so fatigued that I needed to sit. “I’m all right, darling,” I assured him with a soft smile. “I appreciate your concern, but let’s wait until Prince Gilbert makes his entrance.”

“Ah, right,” Ed said, nodding. “Just promise me you won’t push yourself.”

I couldn’t help my face settling into a fond expression at the sight of his large, puppylike eyes, filled with concern. To reassure him, I gave him a big, affectionate nod to convey my love and appreciation.

Then, another booming announcement echoed across the hall: “Presenting His Imperial Highness—Prince Gilbert Ruby Martinez!”

We glanced up just as the doors swung open once again, revealing the star of tonight’s gathering—Prince Gilbert. He strode in with the elegance one might expect of a member of the royal family, his pastel-blue ponytail swaying lightly with each measured step. Upon reaching the dais, he bowed with practiced refinement, then turned and moved in the opposite direction from us. As he settled on the other side of the dais, he glanced at us—a simple, fleeting look meant to acknowledge our presence. Even that small gesture seemed to exude a nearly tangible charm. Was this what it meant to have “a magnetic personality”?

“I know he’s not doing it on purpose, but he could at least be mindful of his...pronounced effect on women. I can hear them swooning from all the way over here,” I murmured. Glancing at the ladies who had practically already thrown themselves at his feet, I gave a small shrug, unable to resist a wry smile. I supposed some men were simply destined to enchant. Prince Gilbert, though, brushed off the attention as if it were second nature, his smile gentle and poised. It was almost alarming how comfortable he seemed basking in the admiration of those around him—a thought I found rather disagreeable.

“He certainly seems to have regained his...vigor,” I muttered quietly.

“The spotlight’s always suited him, that’s for sure,” Ed replied with a hint of amusement. Then, in a more serious tone, he added, “But more importantly,

it's almost the top of the hour. Let's be on our best behavior."

Or else Teo will never let us hear the end of it was what he didn't say, but the furtive glance he cast towards Teodore standing watchfully in the corner conveyed the message perfectly. That silent look was more than enough to spur me into action. I quickly straightened up, wiping the small smirk off my face and biting back any more idle chatter.

At last the bells struck eight, and as that final clang echoed into silence, a reverent hush descended upon the grand hall. In the thick silence, the tick of the second hand on the great clock that adorned one corner of the chamber seemed to reverberate in my ears. Then the orchestra began to play. It was an unfamiliar piece, one that I knew had been composed specially for the occasion. Just as I found myself slipping away into the entrancing melody, the royal guard's booming voice violently shattered the peaceful spell.

"Bow your heads in reverence! Behold, the radiant suns of our realm, Their Imperial Majesties, Emperor Eric Ruby Martinez and Empress Vanessa Ruby Martinez!"

With a posture of obsequience reserved only for the sovereigns, the guards took hold of the ornate door handles and pulled. Every head in the hall dipped in a gesture of respect. The familiar refrain echoed through the chamber like a well-rehearsed chant: "Glory to the Empire!"

The hall was awash in deference, awe, and fear. And yet the two who stood at the center of this adoration seemed to float above it all, untouched by the weight of the moment. The emperor and empress began their measured walk down the red carpet. Unseen to my respectfully downcast eyes, their footsteps echoed, closer, *closer*—passed right before us—then stopped. A rustling of rich fabrics signaled that they had taken their places upon their thrones.

"Lift your gazes, my esteemed guests. And be at ease," the emperor's voice rumbled.

Another great rustling followed as everyone straightened, lifting their heads high, standing as tall as they could in the presence of the emperor with his fiery red hair and the empress with her cool, regal blue. The dignity and solemnity of the empire radiated from them like the very suns they were often proclaimed

to be.

“I thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for taking time away from your respective realms to join us in our revels,” the emperor began, his voice deep and steady. “To celebrate Noel, this holiest of days, with you all is a privilege.” At this moment I swore I caught him flashing the swiftest of glances at me. “A day made all the holier by the presence of our Saint,” he added with a teasing lilt. His eyes crinkled fondly, the faintest hint of a smile playing on his lips—an unusual break from solemnity which I attributed to the festive spirit of the evening.

He paused here, holding the attention of the assembly without dismissing it, letting the expectant mood stretch for a few heartbeats longer. Then, relieving that suspense with practiced precision, he spoke again. “I have good news to share with you all on this day. Before the festivities begin in earnest, I ask for just a few more moments of your time.”

A stir rippled through the hall, but this did not give him pause.

“Gilbert Ruby Martinez, my son, join me!” the emperor called out.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Prince Gilbert replied from the other side of the dais, bowing his head respectfully before stepping forward.

It was like a scene pulled straight from my own history—the emperor’s summons, the quiet confusion written on the faces of the gathered nobles. And just like that earlier moment in my own life, one that lived etched forever in my memory, I could see the dawning realization in the eyes of a few discerning individuals, the faintest sighs of relief and murmurs of understanding stealing through the crowd.

Prince Gilbert halted just before the dais and turned to face the assembly. Though solemnity dominated his features, I thought I could detect a hint of pride peeking through.

“My joyful tidings concern none other than the fine gentleman before you,” the emperor said, his voice resonating through the hall. “My people, it is with great happiness that I stand before you today.”

He paused here, and as if on cue, he and the empress rose to their feet. They

descended the dais towards Prince Gilbert and stopped right behind him. When each of his parents placed a hand on one of his shoulders, it was as if to silently declare to all present: *He is the chosen one.*

The emperor fixed the assembly with a steely gaze before he concluded, “I, Eric Ruby Martinez, hereby proclaim Gilbert Ruby Martinez as my successor—the crown prince of our glorious empire!”

His voice rang out with an intensity that had been yet unreached on this night, underscoring the gravity of the announcement. All around us, eyes flew open wide, and soon, murmurs began to circulate through the crowd.

“The crown prince... Finally, it’s about time!”

“Music. Just music to my ears!”

“The people will be overjoyed! Prince Gilbert is beloved by so many!”

“Oh, what a great reassurance this is. The future of our empire is bright with him as heir.”

Hands were clasped in gratitude, shoulder pats and handshakes exchanged in mutual congratulations. The reaction among the ladies in the room was the most pronounced, with some even moved to tears.

“Details on the investiture will be forthcoming,” the emperor continued, his tone once again composed. “That is all I had to share with you today. Now, let us raise our glasses in a toast!”

With a fluid motion, the emperor and empress stepped back and received glasses of white wine from their attendants. Prince Gilbert, standing proud in front of the dais, received a glass as well.

“Red or white, Lina?” Ed’s voice brought me back to the present. He had a glass of wine in each hand, one white, one red. The maid who had evidently supplied these libations moved away from us, her tray now lighter.

Honestly, I didn’t have a particular preference, but if memory served, Ed had always favored red. I often saw him with a glass of it during dinner. “White, please,” I replied.

“Here,” he said, offering me the glass with a nod. I accepted it with a smile

and murmured my thanks. Our glasses now poised for the toast, we turned our attention back to the dais. The hall was filled with anticipation; every guest present mirrored our celebratory stance—glasses in hand, eagerly awaiting the emperor's signal.

The emperor's gaze swept over the crowd, and displaying his masterful grasp of showmanship, he raised his glass at exactly the moment that anticipation peaked. "A toast—to this most holy of nights, this most auspicious of days!" His voice boomed with regal authority, his glass held high. "Cheers!"

A ripple of movement followed as glasses were lifted in unison, and the hall reverberated with the crowd's thunderous chorus: "Cheers!" And then, with a few notes of music from the orchestra, the imperial celebration swelled into a lively hum. As the din of the hall roared back to life, Ed and I exchanged a private toast between ourselves.

"Look, Gilbert's already being swarmed," Ed remarked, looking past me and gesturing.

I followed his gaze, my eyes landing on the growing throng around Prince Gilbert. "Goodness, you're right," I said, my eyes widening slightly. "This might be the first time I've seen the nobility act so boldly in front of a member of the imperial family."

The crowd around him was composed primarily of older noblemen and their daughters, all vying for the prince's attention. It was quite the spectacle—fathers shamelessly thrusting their daughters forward, desperate to secure for each one a possible future as the crown princess consort. Even among the nobility, where reserve was often considered the greatest virtue, the allure of power had clearly caused them to cast aside such inhibitions. They hovered around him like vultures circling their prize, eager to stake their claim.

"Well, being forward isn't exactly a crime. I think we can let them be," Ed said. "Until we sense any real malice, that is."

"Agreed." I nodded. "He should be fine. Intervening now would only cause a stir. Let's trust our future crown prince to handle a crowd."

Satisfied with our decision, we turned away from Prince Gilbert. I was determined to partake in the festivities for once, and so I took a bold sip of the

fine vintage in my glass. However, I hadn't anticipated the effect it would have on me—almost immediately, I felt a warmth rise to my face. Was the drink already sending color to my cheeks? Perhaps I was more tired than I'd realized.

"Lina, your face..." Ed's voice was tinged with concern as he peered at me, quickly handing off his empty glass to a passing maid. In one fluid motion, his newly freed hand reached up to brush against my cheek. "You're burning up. Should we delay greeting Father and step out onto the balcony? A cool breeze might help."

Ed never hesitated to voice his concern for me. It always came swiftly, naturally, as though it was simply a part of his nature. His usually warm fingers, now cool against my heated skin, only confirmed what he had noticed. A somewhat awkward smile tugged at my lips. I was loath to admit it, but the alcohol had affected me more than I cared to acknowledge. Though my thoughts weren't yet muddled, the idea of cooling off with a fresh breeze seemed terribly tempting.

"Yes, why don't I go refresh myself for a moment?" I agreed. "You can stay here, darling. I'll be right back."

"What? No. I'm coming with you," he replied firmly. "If something were to happen to you, I'd never forgive myself."

An airy giggle escaped my lips. "You're exaggerating," I replied with a playful tone. "But all right, you win."

We gave word to a nearby maid and slipped out to the balcony adjoining the grand hall. The sharp winter air hit us immediately, but it was exactly what I needed to clear my head. My eyes were playfully tracing the white wispy breaths that escaped my lips when suddenly, a weight—and a warmth—descended upon my shoulders.

"Here," Ed's voice came softly from behind me. "It wouldn't do to shake off one ill only to catch another."

He had draped his dress tunic over my shoulders. Though it fit him perfectly and cut a dashing figure, on me it hung like a great blanket. "It looks like a long coat when you wear it," Ed remarked fondly. The largeness of it coupled with the lingering warmth from Ed's body made for a very snug garment, indeed.

“Thank you,” I said. “But aren’t you cold? I’m rather worried about you catching something, actually.”

“I’ll be fine,” he replied with confidence. “Nothing in my life, short of a grievous wound on the field of battle, has given me pause so far.” With that, he gently gripped my shoulders through the tunic, giving them a gentle squeeze. His boyish gesture drew a soft laugh from me, and I relented. *All right, darling, I won’t try to take it off and give it back to you.*

That reminds me. Didn’t Teodore once say something about Ed being neither a wise prince nor a graceful one, but certainly a hale and hearty one? The thought tickled my mind, and I decided that if Teodore, with all his intellect, had vouched for Ed’s constitution, then I had little reason to worry. I pulled the tunic tighter around me and thanked him again, feeling a deeper warmth from his simple, caring gesture.

We stood there for a while, letting the brisk evening air cool my flushed cheeks as Ed and I fell into a pleasant conversation, something that had seemed to elude us as of late. We spoke of the trials, of Noel, of the gifts I had given to Marisa and Owen. There was so much to share, so much to recount, and with Ed by my side, I never found myself at a loss for words.

It could have been three minutes later; it could have been thirty. Either way, as I was in the midst of another sentence, the balcony door creaked open. *Now, who could that be?* The knights stationed outside would have escorted any ordinary guest away from our reprieve, and the quiet, unhurried entrance certainly seemed to rule out any sinister presence. Besides, if there had been even the slightest hint of danger, Ed would have shielded me in an instant.

Before I could turn to see who had joined us, a familiar voice—warm and airy—cut through the chill of the night. “Good evening, you two. Sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping for a word with my mistress.”

There he was, the future crown prince himself, standing on the threshold. He closed the balcony door behind him and took a few steps forward, though he stopped just short of where we stood, a smile fixed in place upon his lips.

Now this was a surprise. Why was he here? How had he managed to escape the clutches of the eager nobility swarming him inside? Had he done so just to

Speak with me? The thought sent a ripple of unease through me—not the sharp discomfort of fear or malice, but a more subtle, neutral kind of nervousness: the kind that comes when you're utterly unsure of what to expect next.

Chapter Seven

(Prince Gilbert)

Mistress looked at me, her head slightly tilted in confusion, while my dear younger brother's brow furrowed in a manner which seemed decidedly less than pleased by my intrusion.

Suppose I can't blame him for being wary, I mused. After all, I had tried to step between them in the past. His attitude, disrespectful as it may have been, was completely justified. I accepted it without much protest, merely giving a slight shrug of acknowledgment.

Standing at a polite distance—neither too close nor too far—I lifted my hands in a playful gesture of surrender, elbows bent, trying to ease the tension. “I’ve only come to talk today, Brother. That is all, I assure you. Should you doubt my word, you are welcome to remain and hear everything that I say for yourself.”

To further show my harmless intent, I took a step back, keeping my posture relaxed. But Edward's distrusting gaze never faltered.

“As if I'd leave you alone with her for a second,” Edward replied coldly, wrapping a protective arm around Carolina, pulling her close against him. It was a gesture of possessiveness so blunt and forthcoming that I almost laughed. Almost. Instead, I settled for a wry smile, though a flicker of pain shot through me. I knew this vigilance, this defensiveness against me, was entirely of my own making, yet it still stung to be so distrusted.

“What is it you came to say, Gilbert?” Edward continued, his voice steady but firm. “We didn't plan on being out here for much longer.”

His words were direct, his intentions clear: whatever words I had come to relate, they had better be brief.

What am I, a wild beast? I thought, feeling a slight twinge of exasperation at Edward's relentless wariness. But despite that, I was still grateful he was willing

to allow me to speak at all. “Thank you, Brother,” I said with a soft nod. “I’ll keep it brief, of course.” I tried to ameliorate the awkwardness by offering him a kind smile, hoping it might ease some of the tension. Unfortunately, my attempt only seemed to have the opposite effect—Edward’s face tightened even further. *Standoffish*, I supposed, was the most charitable way to describe his demeanor, though *threatening* was likely the more accurate word. Yet, what could I do? I deserved it all and more.

His gaze sharpened, urging me to get to the point, and so I took a steadying breath before I, in one swift and determined motion, sank to the ground and knelt before them.

“To begin, I owe you an apology, my mistress,” I said, my voice low but clear. “For misleading you about my recovery and for inciting Edward’s wrath, which in turn brought harm upon you. The fault is entirely mine, and I am deeply sorry for it.”

Carolina’s eyes widened. Clearly, she had been unprepared for such an apology, especially one coming so late. I had avoided the subject for so long that she must have thought I would never address it. But if this act of humility could earn back her trust, it was a small price to pay—especially considering what I next intended to say.

Slowly, deliberately, I lifted my gaze to meet hers, feeling the quickening of my pulse as the moment drew closer. Despite my anxiety, a small, bittersweet smile began to tug at my lips. “Though it pains me to do so right after apologizing, I must ask you one final favor, Mistress. I must ask that you indulge me one last time.”

I held her gaze intently, pouring every ounce of my sincerity into my eyes. I wanted her to feel the weight of my words so that she would understand the depth of what I was about to reveal.

“I am in love with you, my mistress.”

The words fell from my lips like a confession of sin. What a decadent, corrupt man I was—to confess my love to a married woman, and in front of her husband (my own brother) no less. I understood the gravity of my actions, the transgression I had committed. But it had to be done. The wound had to be laid

bare, for only then could I begin to heal.

I was to be crown prince. After that, emperor. Malcosias needed to be my sole focus, my unwavering priority. I couldn't afford to be swayed by any distractions, least of all the complication of an unrequited love.

I had told myself this very thing countless times over the past few weeks, hoping it would help me to move on. But despite my best efforts, a part of me stubbornly clung to Carolina, my mistress—yearning, wanting.

Thus, I had confessed—so that I might be rejected once and for all.

Of course, it burned at me, the patheticness of it all—to be so helpless that I had to ask the very woman I loved to put me out of my misery. But the price of staying silent was far too high for me to bear. Becoming crown prince, with all the power that position entailed, was dangerous enough. Add the weight of an overwhelming limerence, and it became a volatile mixture. I could already feel it—that destructive urge, that insidious desire. The temptation to use my power to rip Carolina away from Edward, to claim her for myself. Truly, there was no greater tyranny than that of a man in love, and I could not allow myself to become that.

It should have ended there—with my miserable confession of adoration. But despite myself, despite the voice of reason screaming that no more needed to be said, that I stood to gain nothing but might certainly lose everything, my deluge of words continued.

“I love you,” I reiterated. “The earnest you. The kind you. Whether you’re chiding me with concern or smiling over the beauty of a flower, I love every part of you... Wholly and without reserve. If it’s not too bold of me to ask, is there a world in which I could be the one to make you smile? Would that be too much to wish for, my dear mistress?”

This was, I knew, an exercise in futility, a hopeless plea that would lead to a foregone conclusion—there were many ways to describe my foolish persistence, and none of them were flattering. Yet despite knowing the answer, I needed to hear it. I needed closure.

To my surprise, Edward remained silent. His glare was still sharp and unyielding, but perhaps he understood the nature of this “final indulgence.” He

let me speak without interruption, though his patience was clearly wearing thin.

My mistress...also said nothing. Her brow furrowed prettily, and she seemed at a loss. But behind that hesitation, I could sense something deeper—perhaps a trace of that same understanding. Her gaze wandered with her indecision for a moment more before finally settling on me with a grave determination.

She drew a steady breath, and with a clarity that both stilled and shattered my heart, she spoke.

“Your Highness, I acknowledge the depth of your feelings, but please know that I cannot accept them. My affections lie solely with Edward Ruby Martinez, and nothing shall ever change that. Humbly, and with all due respect, I must decline your request.”

There was no hesitation, no ambiguity, no room for lingering hope. Her rejection was clear, total, and indifferent—exactly what I needed to sever the stubborn ties of this, my first love. She dipped her head gracefully in apology, her demeanor as regal as ever.

And though her rejection cut deeply, there was something else there—something that prevented my heart from shattering completely. Gratitude. A quiet, profound gratitude for the opportunity I’d given her to provide a clean break between us.

Thank you, Mistress, I thought as the pain settled in. Thank you for making this as clear as it could be. Now, with no regrets, no lingering attachments...I can finally move forward.

I clenched my fists tight and squeezed my eyes shut against the sharp pain of heartbreak. Every bit of affection I had harbored for her only made it hurt all the more. But it was, I was surprised to find, a good pain, the kind that signals a push in the right direction. It was keen, it was real, but it was also the beginning of acceptance.

With that bittersweet sensation thrilling through my veins, I slowly rose to my feet. I looked at Carolina—at the pained expression etched on her face—and forced a smile.

“Sorry about that, Carolina,” I said, intentionally using her name, stripping

away my suggestive title for her. “I do apologize for foisting such a difficult task onto you. But you have handled this rejection with grace and kindness, so I thank you.” I paused briefly to take a breath. “I apologize for keeping you out in the cold. Please, go back inside. Enjoy the party.”

I stepped aside, gesturing towards the warmth of the hall. Carolina gasped, seemingly taken aback that I’d referred to her normally for once, exactly as any member of her extended family might, while my brother stared at me with that impenetrable, stony expression of his.

“You’re not coming back in?” he asked, a little suspicious.

“I’d like to stay out here and cool down for a bit,” I replied, trying to sound composed. “I won’t be long, don’t worry. But I wouldn’t ask you to stay out here just to keep me company.”

I hoped he would take the hint—that I needed to be alone, and I needed this to occur quickly, because the tears were already beginning to well. I blinked them back as best as I could. Crying at this time and in this place felt wrong. Too effeminate, too vulnerable. And above all, it felt disrespectful to Carolina’s efforts tonight. She had handled this situation with such care, and I refused to tarnish that with my tears.

Luckily, Edward tore his gaze away from me, his concern shifting to Carolina. “Let’s go, Lina. At this rate, you’ll really catch a cold,” he said softly, wrapping an arm around her as they turned towards the door. As they passed, I could feel the warmth radiating from him—always the devoted husband, using his fire magic to regulate the temperature to keep her comfortable in the biting cold.

As their footsteps faded away, I let out a weary breath and leaned against the balcony railing, staring out into the darkness. I fought desperately to keep the tears at bay. I knew that if even a single tear fell, a deluge would promptly follow. I still had a party to attend, nobles to mingle with. What would they think of the crown prince showing up with tear-stained cheeks on what should have been the happiest day of his life?

And you call yourself a future emperor, Gilbert, I scolded myself, drawing deep, slow breaths to calm the turmoil inside me.

As I struggled to maintain control, Teo loomed out of the shadows as if from

nowhere. His sudden presence didn't surprise me—he had a knack for dramatic appearances, materializing like a phantom ever since we were young. His clothes were damp from the snow, indicating he had likely been hiding nearby with his illusion magic for quite some time.

“Come to kick a man when he's down?” I asked in a sad attempt to mask my emotions with humor, propping myself up on an elbow.

Teo looked at me out of the corner of his eye, his expression unreadable. He took his time, as he always did, before finally nodding. “Yes, I have,” he replied in a tone that was gravely serious.

I couldn't help but chuckle. “You truly are the worst kind of person.”

“The insult rings a little hollow coming from you,” he retorted, then let out a sigh.

His reply actually seemed colored with a tinge of pity, or so I thought. Of all the scathing remarks he could have thrown at me, this one was oddly bland. Perhaps Teo had come out here not to mock me but to comfort me. In his own way, he had chosen to take up the task that neither Edward nor Carolina could have fulfilled at that moment. In his own cold, detached way...

Not that I hated it. Brisk and distant sympathy was far preferable to condescending condolences.

“Say, Teo,” I said after a beat.

“Yes, Your Highness?” he replied.

“Talk with me for a moment, would you?”

“I must respectfully decline.”

Would it kill you to even pretend to hesitate in your refusal? As wry as my thoughts were, however, a smile couldn't help but curl my lips.

“It's a royal decree,” I amended.

The glance he shot me was nasty. But after a moment he shrugged his shoulders and didn't leave. Taking that as a sign of his compliance (or kindness?), I looked away from him and out to the garden. Words rose to my lips. Words desperate to be heard—each of them tasted bitter and tragic on my

tongue as I released them to the air:

“I love...loved her, you know?” I said out into the dark. “Not just because of what she could do, or the power she had. I loved her—for her.”

For a love I referred to in the past tense, the emotions cut deeper than any blade might have done in the present. I grieved for it, my first love—a fragile, fleeting thing that had slipped through my fingers far too soon. My eyes closed in a stubborn and possibly vain attempt to keep the tears at bay, though the ache remained.

“I admit that in the beginning, it *was* her power I coveted,” I said. “Her Divinity was...useful, a means to an end, but she touched something deep within me—with her kindness, her honesty, her light. Every time we spoke, it stirred something inside of me, something I couldn’t shake. I started wanting her—needing her—to linger just a little longer. And before I knew it, all I could feel, all I could think of, was that I wanted her, not just for a moment, but...forever.”

The image of Carolina’s smile, seared into my memory as if by flame, drifted across my mind. The dull throb of heartache surged with a fresh sharpness, and I pressed my lips together, as if that could dam the flood of emotions and memories threatening to overwhelm me. Despite my efforts, they slipped through, one after another, trickling out slowly but surely. Even after I’d achieved what I thought had been my goal—a clean break, her clear rejection—my heart still rebelled, unsatisfied and aching for more.

“I wanted to be the one who made her happy,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “I wanted to be the only man she ever looked at.” I swallowed hard, the weight of my confession settling heavily in the quiet night. “It hit me recently, the depth of these feelings, but my love for her, Teo... It’s real. It’s more real than anything I’ve ever felt before. Real enough that I’d give up everything—abdicate the throne—just to be with her.”

It became clear only in giving voice to these feelings how much she truly meant to me. The ambition I had chased my entire life, the crown, the power, all of it paled in comparison to the thought of having her by my side. My eyelids fluttered open, and I found Teo still standing resignedly beside me, his brow

furrowed in quiet contemplation. He didn't speak, but his eyes were locked on me, unwavering, letting me know he was there, truly listening. His presence, calm and steady, coaxed the darkness from my soul, drawing out thoughts I hadn't even realized were festering inside me.

"I can't help but wonder," I murmured, almost to myself, "if Carolina had been wed to me instead of Edward... Would she have loved me the way she loves him?" The absurdity of the thought tugged at the corner of my lips, a bitter smile forming. "It's foolish to wonder, I know. Pointless, even. But I can't stop clinging to the curiosity."

This delusion, this wishful thinking, was a panacea I'd concocted to soothe my wounded ego. I wanted so badly to believe that it wasn't Edward she loved. That if circumstances had been different, if fate had twisted in my favor, her heart might've been mine. Yet, deep down, I couldn't shake the cold certainty that no matter how things had played out, she would always have ended up choosing him.

I'm pathetic, my inner voice spat. Even in my own fantasies, she leaves me for him.

"I'm envious of Edward," I admitted with a heavy sigh. "He has it all—health, magical ability, the love of the woman he adores—as well as a loyal and most capable childhood friend," I added dryly, but Teo didn't react. Only after the quiet had stretched for long moments did he sigh, his gaze drifting out to the garden with mine.

"No matter how much you covet what another has, you'll never possess it," he said with a matter-of-fact finality.

"I know, I know," I replied. "But that doesn't stop me from feeling it."

I wasn't so virtuous a man that I could look at my brother, blessed as he was, and claim not to feel any kind of jealousy. Why shouldn't I? When I saw him, with all that fortune and grace, how could I not want to rail against the heavens for dealing me such a cruel hand? The feelings of inferiority, of envy—they had been there all along, just lying dormant, hidden beneath the surface. But it only took falling in love for the first time to stir up that buried spite. Now, it whirled within me—a chaotic, muddled mess—and as it began to settle, a smirk curved

my lips. A bitter, self-deprecating smirk.

“Edward’s a good man—a good brother,” I conceded. “And as much as it galls me to admit, he and Carolina...they’re good for each other. Though it *really* galls me,” I added, quieter this time. My hand reached up, as if I might grasp the moon that hung, distant and untouchable, in the night sky. “Perhaps it’s true—only Edward can truly make her happy. If that’s the case, then I suppose I’ll have to pray for them—for their continued happiness.”



I wasn't quite ready to throw myself into the role of the well-wisher with full heart and spirit. But I found I could at least hope for their peace, their joy. *Indeed*, I thought with a glimmer of hope, glad that I was able to find even a trace of optimism within me. *I don't wish for them to suffer, not truly.*

I opened my hand, wanting to believe, if only for a moment, that I could hold the moon itself...but I closed my fist around nothing but air. I let out a quiet chuckle at the futility of it all, wondering why something so obvious, so predictable, could still leave me feeling so hollow.

My arm fell back to my side, limp and useless, and I heard Teo sigh softly beside me. "Could you even be more chivalrous?" he muttered, his tone dry. He shrugged and shook his head, as if there were some aspect of my behavior—of my longing for something I could never have—that was impossible for him to comprehend.

Chivalrous, eh? I mused silently. Maybe he had a point. After all, I'd never imposed my will on Carolina, never forced her to love me the way I wanted her to. Besides our healing sessions, I had respected her space, her autonomy. If I'd truly been the kind of man to prioritize my own happiness above all else, perhaps I could've kept her near me in some underhanded or unsavory way. Why hadn't I done so? If I'd been willing to throw away my future for her, why hadn't I gone further?

The answer came as easily as it always did: I hadn't wanted Carolina to resent me. "Her body might've been mine," I muttered under my breath, "but her heart never would've been."

I cupped my hands over my mouth and breathed onto my frozen fingers, though I barely felt the cold—the numbness I felt tickled me somewhat, and I smiled again, albeit weakly. I turned, facing the hall where the strains of the orchestra were still faintly audible through the doors. The melody had changed, and I realized how much time had passed.

"It's nearly time for the dancing to begin," I remarked, glancing back at Teo. "We wouldn't want to miss that, now would we?"

"Indeed," Teo replied, nodding curtly. "Let's go back before anyone starts asking questions."

I marveled at how effortlessly he switched from one topic to the next, as if our conversation hadn't been filled with the deepest of my sorrows. And it struck me—Teo hadn't offered a single word of comfort, not a shred of advice. Quintessentially Theodore, yet somehow I felt lighter. The heaviness of heartbreak still lingered, but the burden wasn't so crushing now. I no longer felt the urge to cry, nor to wallow in my misery.

"I'll warm myself in the royal sitting room before returning," I said, giving his shoulder a light pat. "Thank you, Teo. For listening."

With that, I turned and strode towards the door. The weight of my unrequited love no longer clung to me so tightly. Now, I could focus on what truly mattered. I could focus on becoming a worthy ruler—one who was benevolent, respected, and above all, free from the chains of the past.

(Edward)

I warmed Lina with my magic as we made our way back to the grand hall. The moment we stepped inside, we were swept into the endless cycle of courtly duties, greeting nobles left and right. Lina, though, seemed somewhat off—there was a heaviness in her demeanor, a shadow that dimmed her usual brightness. This routine dragged on until finally the nobles started to peel away, likely in anticipation of the first dance. No one wanted to risk my ire by getting in the way of an opportunity for a prince to dance with his princess.

"Prince Gilbert still isn't back yet. Do you think he's all right?" Lina asked, her voice heavy with worry as she scanned the room, her eyes flickering with concern. "You don't think he left, do you?"

"No, I don't think so," I assured her gently, trying to ease her mind. "My brother wouldn't let something like heartbreak keep him from his duties. He's a person of principle, and I know that he wouldn't do anything to tarnish the imperial family's honor."

I kept my gaze steady, hoping to convey the confidence I felt in Gilbert's return. I trusted him to come back, though I didn't spell it out. I caught Lina's eyes widening slightly at my words before a soft chuckle escaped her and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“Right,” she said quietly, but her uneasy demeanor vanished. “It’s Prince Gilbert we’re talking about. He’ll return, more charming than ever. He has a duty to fulfill.”

She seemed to shake off the last of her worries with a shrug, and I gave her a reassuring nod. Just as whispers started circulating about the first prince’s absence, Gilbert made his triumphant return. He looked refreshed, as if he’d taken the time to compose himself—his clothes were immaculate, and his hair had been neatly smoothed. When the nearby nobles questioned him, he casually mentioned that he’d taken a well-deserved repose in the royal sitting room.

“I’m glad he made it back in time for the first dance,” Lina said.

“Just in time to face the ordeal of picking an appropriate partner,” I replied.

“Quite the distinctive honor, isn’t it?” she mused. “I wonder how he’ll navigate that little challenge.”

Just then, the orchestra began playing a new piece. The melody was a ballroom favorite, one I knew well.

“Lina.” Her name slipped from my lips before I could think, and I gently untangled my arm from hers. I turned to her, dropped to one knee, and extended that same arm back out towards her. “May I have the honor of this dance?”

The words felt awkward, twisting my tongue into unfamiliar shapes, but I pushed through it. Lina’s cheeks flushed, though I couldn’t tell if it was with embarrassment or amusement—after all, I was putting on uncharacteristic airs, desperately trying to be even remotely princely or royal...or so I hoped. Her gaze dropped shyly to the floor before she took a deep breath, lifted her head, and met my eyes. Her face was still flushed, but there was a brightness in her expression.

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied formally with a slight tip of her head. When she placed her hand in mine, my eyes crinkled with joy at the sight. Her touch, even warmer than usual, made my heart lift, and I couldn’t help but smile. As I gently straightened, my other hand naturally found its way around her waist, and together, we began to move in time with the music.

For the next couple of minutes, I was utterly hers and she was completely mine. It had been quite a long time since I'd danced at all. The past few years had been such busy ones with the Pyreborn that I'd never had the opportunity. That, and, well...the rumors that had swirled around me meant that any lady would've been afraid to take my hand. I wasn't the most enthusiastic dancer, but seeing the smile on Lina's face as I spun her around and gently waltzed to the tune of the music—there could be no greater joy.

For those precious moments, we focused only on the dance. It was just me, her, and this overflowing happiness filling my heart. We were lost in that fleeting bliss, and the song seemed to end far too soon. As the final notes faded, I turned to face Lina, bowing deeply, though my heart ached at the thought of the moment ending. I wanted nothing more than for it to last forever, but I knew the extent of Lina's stamina, and asking for another dance right away would be too much.

"How about we return to the palace?" I suggested instead. "We've stayed through the first dance. No one would fault us for leaving now."

She agreed wholeheartedly, and I wrapped my arm around her once more. After bidding farewell to Mother and Father, we left the grand hall behind, heading towards the carriage that would take us back to the Emerald Palace. As we approached, just before I could say goodnight, she paused and turned to me.

"Would you like to come in for a moment? I'm sure the eventful evening has taken its toll on you as much as it has on me," she said, her concern evident despite her own weariness. "At least stay until the effects of the wine have faded for the both of us," she added, her voice gentle but insistent.

I nodded without hesitation. "Of course, I would greatly enjoy your company," I agreed. Did I need any other reason to spend more time with my beloved wife? No, not at all. We headed to her chambers, where I sank onto the guest sofa. Marisa and the other maids were nowhere to be seen, leaving Lina to brew our tea herself. When she set our cups on the table, I smiled, thanking her. She returned the gesture with a soft "You're welcome" before gracefully lowering herself to sit beside me.

Her body still radiated heat, the wine's effects clearly lingering. I swallowed hard, desire flashing through me. I tried to rein it in, as I had so many times before, but this time I felt my control slipping—had the wine addled my mind as well?

This is the last time I drink anything stronger than tea, I silently vowed, reaching for my cup and taking a sip in a desperate bid to distract myself. I was focusing on the taste, trying to stay present, when I felt a gentle tug on my sleeve.

"How is it?" Lina asked. "The tea, that is?"

She looked up at me with wide, innocent eyes. In any other moment, it would've been an endearing gesture, but now...it was sheer poison. My self-control snapped, and the next thing I knew, I had her pinned beneath me on the sofa. My head dipped closer to her, teeth bared, ready to claim the soft skin of her exposed clavicle when—suddenly—sanity returned.

I froze, horrified at what I'd almost done. There I was, hovering over her, our bodies almost crushed together, and... All the blood drained from my face. "S-Sorry! I don't know what came over me!" I stammered, pulling back, desperate to put some semblance of space between us. What had I done, without obtaining her permission? As I loomed over her, gripped by shame and regret, Lina fluttered her large, ruby eyes at me, as if she hadn't fully grasped what had just happened. But realization settled barely a moment later, her cheeks flushing bright red.

I tried to retreat further, to stand and distance myself, but her hand shot out, grabbing my shirt collar with surprising strength. "It's all right," she rasped, her voice husky but steady. "It's all right, so please—touch me."

She wanted it too. The bright flush that had crept all the way up to the tips of her ears told me as much. An embarrassment and shame similar to mine might have racked her, but there was something stronger in her gaze—a resolve that told me this wasn't just about a need to humor me or a case of being swept up in the moment. No, this was her desire, just as much as it was mine.

And if this was what she wanted, what kind of husband—what kind of man—would I be if I didn't oblige her? *Spineless. Coward.* Teo's scathing words echoed

in my mind, spurring me on. I gently removed Lina's hand from my collar and stood up. I saw the flash of pain in her eyes; she thought I was rejecting her. A misunderstanding I couldn't let stand—not after the courage she'd shown to bring us here.

“Perhaps we should withdraw to the bedroom,” I suggested softly. “The sofa's hardly a place for such a momentous step.”

Not that I would mind if it happened on the sofa someday, but for the first time, everything needed to be done exactly right, especially the location.

At my conscientiousness, Lina's face relaxed, though her uncertainty when faced with the reality of the situation kept her slightly on edge. The air between us cleared, and I let out a quiet breath of relief. I bent down, gathering her up in my arms. She felt warm—warmer than usual—and the heat of her body against mine only served to further stoke the fire within me.

I carried her to her innermost chamber, and as I stepped over the threshold for the very first time, a thrill shot through me. All the other times we had pretended to have relations, it had been in my chambers. I felt almost a sense of taboo, as if I were stepping into something forbidden, and it only heightened my excitement.

My body screamed for release, but I held on to that last thread of control as I gently laid Lina down on the sheets. I sat beside her, my hand gliding over her cheek, tracing the line of her shoulders. This was how it needed to be—slow, deliberate, savored. Beside me, she let out a light, airy giggle, her lips curving into a teasing smile as she parted her arms, silently inviting me closer, as if to say *I'm all yours*.

That final thread slipped from my grasp; I pinned her down onto the bed.

“I'll be gentle,” I whispered, my finger brushing softly along her cheek. Then I leaned in, capturing her lips in a deeply desirous kiss. A soft moan escaped her, sending a shiver down my spine. My hands moved to the fastening of her dress, my fingers trembling, eager, wanting everything I was about to have at long last...



(Carolina)

Despite the fact that I had retired at a most reasonable hour the night before, I awoke the next morning feeling more weary than refreshed. I rubbed at my heavy eyelids, attempting to banish the remnants of sleep that clung stubbornly to my lashes. *What time is it?* my groggy mind wondered. I tried to sit up and glance at the clock, but I found myself inexplicably hindered in my efforts. A strange pressure held me fast by the waist, preventing even the slightest movement. Sluggishly, I tilted my head downward—only to discover a heavy, muscular arm draped across my midsection.

My face burned as the memories came flooding back. *That's right*, I thought, the undeniable truth hovering at the edge of my awareness, though I barely dared to examine it too closely. *Ed and I...consummated our union last night, didn't we?* I took an inventory of my feelings: there was some embarrassment, it was true, but also a bubbling joy—and no disgust or shame or discomfort. There was satisfaction—and also relief, I realized. We had been together for so long, yet in all that time, Ed and I had shared nothing more sensual than chaste kisses. I knew he loved and cherished me, but the absence of what I assumed was customary intimacy had left a silent question lingering within me—one unanswered until now. He *did* desire me. I *was* a woman in his eyes. I had barely acknowledged the weight of those doubts when they had been pressing upon me, but now that they were lifted, how light I felt! Ed and I were now truly bonded as man and wife, with no obstacles remaining to us as lovers. The thought brought a tender smile to my face.

I allowed these warm, loving emotions to blossom in the garden of my heart, then turned to face my husband, who even in his sleep wouldn't let me out of his arms. At rest, the hard lines of his face gave way to softer shapes, a glimpse of the boy he undoubtedly once had been. Cherubic was the word that came to mind, and the selection of this adjective made my eyes dance with amusement as I admired this newfound aspect of the man I loved.

As I gazed upon him, something else dawned on me—I felt no...intimate discomfort whatsoever. No aches, no soreness, not even the lingering fatigue one might expect. I recalled Ed's gentleness and consideration from start to finish, and I couldn't help but smile wider. It must've been hard for him to hold

back with such care, yet he had done so without the slightest hesitation. I couldn't help but wonder: *Can he even enjoy himself under such self-imposed restraint?*

And I wasn't talking strictly about last night. Ed had always placed my needs above his own, so much so that I doubted if he ever thought to put himself first at all. It was his steadfast nature, his unwavering love, that had given me the strength to overcome my past and become the woman I was today. The love of this one man had transformed me entirely, molding my heart into a beautiful shape I could never have imagined.

The swell of affection within me grew, coalescing into a single thought, profound in its simplicity. "Thank you, Ed—for loving me." The words tumbled from my lips, as if they had a mind of their own, expressing my desperate wish to convey my gratitude to him, even if he was still lost in the land of dreams.

But then Ed stirred, and his eyes fluttered open. "You stole the words straight from my mouth, my love," he said in a soft voice. "Thank *you*, Lina—for falling in love with me. I love you."

His voice, though rough with sleep, was laden with love and affection. My heart melted at the sound, a gentle smile gracing my lips as I looked upon the man who had given me everything without my ever needing to ask.



“I love you too, my darling,” I replied softly.

“And I will always thank you for it,” he murmured, then leaned forward to press a tender kiss upon my forehead.

The joy in his eyes when he pulled back was infectious, and I savored the lingering warmth of his kiss, a quiet laugh bubbling joyfully from within me. In that moment, the happiness of loving and being loved was ours to share once more, a jubilation that filled the room with a brightness that rivaled the morning light.

Side Story: The Wedding Anniversary

The seasons rolled by, winter melted into spring, and before I knew it, an entire year had passed since I had first arrived in Malcosias. It was a strange feeling, learning that an entire year could feel as short as this one had. But scant weeks after I marked the occasion of a full year spent in this new land, another significant day approached—my wedding anniversary.

I had been looking forward to this day, anticipating a private celebration between Ed and myself as a happy couple. But as fate would have it, it seemed that our anniversary was fated to pass without commemoration. Ed was away on an expedition with the Pyreborn, and he wouldn't return in time. According to Theodore, the knights had been dispatched to deal with mana-beasts who were awakening from their winter sleep, well-rested and ready to cause all sorts of havoc. While my Divinity might have worked to suppress and repel them, the vastness of the empire proved the challenge. My powers only extended so far, and when it came to protecting the distant reaches of the continent, we had no choice but to rely on the efforts of the empire's brave warriors.

A sigh escaped my lips as I pondered the situation. *If only this country were as small as Celestia...* I mused with a frown. An image of Ed's face on the day he had set forth on this particular expedition floated into my mind. A pang of loneliness struck, and the words "Is it too much to ask for us to be able to spend our anniversary together?" tumbled from my lips quietly. Almost immediately, I chastised myself. *The situation is beyond our control.* Ed surely felt the same way I did—there was no doubt he resented the situation too.

Determined to be a supportive wife, I quelled the flicker of disappointment. As I sat myself down on my sofa, my gaze fell upon a meticulously wrapped box. I picked it up and gently ran my hand along it. The box contained a miniature figure of a phoenix—an anniversary gift I had gone to great pains to complete on time. My haste now seemed to mock me.

As I recalled the form of the little felted bird, it occurred to me that with the extra time on my hands I could perhaps make another one. The final product had turned out well, though that was not to say the process had been in any way straightforward. It had been my first time working with felt, and the finished product was the result of three failed attempts—each of which had taken up more time than I had anticipated. I glanced over to the corner of the room where my three rejected creations sat awkwardly on a shelf. Lopsided wings, visible seams, and misplaced body parts gave them a rather grotesque appearance, like a set of shambling apparitions born from the laboratory of a madwoman. But as the madwoman in question, I found something oddly endearing about them, and so I hesitated to throw them away altogether.

In their own way, they *were* somewhat charming—especially since they represented the journey I had taken in the pursuit of finally creating something beautiful. Without those failures, I wouldn't have been able to produce such a well-crafted final product. My lips curled into a rueful smile as I reflected on the time and effort I had invested. Suddenly struck by the urge to create another felted creature, I stood up and called out to my ever-dedicated handmaiden:

“Marisa, could you fetch me some more felt and my sewing—”

Three knocks rang out at the door. Instinctively, I cut off my request at once and glanced over at Owen, who was standing by the wall. My eyes asked an unspoken question—*is it safe to grant entry?* In response, he shot me a knowing smirk and nodded his approval.

Now just what is so funny? I wondered as I straightened up and called out, “Enter!”

“Excuse me,” rumbled a deep baritone voice. The door swung open, and to my utter surprise, none other than Prince Edward Ruby Martinez himself strode straight into my chambers. He must have come straight from the battlefield; his armor, usually polished to a pristine shine, was dirtied with grimy stains.

Not blood, nor sweat, nor filth would deter me in the slightest, however. It had been over a month since I'd last seen my husband, and the sight of him standing before me was all it took for my excitement to overwhelm any sense of propriety. “Ed, you're back!” I exclaimed, launching myself straight into his

arms—the sheer joy of seeing him overpowered everything else.

In contrast to my exuberance, Ed remained his steady, composed self. “Lina, I’m sorry I’m late,” he said, gently stroking my hair as he held me close. “I wanted to return earlier, but there were far more mana-beasts than we expected.” His voice was soft, filled with the quiet affection that I had missed so much. “Oh, how I’ve missed you,” he crooned, echoing my thoughts.

After a moment, he pulled away from our embrace, evidently for the purpose of reaching into his pocket to pull out a small jewelry box—the kind that I might have expected to hold a ring if we weren’t already married. “Shall we celebrate, Lina? The day’s not quite over. We still have some time to enjoy together.”

With a deft motion, he opened the box and tilted it towards me, revealing a pair of stunning ruby-inlaid earrings. “Lina,” he began softly, gently. “There exists a tradition in a distant land where lovers each wear one of the earrings from the same set. And it’s not just for show; there’s a meaning to it. The one who wears the leftmost jewel stands as the protector, and the one who wears the right is the person they’ve forever sworn to shield.” He paused, then dropped to one knee, his eyes never leaving mine. “Will you give me the honor of placing this on your right ear? The left...well, that one belongs to me, because I’ll be the one to watch over you—for the rest of your life.”

The sincerity and love in his eyes coupled with a gesture that felt like nothing short of a second proposal nearly made me break into tears or into laughter; I wasn’t sure which. The blush that crept up my cheeks was only the beginning of this emotional torrent—happiness and sheer gratitude for everything that had brought us to this moment washed over me in waves. And then, overwhelmed by it all, I *did* break, tears spilling over my cheeks. “Yes. Of course!” I squealed, smiling so brightly, so radiantly, that I felt like the embodiment of joy itself.

Ed’s eyes crinkled with warmth as he stood up slowly. “May I put yours on for you?” he asked.

“Of course,” I replied, my voice thick with emotion. “And I will do the same for you.”

We each took each other’s earring from the box, and with all the solemnity of a vow, we placed them on one another’s earlobes—though not without a little

bit of finagling on my part. Ed was simply too tall for me to reach comfortably. In the end, he had to crouch slightly, but with a bit of laughter and teamwork, we managed. Once the earrings were in place, we both took a moment to admire them, sharing a smile that soon blossomed into a laugh.

“It looks beautiful on you, my darling,” he said.

I giggled in response. “Thank you. Yours looks dashing as well.”

There was something about the simplicity of the design that suited him perfectly, a wonderful contrast with his strong, rugged features. The thought that he would wear it out in public, carrying a piece of our bond with him, filled me with happiness. As I basked in the warmth of the moment, I suddenly remembered the gift that I had prepared. *Right, the phoenix! I even wrapped it and everything.*

“Darling,” I said, catching his golden gaze with my own.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Truth be told, I’ve prepared a little present for you, as well. Would you like to open it?”

“Would I? Absolutely I would,” he replied with an eager nod. “A present from my dear Lina...” he murmured to himself, and I could almost feel the excitement radiating from him; he was practically vibrating with anticipation. His reaction was so endearing that I couldn’t help but laugh at his adorable enthusiasm.

“Wait here for just a moment,” I said, still smiling as I went to retrieve the present from the nearby table. I returned and handed it to him with a mix of excitement and nervousness. “It’s not much, but I hope you like it...”

“Of course I’ll like it,” he declared with unwavering confidence. “It’s a present from my dearly beloved wife. How could I not?”

His words, coupled with the palpable joy in his expression, instantly dissolved any lingering anxieties. With an almost exaggerated gentleness, Ed took hold of the present. I could almost see his ears perk up; I imagined a tail wagging with excitement behind him.

“Can I open it?” he asked.

“Please,” I replied, and Ed carefully began to remove the wrapping. His hands moved deliberately and slowly, as if he were handling something incredibly delicate, not wanting to damage even the slightest bit of the decorative paper. I was grateful, but also a little impatient. *It’s all right, darling. Just hurry up and open it,* I thought with a wry smile.

Ed finally lifted the lid, and his eyes widened slightly. “A phoenix...” he murmured. “Did you make this yourself?” He didn’t seem to want to touch it with his sullied gloves, instead examining it keenly from a safe distance. Then, in a gesture that melted my heart, he hugged the box close to his chest, like a little boy who had just received something he’d always wanted.

“This is the most amazing gift I’ve ever received,” he said. “I’ll treasure it forever.”

“I’m happy you like it,” I responded giddily. My hand moved to my right ear, brushing against the ruby stone, and suddenly, there it was again, gracing his handsome face—that smile from a year ago. The one he had flashed on that fateful carriage ride to Malcosias. The one that had breathed hope into my future—the one that had captured my heart. And now, seeing that same smile on my husband’s face, my heart swelled all over again.

Later, after Ed had changed out of his armor and we had both freshened up, we ventured out into the streets of the capital, enjoying what turned out to be one of the happiest days of my life.

Side Story: Missing Her—Edward's Memories

The morning of my wedding anniversary, I did battle with mana-beasts, but as nobly as I acquitted myself, all the while I fought the urge to abandon my post and return to the capital.

I slashed through goblin after goblin, my blade cutting a path of destruction as I advanced towards their den. Once I had drawn close enough, I incinerated the forest cave that was their home in a gout of flame. Black smoke billowed. Screaming goblins, their bodies engulfed in a magical inferno, fled their refuge. They collapsed on the dirt, rolled frantically, tried everything they could to douse the flames, but they found no relief. This was a fire not easily extinguished—it would burn until I willed it to stop, or until the goblins found a body of water deep enough to submerge themselves.

“Knights, stand back,” I bellowed, warning my men of what was to come. “I’m going to end this!” I cast the remaining goblins a scornful look. *Loathsome creatures, how dare you keep me from my Lina!* In the next moment, I conjured another torrent of crimson flame. It erupted from my hands and engulfed everything before me. The wall of fire swept forward, consuming all in its path, leaving nothing but ashes in its wake.

“Commander!” Collett’s voice cut through the roar of the flames. “What you’re doing is risky! Far too risky! What if you burn down the whole forest?!”

I glanced back at him, noting the deep furrow of concern in his brow. His pale face reflected the gravity of the situation—*This isn’t something a letter of apology can rectify!* his expression seemed to say.

“Good,” I replied without hesitation. “If the forest burns, the goblins will have no place to hide.”

Who would miss a goblin-infested forest anyway? I wondered, and without a second thought, I poured even more magic into my palms, fueling the flames. But then, abruptly, my magic fizzled out. It was almost as if somebody had countered it. The exasperated sigh of the somebody in question soon reached

my ear.

“What in the emperor’s name do you think you’re doing, Your Highness?” a familiar voice called out from somewhere above me.

I looked up, searching the skies, and there he was—Teo, floating on one of his wind currents, his expression decidedly unamused. With a shake of his head, he landed gracefully beside me. As he surveyed the blackened landscape before him, another sigh escaped his lips.

“How will you explain your way out of this one, I wonder?” he mused, his tone dripping with disapproval.

“I *could* have turned the entire forest into charcoal if I’d desired to do so,” I pointed out, seeking acknowledgment that I had at least held back a *little*. With a forceful swing of my greatsword, I cut through the thick black smoke that obscured our vision, revealing what had become of the goblins—their charred, motionless husks strewn across the ground.

But goblins were wily creatures. I wouldn’t have put it past them to play dead. Better to be safe than sorry. “We don’t have time to confirm every single one of these kills. Another gout of flame should do it,” I said.

“No, it will most certainly not,” Teo snapped. “Just how much natural splendor must you destroy before you’re satisfied?”

Normally, I would’ve relented, but not today. “Lina is more important to me than some trees. My anniversary is on the line. Now, are you going to help me, or will you continue to stand against me?”

My hand brushed against the small box hidden beneath my breastplate. I even had a present prepared for today—*nothing* was going to come between me and Lina.

Teo studied my stubborn determination for a moment longer, then sighed and pulled a folded piece of parchment from his pocket. “I had planned, in light of the occasion, to teleport you directly back to the capital—but that is only if you focus on the task at hand, Your Highness.” He adjusted his glasses, waving what did indeed appear to be coordinate calculations in front of my face. The intricate scrawl of numbers and equations gave me pause, and I felt myself

starting to calm down. I had assumed we'd be returning to the capital by conventional means, which meant that even if we left at this very second, it would be evening before I saw even a glimpse of the imperial castle. But if Teo was willing to teleport me, travel time would no longer prove an issue. These pesky goblins, however...

"All right," I said after taking a moment to collect myself. "I'll focus on sparing the damn trees, so long as you focus on weaving that magic circle—"

"It's already done," Teo interrupted smoothly. "Securely tucked away in my storage pocket, untouched and unassailable. So let us end this properly—and *together*—Your Highness."

Emphasizing that we were supposed to be working as a team, Teo conjured a windblade with a swift motion. He then addressed the men with authority. "As always, we'll be taking the heads of these goblins as irrefutable assurance of their deaths. If that means severing them one at a time from the corpses, so be it. Goblins are too damn good at feigning death for us to risk leaving them behind. No mistakes—execute your task with the precision befitting the Pyreborn."

At once, the knights rushed out, confirming each kill. Perhaps sensing my urgency to return, they moved with even greater swiftness than usual. I felt my expression soften at the sight. "They're good men," I murmured.

"If you truly believe that," Teo replied, his tone firm, "then perhaps you'll rely on them and think twice before attempting such shortsighted and wholesale destruction ever again. Need I remind you that you are a *commander*, Your Highness? I do not understand what compels you to periodically forget such a self-evident fact."

Teo was right. Every man here shared a single cause—my cause. To push them aside, to attempt to do everything myself, as if I thought I could do it better... This was not only foolishness but also a disservice to the competence and loyalty of my men.

I gave him a nod. "Yes, you're right. And I'm sorry about that. It won't happen again," I promised, lifting my greatsword once more. Together, Teo and I moved towards the grisly pile of blackened bodies, dispatching any remaining goblins—

me with my greatsword and he with his conjured blade.

A short while later, thanks to the combined efforts of my soldiers, Teo, and myself, the task was complete, and more quickly than I had anticipated.

“I will finish up here so that you can leave,” Teo said.

“What? Are you sure?” I asked, taken aback by his offer.

“This particular occasion only comes around once per year. I can make an exception to the prescribed procedures,” he replied. With a casual shrug, he summoned his storage pocket and pulled out the prepared magic circle. He placed it on the ground and reached for my hand. The sensation of the rising energy was immediate, the circle resonating with his power, growing brighter with each passing second. We both shut our eyes as the light intensified.

“Teleporting now!” Teo announced, and then everything went silent. A heartbeat later, we found ourselves within a chamber in the Emerald Palace.

I stood there for a moment, taking in the familiar furnishings. Teo abruptly released my hand. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. Our men are waiting for me,” he said.

“Right,” I replied, snapping out of my reverie. “Good luck, Teo.”

“I don’t need luck,” he said matter-of-factly, summoning his storage pocket once more and retrieving another piece of inscribed parchment—clearly another pre-prepared magic circle for his return to the field. Catching my gaze, he added, “Please, I’ll be fine. Go see Her Highness. I’m sure she’s been missing you terribly.” He glanced towards the stairwell leading up to the second floor as if to say *Go*.

My eyes widened, touched again by the thoughtfulness of my old friend. “Thanks Teo, I owe you one.”

“You can repay me by spending some lovely quality time with Her Highness,” he replied with a softer expression of a kind that I rarely saw on his face, then dipped his head respectfully.

Without wasting another second, I rushed for the staircase. As I reached the bottom step, he called after me, “Do give my salutations to the princess for

me.” I turned back, gave him a nod of acknowledgment, and then I was off again. There was no time for changing or freshening up—I dashed straight to Lina’s room, my heart pounding with anticipation.

Finally, I stood in front of the imposing emerald-inlaid doors. *This is it. I’m finally here!*

Joy swelled, and with it came the vivid image of my darling wife’s face. The loneliness I had felt during our time apart surged, and for a brief moment, a slightly ridiculous urge to kick the door down rose within me. But I managed to restrain myself. *What kind of reunion would it be if I tarnished it with violence?* I reminded myself, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

With my excitement bubbling just beneath the surface, I knocked firmly three times.

Side Story: The Crown Prince—Prince Gilbert's Memories

It was September the twenty-third.

Every member of the nobility was gathered in the throne room of the Diamond Palace today, summoned by the imperial family for a momentous occasion. They stood in perfect columns on either side of the red carpet leading up to the throne, their expressions solemn, eyes firmly fixed on the foot of the dais. It was there that I knelt before my father and mother, both sitting regally before me upon their thrones.

“Gilbert Ruby Martinez,” Father’s voice boomed. “I hereby declare you heir to the throne and bestow upon you the title of crown prince. May you strive each day to become a worthy ruler.”

With those words, he held out a sapphire-inlaid crown towards me. The regal set of his features as he performed this solemn ceremony overshadowed every other aspect of his nature. The warmth and boisterousness that usually radiated from him as my father were nowhere to be seen; instead, he seemed almost divine, like a holy presence descended from above the clouds.

When I thought about the fact that this was the dignity, the sort of presence, that I needed to aspire to achieve in my new role, my body stiffened, nerves jolting through me at the enormity of the task ahead. Could I truly transform myself in the years, perhaps decades, that lay before me? As I knelt there, my father seemed to take on a whole new persona in my eyes. He loomed high above me, like an insurmountable wall—yet I knew that it was one that I had to overcome, no matter the cost.

Indeed, determination burned bright within me. It cast away the darkness, illuminating the path forward. “I humbly accept the title of crown prince,” I replied, letting my voice carry the confidence I felt. “As your descendant, I shall conduct myself with honor, striving each day to become the shining sun that will illuminate the future of our empire.”

With these words spoken, I lowered my head, and my father placed the crown upon it. It was heavy, as if it were weighed down with each and every expectation and responsibility of the crown prince. Yet even as I felt its weight, I knew this crown was not nearly as heavy as the ruby-inlaid imperial diadem, passed down through my family for generations.

The emperor took my hand, and with a firm tug he pulled me to my feet. Then, with a voice like thunder, he proclaimed to the nobles... No, to the people of the empire: “Everyone, witness the birth of an heir—the dawn of a new age of our glorious empire. Now, rejoice!”

At once, the hall exploded into applause. Cheers of well-wishes and prayers echoed from wall to wall. A muted roar reached us even from beyond the grand windows—the citizenry was cheering me on, watching the proceedings through the magical instruments broadcasting the event for all to see. The mood was as celebratory as it had been during Noel, with fireworks launching into the air, painting the sky in vibrant colors—a fitting backdrop to the smiles that sparkled all around me.

“Thank you, everyone,” I replied, a smile of my own creeping onto my face. “I shall endeavor to be the ruler you all believe me to be.”

In that moment, it felt as though I had the wholehearted support of the entire empire, a force so powerful that I felt as if I could conquer any challenge, vanquish any foe. I knew then that whenever I faced adversity in the future, all I would need to do was recall this moment, and it would grant me the strength to overcome any obstacle. Brimming with a newfound courage, I stared straight ahead—my gaze fixed on the bright future of this empire. I made a solemn vow to myself: *this empire, as it is in this moment, will be the worst it shall ever be. From this day forward, it will only grow stronger, more prosperous.*

As I made this lofty vow, my father raised a hand, signaling for the applause to quiet. The double doors creaked open, revealing the leader of our church, the high pontiff himself, Melvin Clark White. Clad in his ceremonial attire, he proceeded with slow, measured steps down the red carpet.

Utterly heedless of the flabbergasted stares of the gathered nobility, His Holiness continued his approach until he stood before the dais. Then, with a

graceful bow, he knelt before us. “To the future ruler of this grand empire, I have come to bestow the blessings of our Lord,” he intoned with ceremonial cadence.

A ripple of surprise spread through the audience. There was precedence for the high pontiff to give a congratulatory address at the coronation of a new emperor, but to give one at the investiture of the acknowledged heir was exceedingly rare. Considering that in all the empire’s history, the same thing had perhaps happened twice, the general amazement was well warranted.

This little piece of ecclesiastical theater had, of course, been prearranged, all part of our plan to demonstrate the strong relationship between the imperial family and the church. I couldn’t help but smile at how effective our little display proved to be—no doubt this would be a significant boost to my legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Pragmatism aside, however, the appearance of His Holiness on this day was significant to me for a very different reason. Before Carolina, he had been the one who had seen me through the worst days of my illness. Without him, I would not have made it to this moment. To have him here, at the culmination of all of our efforts, felt not only right but necessary, and I was glad beyond words that he had accepted the invitation. As I stood there, my eyes narrowing in gratitude, memories of those dark days at the height of my illness flooded my mind—days that had crushed not only my body but my spirit. The pain and despair had been overwhelming, yet the high pontiff had been my steadfast beacon, guiding me through the storm.

Next to me, my father stooped down and offered his hand to the high pontiff. “You have my gratitude, Your Holiness. Please join us in celebration.”

“I will, Your Majesty,” the high pontiff replied, accepting my father’s hand as he rose to his feet. He looked at me, and when I saw that same tender, reassuring gaze I had known for more than a decade, I felt the sudden urge to weep.

“Gilbert Ruby Martinez,” the high pontiff began, his voice deliberate and resonant, each syllable imbued with profound significance. “From the tender days of your youth, I have watched you blossom from a boy of kindness and wit into a man of wisdom and compassion. If you hold fast to these virtues, if you

uplift the downtrodden and stand firm beside the mighty, your reign shall be one of greatness. Therefore, let not your noble spirit falter. Take it, and wield it in service to your realm—your people—with unwavering devotion. The favor of God shall guide you, now and forevermore.”

Then his solemn expression softened into a smile. “Congratulations, my boy,” he added. And with that, he bowed deeply before me.

Again, the audience erupted into applause, this time more exuberant and less restrained. The thunderous cheers seemed to wash over the high pontiff, yet he remained composed, slowly raising his head to meet my gaze. There were glimmers of joyful tears in his eyes, and a palpable sense of relief radiated from him, as though a heavy burden he had carried for years had finally been lifted.

“Seeing you stand here today, receiving this honor, fulfills one of the greatest hopes of my life,” he said, his voice barely audible over the clamor. “Now, I can depart this world without any regrets.”

At his words, I smiled, though with a touch of sadness. “Please don’t say such solemn things! I still need you, Your Holiness—for a long time yet.” After assuring him that his charge was yet unfinished, I gently took his hand and cradled it between my own. It was perhaps a self-indulgent wish to insist that he remain by my side, especially considering his age, but I couldn’t help it—I truly felt that way.

His Holiness just chuckled softly at my childlike plea. “All right, Your Highness. I suppose I’ll stick around for just a little while longer.” He playfully shrugged his shoulders to punctuate his reply. Then he placed his hands over mine, and my eyes narrowed with pleasure in response to his warmth, his love.

“Thank you, Your Holiness. Stay with me, and witness the world I will build with your own eyes,” I said.

With that promise of a brighter future, I couldn’t help but break out into a broad and carefree grin.

Side Story: Mother's Grave—Flora's Memories

Nearly five years have passed since that fateful Noel, the day that altered the course of my life. Over the course of those years, I immersed myself in all Father could teach me, leaving no stone unturned in my pursuit of knowledge. The path was not without its trials—there were formidable obstacles I had to overcome—but through unwavering diligence and perseverance, I surmounted each one. Gradually, my dream began to take shape, piece by painstaking piece. I could see the fruits of my labor; I was closer than ever to my ultimate goal. Yet for all this, I harbored no delusions of having earned Carolina's absolution. No, that would only come when my work was complete, and on that day, I would send Father himself to deliver the message.

I knelt gingerly on the windswept hill, a place I had visited countless times before. My gaze flickered upwards, settling on the weathered stone that marked Mother's final resting place.

"Hello, Mother," I said, my voice barely rising above the breeze. "It has been some time since I last visited you, hasn't it? I'm sorry. It's just that I've been so busy between the demands of the succession and my duties in the realm of civil service." I paused, then a brightness overtook my voice. "But you see, I bring good news today: my hard work has paid off! That was what I wished to share with you."

I glanced back at Father, who stood a few paces behind. When our eyes met, his stern expression softened, and he gave a firm nod of approval. Reassured by his gesture, I turned once more to the grave.

"Mother," I continued, excitement pulling my voice to a slightly higher pitch. "The truth is...I've officially been named Duchess Sanchez—just the other day! Unfortunately, I'm not quite prime minister yet. Father and I have agreed that when the king passes his torch, he will do the same. Of course, that won't be the end of my journey; it will rather be the beginning."

I could only imagine what my mother's reaction would be to my news, but

somehow I just knew she would be beaming with pride, congratulating me. The thought warmed my heart, and I found myself smiling, a smile meant only for her.

“It’ll take everything I have and perhaps even more to fulfill my promise to Carolina and secure Celestia’s future,” I continued. “But I won’t falter, not for a moment. Keep watching over me, as you always have, Mother. I’ll make you proud—I’m certain of it.”

With that, I gently laid the bouquet of carnations I’d been clutching against my chest onto her grave. As I bowed my head in silent prayer, hoping these flowers might reach her in heaven, Father’s voice broke the stillness.

“Hello, Karen. Your little girl has grown into a remarkable young woman, hasn’t she? And now...well, I feel like I’ve outlived my usefulness,” he quipped with a shrug, his lips curling into a sad smile.

I could see the bittersweet pride in his eyes, knowing that both Carolina and I had grown strong yet feeling the ache of watching us step further away from needing his care. But just because we were no longer those helpless, fragile children didn’t mean his role in our lives had diminished.

“Father, that’s not true,” I countered, a playful note in my voice. “The road ahead for me and Carolina is still a long one. Now you can watch over us as we grow—just as Mother has.”

I wanted him to understand that being a parent wasn’t just about fixing our mistakes or holding us up when we stumbled.

“We may be older now, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re still your daughters,” I continued. “The world around us may shift, it may change entirely, but nothing will ever break the bond we share as a parent and his children.”

The love of a family was enduring, stronger than time itself. I let that truth shine in my eyes as I met my father’s emerald gaze. And then I offered him a small, bashful smile.

“It’s our turn now, Father,” I said softly. “To honor everything you and Mother have given us, to repay you both for the love and care you’ve shown us. You’ve spent your life nurturing us, and now it’s time for you to see the fruits of that

labor.”

This was my implicit promise to care for him in his old age, and in response, Father’s eyes crinkled at the corners, the wrinkles seemingly more pronounced than usual. The lingering gloom from earlier dissipated, replaced by a warm smile that lit up his face. “That means a great deal, my daughter,” he said, his voice softening. Then, that playful twinkle reappeared. “By the fruits of that labor, surely you mean a grandchild to comfort me in the twilight of my days, yes?”

I awkwardly averted my gaze. “Let’s... Well, I’m sure Carolina would be happy to oblige you in that. Me, I’m always too busy with my work...”

Before I could settle on a graceful excuse, Father burst into hearty laughter, the sound rich and full of life. “It was just a joke,” he assured me, still chuckling. A small, indignant pout tugged at my lips, but the absurdity of the moment got the better of me, and soon I too was laughing along with him.

Who would have thought the day would come when Father and I would share such carefree amusement? The old me, the “perfect lady,” would have certainly tutted in disapproval at something so “unladylike.”

I was glad I wasn’t that person anymore. Life was far more enjoyable this way. There are many ways to define happiness or fortune, but this—these shared moments, this lightness—felt like the truest definition of them all.

I glanced at the tombstone, still giggling a little, and I imagined Mother right there with us, her laughter echoing from the heavens, her belly aching with joy.

That day, I learned what it truly meant to laugh until you cried.

Side Story: Paying Respects

It was during a brief warm spell, when the snow had begun to melt and the first whispers of spring started to grace the air, that Ed and I made our journey to Celestia to visit my mother's grave. Standing before the weathered tomb, the name "Karen Sanchez" carved deeply into the marble, Ed and I both lowered ourselves to the ground, the soft grass tickling our ankles.

"Greetings, Madam... Um, Duchess Sanchez," Ed began, his voice tinged with a mix of reverence and nerves. "I am Edward Ruby Martinez, husband to your daughter Lina... I—I've come today to pay my respects."

Despite his verbal clumsiness, he spoke to the stone with the same gravity and sincerity as if addressing a living person, his posture firm, his gaze unwavering.

"This meeting... It should have happened much sooner," he continued, his voice steadying in its earnestness. "But the empire's power struggles and my own lack of time caused a delay. For that, I must humbly ask your forgiveness."

He then bowed his head deeply. The naturalness of the gesture, his desire to treat someone with this level of respect on a first meeting, even if it was my mother's grave, was so quintessentially Ed. The thought brought a gentle smile to my lips as I turned my gaze back to the stone.

"Mother," I said, beginning my address. "Ed is a kind and compassionate man, and he treats me wonderfully. When I journeyed to Malcosias for the first time, I was alone and rudderless in a foreign land. It was his kindness and care that sustained me. Truly, I am who I am today because of him. So rest easy, Mother. I'm in good hands. The very best of hands, actually."

As my words tapered off into a smile, I noticed Ed's expression soften as well, reflecting the warmth in my own.

"Duchess," Ed spoke again, his tone becoming even firmer with confidence. "I swear to protect Lina for as long as I live. To that end, I've come here today to

seek your blessing. Perhaps you won't grant it just yet," he added, gently placing a bouquet before the tomb, "but I hope that when we return, I will have earned it."

He rose, his movements deliberate, and extended his hand towards me.

"We can come back? To Mother's grave?" I asked, taken aback. I had fully assumed this would be a onetime visit, and I had been very grateful to have been allowed even that. After all, I was now a Martinez, and it felt somewhat improper to frequently visit the grave of a member of my Celestian family, even if it was my own mother. Wouldn't people question my loyalty to the imperial family if such visits became too commonplace?

But to my surprise, none of these same doubts seem to trouble my husband. "Why wouldn't we?" he replied easily. "Though the next time I may be able to return is in the fall. I'll likely be dispatched to deal with mana-beasts all summer." As he said this, his face fell. I could sense his imagined and eternally wagging puppy's tail falling still behind him.

"That's quite all right!" I quickly reassured him. "The fact that we can return at all is already more than I ever expected, and I'm truly happy. Really, I am!" A genuine smile spread across my lips, the joy in my heart from this dream come true reflected in my eyes.

Some of my joy seemed to reach Ed, and he brightened once more. "Though I doubt we'll ever be able to take our time," he admitted. "We'll have to keep sneaking around like fugitives. The king of Celestia might've discreetly sanctioned our visit this time, but the regular appearance of the Saint and a prince would cause quite the commotion if word got out."

"And that's perfectly all right as well," I replied with a confident nod. "Better this than drawing all that attention to ourselves."

With that, I finally took Ed's outstretched hand and rose to my feet.

"All right, then. We'll be back," Ed promised. "For now, though, I think we should be on our way."

"Ah, right," I agreed with a nod. Remembering that a third, blonder, and less patient member of our party was waiting for us not too far away, it seemed

wise to wrap things up. With a sense of finality, I turned to face Mother's grave one last time.

"Well, you heard us, Mother. I hate to leave so soon, but we'll visit again. Farewell for now—we'll see each other soon."

With a smile, and not a farewell but a promise to return, I took my husband's hand, and together we turned and left that hallowed place behind, striding confidently towards our future...together.

Afterword

Thank you for choosing to pick up the fourth volume of *The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I Was the Real Saint All Along!* I am the author, Almond. As those of you who have finished reading have surely surmised, this is the final volume of the series.

Thank you.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you all for your support! I could not have brought this series to completion without you.

To be utterly and perfectly honest, when it came to this series, I had always feared the swing of that mighty axe. When I saw (guesstimated) the sales figures of volume two, I was like, “Welp, this is it.” So imagine my surprise when I got the go-ahead to write more. Earth Star, you are the best and I love you. You even gave me a manga adaptation, which is more than I deserve (helmed by the great Yona Etou-sensei at that!). The art is immaculate, the story is easy to digest and adapted perfectly... Seriously, I could not have asked for a better mangaka with a greater sense of what works in the medium and what doesn't—it's incredible. If you haven't read the manga yet, certain parts are streamed for free, so what are you waiting for? Check it out! You'd be doing yourself a favor, I promise!

Now, I'd like to share what is perhaps the biggest behind-the-scenes tidbit about this series:

I struggled with how to handle Flora's story arc until the very end.

I thought maybe that she should face her fate in some kind of brutal, satisfying moment of comeuppance. But then I thought, given the general vibe of this series and Carolina's personality...did that really work? Maybe something that ends with a redemption arc would be better? I wrestled with the question over and over again until my stomach hurt: what *was* the story I wanted to tell about these two sisters?

Even now, with the manuscript done and dusted, I sometimes have doubts I made the right choice. But then I just look at Yoshiro Ambe's illustrations, Yona Etou-sensei's version of the story, and that makes me think, "Yeah, every single character in this story deserves to be happy and get along." (The power of pictures, I tip my hat to thee.)

Sorry for getting off topic. That was all I had for behind-the-scenes talk.

Also, there are quite a few side stories in this volume! They're mainly epilogues about what happens to the characters after the story. If you want to learn about how they all got on, definitely check out the side stories at the end of this volume and the special edition ones too. Everyone does quite well in the end, so if you want to feel warm and fuzzy inside, go give them a read!

Lastly, but certainly not least, acknowledgments.

To my supportive dad, my outwardly cool but inwardly doting brother, and all my writing friends—thank you all so much, as always.

A special thanks to the illustrator of the series, Yoshiro Ambe. I always have too much to say about the characters, and you put up with me far more than I deserve—thank you.

To my editor, who supported me from the very beginning when I was just a newbie writer—your guidance has been invaluable. And to everyone else involved in the production of this book, I am deeply grateful to you all for your hard work and dedication.

Finally, to you, the reader—thank you for coming along on this journey with me, and for sticking through it until the very end. Your support is what makes it all worthwhile.

Thank you all, from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you for seeing *Oblivious Saint*
through to its conclusion!

Yoshiro Ambe





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The Oblivious Saint Can't Contain Her Power: Forget My Sister! Turns Out I Was the Real Saint All Along! Volume 4

by Almond

Translated by Dawson Chen Edited by Rachel Kohler

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