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The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess

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Chapter 1: Begone, Unholy Woman

“OUR betrothal is annulled, you lascivious priestess!”

Thus declared His Royal Highness, Prince Medaikonar Kophe, his ice-cold voice echoing throughout the hall. There was only one problem—the purpose of tonight’s special party was to *announce* our engagement.

What in the realm is happening? I haven’t even been betrothed for five minutes!

My mind in chaos, I remained speechless, unable to string words together coherently. Those who were gathered around us—nobles and royalty both—seemed to hold their collective breaths, listening raptly as a deathly silence blanketed the space. Someone inadvertently struck a piano key, and the resulting *plink* reverberated endlessly through the room, echoing up to the high ceiling and all the way back down again.

I could see a vein throbbing in Prince Medaikonar’s forehead. He roughly combed his fingers through the well-coiffed locks of his golden hair, then pointed an accusing finger at me from his seat, which was positioned a single rung below the throne.

“Priestess,” he demanded in a disgusted tone, “why was I not informed earlier of your *unholy* power?! Why was I unaware that you are possessed of an ability so *vile* that it induces lust in those around you?!”

“W-Well, you see, I—”

“Do you *really* expect me to believe that all those strapping young knights you’ve been fighting monsters with at the front line have somehow failed to fall under your seductive spell? I find it entirely *inconceivable* for such a thing to be true when you’ve been using your peculiar abilities the entire time! Tell me, priestess—tell me I am wrong!”

“U-Um…”

The truth was, His Highness was right—but only partially. And so, I decided that perhaps it would be best if I tried to appeal to his better judgment.

I took a deep breath, feeling very aware of the fact that I was at the center of attention of everyone within the grave, quiet hall, and then said, “With all due respect, Your Highness, the rare ability bestowed on all priestesses is well known to have a strong effect on the survival instincts of living creatures. That is only natural, as it is a healing skill that amplifies the innate recovery rate of the recipient. That being said, I must acknowledge that the strength of my particular ability is not without consequence, the price being a side effect that incites a certain degree of excitement in myself and others.”

The prince’s eyes narrowed. “So, you admit it!” he snarled. “A soiled holy woman like you could *never* become my consort, let alone my kingdom’s future queen! The mere idea is preposterous! I say again, our betrothal is annulled!”

“Please, just listen to me!” I cried. “All the men I fought with on the front lines adhered to a most chivalrous code of honor! Each and every one of them were well-mannered, honorable men! They would never have behaved as uncouthly as you imply.”

“*Silence!* I know the truth, you odious priestess. I can hear it in your voice! Such a tone could only come from a woman who has known the touch of a man!”

My mouth dropped open. “Th-That is simply not true!”

This exchange finally shattered the hush that had fallen over the hall, and people began shouting left and right. A great many of them seemed perturbed by Prince Medaikonar’s hateful attitude, not to mention his vitriol-filled words.

Not that any of them will protect me, I thought, shoulders drooping.

And why not, you ask? Well, because everyone in the hall, save myself, was of the peerage. None of them would bother standing up for a commoner like me.

I’d managed to end up in this place some time after I’d been dispatched to Mayga Cieux, a forest located in the western portion of the Kingdom of Kophe. Mayga Cieux occupied about one-eighth of the nation’s territory, and had the unfortunate fate of being plagued by monsters. As a result, it had been

demarcated as a disaster zone—the special designation was apt, since the forest was the part of the kingdom that suffered the highest number of monster outbreaks.

My job had been to defeat the monsters within Mayga Cieux using my divine abilities. I'd done my best, and eventually my efforts had been recognized as meritorious achievements performed in service to the nation. This recognition was what had ultimately led to me being chosen as Prince Medaikonar's fiancée, even despite my common birth.

Ultimately, the problem of my lineage had been resolved just hours ago, when I'd signed an adoption agreement with a marquess. My transformation into a noblewoman had been instantaneous, and I'd been carted off right then and there to observe a variety of necessary formalities. It was only after their completion that I had been led into the throne room where I now stood, where it had finally been announced that I was the prince's intended. This last event had only happened five minutes prior. And now, mere moments after its recognition by the peerage, our engagement was to be *dissolved*?

The aristocracy present seemed to be similarly taken aback by the situation, though their shock seemed tempered by relief. When I saw the raptness of their gazes, I felt like I could guess exactly what they were thinking. It would be something like, "While it's certainly true that His Highness's words are beyond the pale, the priestess *is* a member of the *hoi polloi*…" or "I'd rather agree with the prince than run the risk of a peasant becoming queen." Judging by their behavior, such sentiments seemed to be shared amongst them all.

Frankly speaking, I had now come to a place where I found the whole ordeal nearly too painful to endure.

I turned my face away from the apathetic stares of the elite, and spied a man lurking in the shadows of a pillar. The thin, hunch-backed lordling was watching me, an unsavory smile on his face. I recognized him by his hair, which was dun-colored, and brushed to a gleam.

So he's *the culprit,* I thought, filled with distaste.

The man's name was Lord Keunt Strelizzi. From my time at the front lines, I knew him to be a person possessed of what could be referred to as a slight

victim mentality. He had always been all talk and no action—he'd go around proclaiming grandly that he was to become a great hero, only to complain endlessly whenever he was assigned to fight in a place he deemed dangerous. To top it all off, whenever he was given an assignment that actually matched his requirements, like supplying troops in a relatively safe area, he'd get all sulky and resentful and demand, "Are you implying that I'm useless elsewhere?!"

Lord Keunt's problematic behavior had eventually caused him to be assigned nearly exclusively to independent tasks, since he might cause issues otherwise. But naturally, he was never happy to receive such orders, as he didn't want to be separated from the rest of the company.

In short, he was quite a difficult man in many ways. His high-status family name only made dealing with him that much harder, since his rank in the peerage outstripped the front-line commander's authority.

I had chosen long ago to treat Lord Keunt as I would any of my fellow comrades on the battlefield, even despite his disagreeable nature. I interacted with him just as I would with any other I considered my equal, and afforded him all my respect. Secretly, I considered him socially inept, and thought of his foibles as part and parcel of his condition. Back then, I had truly believed that he was trying to do his best in his own way, and was an upright individual at his core.

I'd been much too naïve.

TWO days ago, I had been minding my own business in the royal palace. I had recently moved in, as the prince had wanted me to be in residence by the time our engagement was announced.

Then, suddenly, Lord Keunt had appeared, grabbing me and dragging me off into a hidden alcove. Thus cornered, I'd had no choice but to ward him off as he attempted to forcibly kiss me.

"You fancy me, don't you?" he'd said in a husky voice. His heavy breath had rasped over my face as he grasped my hips, kneading them in his hands. "Isn't that right, priestess? So, come on, just let me kiss you."

“Wh-Wherever did you get that idea?!” I’d stammered in horror, only just managing to stop myself from screaming.

Lord Keunt had only stared at me, his eyes feverish with excitement. “Oh,” he’d drawled, “I’ve known for quite some time that you have feelings for me.”

The only response I could summon to this statement was a blank stare. *Well,* I’d thought, *that’s certainly not a reality I’m living in.*

“When we were on the front lines, I never truly viewed you as a viable prospect, perhaps because of your unusual power. But seeing you as you are now, clothed in such a fine dress…well, it made me think it would be a waste if I didn’t reconsider.”

So it was my dress that provoked him…? I’d thought, the color leaching from my skin.

Normally, I would have been safe from an attack like this, since my saintly garments were bespelled with a special defense mechanism that warded off lust. This provided me with a safeguard against anyone who’d been driven into heat by my powers. But that day when Lord Keunt had cornered me, I’d been bereft of such protections, as I had been commanded by a lady-in-waiting to leave them behind.

“You’ll be perfectly safe here in the royal palace,” she’d told me in a condescending tone. “So really, I must insist you remove that drab, unpleasantly fish-scented sack *at once*.”

Faced with her demands, I’d had no choice but to remove my saintly apparel, though it had left me feeling completely and utterly naked. Ever since, I’d been focusing intently on keeping my powers as a priestess dormant, doing my very best to avoid inducing even a hint of lust in myself or anyone else. And yet, in the end, it appeared that my efforts had ultimately failed.

A shiver had chased down my spine as Lord Keunt leaned closer and closer to me, his breath coming in labored pants against my face. “Holy woman…” he’d moaned. “So *this* is what the crown prince’s woman does to a man…”

I’d realized, then, that Lord Keunt must have set his sights on me from the very beginning. His actions in that moment had certainly been enough to reveal

him as a deviant. And no normal one, either—it appeared that not only was he willing to commit a crime as inexcusable as assault, but he was also even brazen enough to do so in the royal palace.

Was it any wonder that such a man would react in this way, when confronted with a maiden strolling the grounds in a dress that exposed her decolletage as outrageously as mine had? Of course not—I had no doubt that any such maiden would have found herself in the same position I had: pulled unceremoniously into a darkened alcove, caught up in the unsavory clutches of the fiend who had been lying in wait for her. No doubt *that* fiend would have acted the same as Lord Keunt, intently ogling the trapped maiden's breasts as he tried to steal kisses from her without her consent.

And all it had taken for me to end up in such a disastrous situation was to be separated from my guard for a few short seconds. But perchance that had also been part of Lord Keunt's strategy.

"Lord Keunt," I had said firmly, "please, stop this. You must be aware that at the ball taking place a few days hence, I will become His Royal Highness's fiancée! I beg of you, think not only of the prince's honor, but of your family's as well. Think of the honor of the duchy of Strelizzi, which you are destined to inherit! Please, won't you put a stop to this unbecoming behavior before you sully any of their names?!"

"I-I'll have you know that adultery and orgies are quite the norm in the royal family," the lord had huffed in my ear, breath still coming in gasps.

"That may well be true, but I most certainly do not care for such things!" I had snapped in return.

"Come now, priestess," Lord Keunt had drawled, "I was under the impression your marriage to the prince was one of convenience. Certainly something so simple as a kiss wouldn't jeopardize your position."

In lieu of a response, I'd glanced around frantically for my guard, who was still nowhere to be found. I hadn't known what to do; I couldn't have possibly struck down a distinguished personage like a duke's son with magic, even if I was defending myself.

As I'd waffled in indecision, Lord Keunt had sunk his hand into my hair, jerking

me roughly toward him. His lips had grown alarmingly close to mine.

There had been nothing else for it—I lifted both my hands and lightly pushed him away.

But even this slight rejection had been enough to enrage him.

He'd stared at me for a moment, clearly dumbfounded by my resistance, before the anger had hit him, and his face flushed a deep, furious red.

"You wench!" he'd snarled. "You *dare* to reject my kiss in such a fashion?! You *dare* to make a fool of me?! You have some nerve for a commoner! I'll make you pay for this, mark my words!"

He'd stormed away, then, making quite the grand production of himself. His angry footsteps had clacked loudly against the flooring.

"Oh, dear…" I'd sighed, watching him go.

AFTER that incident, I had been filled with a deep apprehension that Lord Keunt would retaliate in some way against me, but I had never expected that his revenge would take the form of ruining my engagement. In the end, though, it wasn't Lord Keunt's actions that hurt me so deeply—it was the fact that His Highness had accepted what the disgusting man had said about me with such ease.

I stared up at where the prince sat on his throne, taking in the sight of him. He was all silky golden locks and shimmering blue eyes, his striking features overlaid with a layer of fine, alabaster-pale skin that defied the bronzing effects of the sun's touch.

Looking at him, I was struck by the thought that the prince had much in common with your typical well-bred young lady—he had had a sheltered upbringing, during which he'd been cocooned within only the best parts of life, and had had relatively few chances to encounter any sort of hardship. The title of crown prince had been handed down to him by his elder brother, Prince Stevay, who was now bedridden due to an unfortunate accident. This meant that unless his brother went through an unexpected recovery, Prince Medaikonar would be the next ruler of the Kingdom of Kophe.

Naturally, Lord Keunt had known all this as well. And he had used his knowledge of the prince to deduce that the most effective method of changing his mind about our engagement was to reveal the cost my powers as a priestess demanded of me.

“Why so quiet, you unruly priestess?” Prince Medaikonar demanded. “Can you not think of a single excuse?”

Complete silence once again reigned in the hall.

“Very well, Your Highness,” I said softly, lowering myself into a curtsy. I kept my head held high, and my carriage proper. “I humbly acknowledge the end of our betrothal.”

Never let your head waver, even on bended knee, snapped a voice in the back of my mind. It was hard *not* to remember that particular lesson, with as harshly as it had been drilled into me.

I waited for the prince to dismiss me from the hall, but instead, his features crumpled in anger. “So you admit it, you filthy trollop!” he shouted, leaping to his feet in an agitated rush. “You *did* indulge in dissolute fetes of the flesh!” A triumphant look broke out over his face, as if he had just succeeded in besting some sort of monster.

I could only stare at him, my spine rigid, and declare, “Of that, I am innocent.”

I could not let these allegations pass—if I did not deny them resolutely, then the honor of my compatriots on the battlefield would be sullied. I couldn’t let such a thing happen, not when they had protected me like the gentlemen they were.

And so, I didn’t let my eyes waver from the prince’s for even a moment. “Not only am I innocent,” I asserted, “but I can prove it. All it would take is an examination from a magical physician to prove that my body remains pure. I am quite certain that my comrades on the front would attest to my integrity as well. And yet…”

The prince opened his mouth, as if to deride me further, but I continued before he had the chance. “*And yet,*” I said firmly, “I cannot deny that being engaged to someone of Your Royal Highness’s station is beyond what I deserve.

I may be a holy woman now, but there is no ignoring the fact that I was raised as a commoner. I was never suitable for such an honor."

I slowly spun around as I spoke those last words, surveying the entire chamber in which we stood.

Ahhh, I thought with a wistful sigh, *what a sumptuous place. I doubt a plebeian holy woman like me, whose work is on the battlefield, could ever feel truly at home within such palatial elegance.*

Once I'd looked my fill, I spun back to face Prince Medaikonar and his parents, who sat next to him, ensconced upon their own thrones. The royal couple had maintained an ominous silence throughout our disagreement, not saying a word to stop their son's reckless behavior. This abstention left me with little choice but to surmise that they were in agreement with their son on this matter.

Memories of the past year flashed through my mind. I had studied so hard to become queen. It hurt to remember how much I had struggled, or to think of the unbearable strain—both physical and mental—that had been put on me by my constant traveling between the front lines and the royal palace. The culture between the two had differed so extremely that the stress of having to constantly readapt to my surroundings had been overwhelming. I'd felt as if I could feel the very threads of my existence fraying away.

If I was to be honest, I had to admit that the past year had been the worst of my entire life. I had done what I could to change it for the better, but in the end, my efforts had failed. Now, all that was left for me to do was make it through this audience so I could return to my duties.

"Your Highness," I intoned, keeping my voice sweet and respectful, "I freely admit that the fault for this commotion falls to me, though I must say that I consider the wounding of your heart to be the most grievous sin I have had the misfortune of committing. Such is my sorrow, that I will accept any punishment you choose, be it the breaking of our engagement or a sentence of exile."

"You fool," the prince spat, his lips twisting in blatant contempt. "Exiling you would be nothing but a waste."

I was so shocked by this pronouncement that an impolite "Eh?" slipped

unconsciously from my mouth.

Prince Medaikonar ignored me entirely. “Henceforth,” he proclaimed, “you will continue to act as the wanton priestess that you are, using your powers to protect our kingdom from the monstrous threat within Mayga Cieux.”

Wait, what? I thought incredulously. *That can’t be right. He can’t seriously mean to make me do my utmost to fight for* this *kingdom, even after everything else I have been subjected to!*

But I could not summon the energy to say these words out loud—I was no longer either willing or able to suffer any further mortification. I left the hall and returned to the room that had been specially reserved for my use, and there, I let myself cry for a time.

HOLY *woman. Priestess. Saint.* So many different words, and all for the same being. Unlike magic, which could be acquired later in life, one’s nature as a holy woman and the unusual powers such a status conferred were present from the very moment a child was born.

Broadly speaking, a holy woman was gifted with two particular powers. The first power gave her the ability to rejuvenate the life force of others; the regenerating of flesh and the healing of wounds served as pertinent examples. The second power gave her the ability to amplify her own magic, and thereby activate tremendous magical power.

In normal circumstances, magic such as mine was considered second class, but once I activated the enhancement ability conferred upon me by my sainthood, my magic rose to first class. This level of advancement was only possible because of the strength of my saintly abilities, which I’d been told were exceptionally powerful. Though specific technical provisions existed to describe the might of my overall talents, they could be explained using simple terms as well. When called upon to give an approximation, most would describe me as, “The only saint in history whose abilities are so strong that they are able to provide divine protection to an entire military base.”

Even going without such enhancement, my magic was quite powerful. It was at so high a level, in fact, that I was considered to be just as strong as the

noblemen who were eligible to declare themselves as candidates to become high priests within the Great Church. It was a comparison I'd found useful, since it allowed me to explain my strength in a way most people grasped nearly instantly.

My saintly nature had been discovered upon my tenth birthday. At that point, I had left the orphanage in which I had been housed hitherto to attend the Holy Woman's Academy of Learning, a school both founded and operated by the government. It was there that I had received my training as a priestess.

I had finished my education at the age of thirteen, and had soon after been sent off to the forest of Mayga Cieux. Just like that, I had been plunged into the Kingdom of Kophe's specially designated disaster zone, where I had been called to step into my role as a holy woman who battled on the front lines.

As the sole priestess assigned to the base, I'd had to learn how to deal with all manner of different tasks, day in and day out. Often I could be found splattered with entrails and monster blood as I wove amongst the fighting, providing medical care and support to the knights immersed in combat. In times like those, I would make use of both my healing ability, which was impressive in its own right, and my enhancement ability, which I referred to affectionately as my saintly superpower. When the latter was activated, I was able to invigorate a person's life force so intensely that I could perform incredible feats of healing.

Unfortunately, this uniquely powerful form of healing had its drawbacks—the main one being that it induced a heightened state of sexual arousal in both the recipient and myself. But as long as I could suppress the heat my ability caused, I could undertake the responsibilities of more than ten top-ranked holy women all on my own.

And so, I had strived to do just that for the many years that had passed since I had first been assigned to Mayga Cieux, the Kingdom of Kophe's deadly forest of monsters.

"TO think that I would be denounced as a lascivious priestess…" I muttered, staring listlessly out my bedroom window.

A week had passed since my dignity had been so brutally trampled at the ball,

but I was still currently being detained in the annex that housed my room at the royal palace.

The myriad of procedures accompanying the end of my engagement to Prince Medaikonar were taking some time, and I'd heard there had been delays in rescinding one of my titles. The appellation of Esteemed Holy Woman came along with an honorary position, and had been bestowed upon me by the Great Church of Kophe when I had been chosen as His Royal Highness's fiancée. Even though the title came with little actual weight, it was still necessary to revoke it now that we were no longer betrothed.

"Well, three meals a day, endless naps, and a positively lovely tub certainly make for a peaceful existence…" I said softly, pressing my forehead against the pane of my window.

Outside, the sky was cloudless and blue, stretching endlessly above the verdant, carefully tended garden below. It was a commanding view; truly, the picture of tranquility.

Meanwhile, my life is falling apart after being branded an unholy woman, I thought wryly.

To be frank, the emotional wounds that I had incurred during the prince's excruciatingly public disavowal had already healed. In the end, it had always been impossible for a commoner like me, whose feet were set firmly upon the ground, to coexist peacefully with the likes of royalty and nobility, whose station lifted them high above the clouds. This knowledge had sapped me of my ability to care about their slandering of me; I no longer minded if they thought me debauched or unholy.

This left me with only one problem—the question of what would become of my future. Now that I had lost the support that came with being the prince's fiancée, I wasn't sure if I could continue living in this kingdom as I had once before. Especially since I was now a so-called "indecent holy woman."

I had to ask myself honestly, *Will I still be able to protect my chastity, now that I've lost the security that came with my position as the prince's betrothed?*

The degree of arousal my saintly superpower instigated in a patient directly corresponded to the amount of effort I had to expend to heal them—in other

words, it was entirely out of my control. The majority of the knights were well-mannered, no matter how much power I used, but there were of course a number who were not. I could not definitively state that I had never found myself in danger during my time among them, and that had been before His Royal Highness had decided to declare me a “lascivious priestess.”

This was exactly why I had always taken such great pains to protect myself, and had adopted numerous measures throughout my life that made me feel safe and secure. I had surrounded myself with allies I could trust, and continually tried to improve the effectiveness of the special defense mechanism I’d sewn into my priestess attire, among other things.

But, in the end, the metaphorical shield provided by being His Royal Highness’s betrothed had proven to be far more effective than any of my other efforts. It had made things quite simple: all I had to do was say I was affianced to the prince, and the other party easily understood that they should keep their distance. With that nigh-invincible cloak, I had been able to repel both strangers and the occasional reckless, morbidly curious, would-be rapist.

It was not lost on me that the prince’s smearing of my name might result in the attraction of more of these unsavory characters to the front line. There would certainly be those curious enough to want to test the truth of his words. I shook my head vehemently to dispel that terrible thought, but I couldn’t ignore the horrendous chill that still rushed down my spine.

“I have no choice except to forge ahead,” I told myself, trying to bolster my courage. “I have survived thus far, and so I must continue to do the same.”

Beyond the front line, I had nowhere else to go. Some time ago, my hometown had been destroyed in a monster attack, of which I had been the only survivor. The memory only solidified my determination.

Society might call me an unholy woman, but that does not change the fact that I have been blessed with the powers of a saint. I will not forsake that gift—instead, I’ll do everything in my power to prevent that sort of tragedy from befalling any other village and its people.

I smiled grimly. “Back to the front line I go.”

ONCE all the formalities had been observed, I was awarded a meager settlement by the royal family, who then allowed me to return to the front line by way of a relocation device.

Thus transported, I found myself standing in front of the familiar shape of the royal fortress which had been erected at the forefront of Mayga Cieux. The fortress was managed by the chivalric order, which was responsible for ruling over the westernmost portion of the monarchy, and contained a small town within its walls that was well-known for both its status as an outpost and for its close placement to the front line.

It was not long before the townspeople noticed my return, and soon they came piling out in droves to greet me. *There's the elderly man that runs that tobacco shop, and that old woman who works as a fortune teller,* I thought, eyes tracing over the crowd. But though I recognized some faces, most were mere pinpricks scattered among a throng of barmaids, sex workers, and even retired knights.

They were a rather outrageous lot, so it only took me a few moments to glean that they had somehow managed to learn of my predicament.

"I heard tell what happened to ya, little saint," one of the townspeople called over to me. "Some blasted talk of ya bein' a lascivious priestess or such?"

Dismay flickered through me. "How is that so widely known already?!"

"Well, ever since that newspaper sprung up in the royal capital, information spreads like wildfire, ya know," the man replied gently.

The tobacconist kindly proved the townsmen right by proudly brandishing a newspaper toward me. "Massive Revelations Come to Light!" proclaimed the title. "His Royal Highness Dissolves His Betrothal to the Lascivious Priestess!!!"

I sighed. "How absolutely horrendous…"

The elderly tobacconist let out a chuckle. "Now, now, don't get too worked up. We've got everything ready so you can drown your sorrows in drink for the day. Think of it as a consolation party."

As I blinked, processing that statement, one of the sex workers reached out to give my shoulder a sympathetic pat.

Before I knew it, a giggle had escaped me, and I started to laugh.

THE little town within the fortress outside Mayga Cieux had long been a place where society's outcasts eked out a living by joining together. Its proximity to the front line meant we often got folks whose villages had been destroyed by monsters running rampant, but many others found their way to our base as well. Some folks were suffering from the malingering effects of disease and injury, or had been maimed in a way that prevented them from finding further work. Others had had their jobs or even their land stolen from them by the bourgeoisie. Widows, orphans, and the elderly could also often be found among the newcomers, having been left bereft of support after their family members had died or deserted them.

The Kingdom of Kophe had no established social welfare system in place to ameliorate these people's lives, so it was left to the little town inside of the fortress to embrace them. And eventually, through the combined efforts of all those who lived there, the town had managed to develop into a thriving pleasure quarter of sorts.

The chivalric order that battled against the monsters was not so different from the townspeople in composition—they were comprised of a variety of men from different walks of life. Third and fourth sons of the aristocracy—or, more crudely, spares who would never be heirs—fought alongside talented mercenaries with commoner backgrounds.

Those knights who received hazard pay from the kingdom's chivalric order spent their money much more lavishly than the commoners were able to, and the town's economy functioned quite well as a result. Even my saintly powers played a part, as the knights often rid themselves of the ardor my healing forced upon them by pouring money into the coffers of the town's pleasure quarter.

I had once heard it said that if people were able to lead fulfilling lives by having both their physical and emotional needs met, then a spirit of cooperation would arise from that satisfaction. The truth of that statement was evident in our little town and the solidarity that had grown amongst its

residents.

I had been to several other settlements during my time serving as a holy woman, but none of them had had an aura like the cozy, lively one that exuded from this town. Life here was difficult, yes, and sometimes even gruesome. But nevertheless, knowing that my skills as a holy woman could help the townspeople here filled me with joy.

I popped my head briefly into the fortress's base to inform all the knights that I had returned and to just generally say my hellos, then wandered over to my favorite tavern. When I swung open the door, I was confronted with the usual crowd of knights and townsfolk, many of which I considered close friends.

"Oh ho! Welcome back, priestess!"

"We've been waiting for you, sainted lady!"

The festivities were already in full swing, and everyone there appeared to be in the mood to tease me incessantly. I was grateful for their attitude toward what I'd gone through, though, since it quickly transformed the incident that destroyed my reputation into just another humorous romp.

"Good grief," hollered out one of the tavern-goers. "There's no doubting your purity, little priestess, so I must question whether His Royal Highness is blind or foolish."

"And that's not even mentioning that Strelizzi greenhorn," snarked another. "He's got some nerve, repayin' our priestess like that. *Especially* after what she did for him."

"Wait," I broke in. "Hold on a second. Everyone knows about his part in the tale too?"

The first man to speak gave me a sage nod. "Aye. He's listed in the article as a loyal subject who saved the crown prince from a venereal disease."

"What?!" I gasped. "But it wasn't a venereal disease at all! What an awful thing to say!"

"Hahaha! Well, if ya hadn't healed the man in the first place, that febrile

illness he had woulda led to his little man downstairs rottin' off anyway."

I gave a little harrumph, wrinkling my nose at my table companions. "Perhaps I should have just left him to rot then."

I glanced down at the flagon of beer in my hand, smiling ruefully as I thought, *Right, I completely forgot that even happened.* I wasn't in the sort of mood to dwell on such memories, though, so I took another swig of lukewarm beer instead of saying anything else. At the palace, an assortment of high-class cuisine had always been available, but for some reason the bar's alcohol—which had a marked resemblance to muddy water—tasted incredibly good on my tongue.

"In any case," one of my companions continued, "congratulations on ending things with that blind fool of a prince!"

"Hear, hear! Yer a cute little thing, so you'll find a great man soon enough!"

The bar filled with laughter and joking voices, the deluge of sounds only quieting when someone started clapping their hands to a rhythm. As a wave of drunken song broke over the room, a second person began slapping out a beat on some sort of improvised instrument, and the chorus of tipsy voices soon followed along.

"O holy womaaan! Our pure, innocent maiden! She slaughters monsters aaand heals fevers! Sometimes she even saves ooother thiiings!"

I couldn't help but smile as I listened to them sing. *If only all my bad memories could be turned into such funny stories,* I thought wistfully.

That's when a deep voice spoke up by my ear. "Those are certainly some interesting lyrics," its owner murmured.

I huffed out a laugh, turning to meet the gaze of the person sitting next to me. I knew the young, redheaded knight errant at my side quite well—in fact, he was one of a small number of precious people in my life that I knew I could trust from the bottom of my heart.

"Are you enjoying yourself, saintess?" he asked. Before I could reply, he waved a hand at his plate of fried chicken and asked, "Care for a morsel?"

He's always so considerate of me, I thought, heart softening.

I reached over and took a small piece of the chicken. "You have my thanks," I told him with a smile.

"Are you…truly all right?" he asked, clearly concerned. "From what I've heard, you went through quite the ordeal at the palace."

I paused, then finally said, "I am fine…in a sense."

A short silence fell between us, but I could sense his eyes on my face. "I understand you weren't able to wear your holy attire while you were in residence at the palace. I hope nothing…untoward…happened to you?"

For a moment, I was back in that alcove, feeling the sensation of Lord Keunt's hands grasping at me all over again. A shudder wracked my body.

"I'm fine, I'm fine!" I lied, gulping my beer down hurriedly in an attempt to drown out the unpleasant echo of feeling. "I didn't even have the chance to use the unusual portion of my holy woman abilities."

"Truly?"

I nodded furiously. "Yes, yes, truly! Besides, someone like me was just an ugly duckling in that pond of swannish noblewomen at the palace."

He gave me a doubtful look, but seemed to decide not to push me any further on it. "If you insist. I admit that I was quite worried about you anyw—"

"Hey, priestess!" I looked up, realizing that the one who interrupted us was the tavern's proprietress. "Come on, come on!" she cried. "Come dance with us!" She seized me by the hand, dragging me abruptly from my table *and* my conversation.

Still, I found my mood lifted more than I could say as I drank and made merry with the rest of the townsfolk enjoying the bar. Everyone was here—the townsfolk, the sex workers, the barmaids, the knights from our outpost…

I really was terribly unsuited for the role of queen, I thought tipsily. *It's rather unsurprising in hindsight. What kind of royalty would so love a place like this…?*

THE feast, such as it was, had stretched all the way into the wee hours of the night and into the next morning. Despite my lack of sleep, when I'd woken to the dawn, safe in my own room at the base, I'd felt completely refreshed, as if all my burdens had been cast away.

"Right!" I'd cheered, pumping my fist. "Time to go out there and give it my all!"

Or, that's what I'd planned, but bad news had been lying in wait for me just across the threshold of the knight commander's door. I'd shown up at his office soon after I'd been informed that he required my presence, only to be met with a closed-off, frosty expression.

"Holy woman," he snapped. "His Royal Highness has decreed that this outpost will be dissolved. In addition, he has commanded that the town inside the fortress be vacated forthwith, along with any other settlements in the surrounding areas."

I stared at him, dumbfounded. My mind stuttered over his words, unable to process what he was saying.

"I…I d-don't…understand…" I finally managed, my voice strained and weak.

The knight commander gave a disgusted sigh. "While the knights and I are all well aware of both your achievements and integrity, now that you have been so thoroughly rejected by His Royal Highness, you cannot be allowed to continue serving the country in the same role as you did before. The crimes he alleges toward you, particularly those of indecent behavior, preclude such a thing."

"But…but that can't be!" I cried. "It was His Royal Highness himself who told me I was to continue working!"

"He did not mean as a holy woman in an official capacity," the knight commander explained in a flat voice. He handed me several documents. "As stated here, you are to continue your work as a normal woman who just so happens to possess the rare powers of a priestess."

I narrowed my eyes at the documents he'd handed me, scrutinizing them from top to bottom. They stated that I had been removed from my post as a holy woman as of yesterday, and that my replacements, a group of three

second-rank priestesses, had already been assigned to the main fort that guarded the region around Mayga Cieux.

There's no way they'll be able to handle all the work I was doing, I thought, stomach clenching in distress. Then the knight commander pointedly cleared his throat, and I had no choice but to focus back on him.

"I'll grant you a week to get your affairs in order and determine your next steps," he told me. "You may use your room until then. After that, you will be prohibited from entering the base."

My stomach clenched even tighter. "Am I not even allowed to train the new women in their duties…?" I demanded. "Commander, you *know* how dangerous it is here."

"I do," he said, voice flat. He stared at me for a long moment, eyes as cold as ice chips, then released a heavy sigh. "But I have no say in the matter. The top brass are in a complete uproar over the existence of a lewd holy woman, and have already come to their conclusions on the matter. This base is to be shut down due to violating social mores, and I have been summarily demoted and ordered to depart for another location." He clenched a fist, then released it. "I wonder how much worse my new posting will be, compared to here…"

"D-Do the others know already?" I asked, my hands beginning to shake.

"I haven't made an official announcement yet, but I'm certain they suspect what is coming," he said, letting out a long lamentful sigh and dropping his head into his hands. "I'm certain they are at least tangentially aware that they will soon face either demotion, or the loss of their jobs altogether."

A long silence fell, but then something seemed to come over the knight commander. When he lifted his head, his eyes were even colder than before. "You know, priestess…" he spat, "none of this would have happened if it wasn't for that profane power of yours."

I staggered back, his candid words sending an unbearable, shooting pain through my heart.

I had been able to endure the awful way I was treated at the palace—I had even accepted that the insults its residents hurled my way were inevitable. But

how could I endure *this*? How could I not be wounded down to the depths of my soul when the knight commander by whose side I'd toiled for so long condemned me so harshly?

"Ever since the beginning, I had grave misgivings about you," the knight commander continued. "Those strange abilities make you stand out too much—it makes you a danger to those around you." He let out a frustrated sigh. "If only you had just behaved like a proper, unassuming priestess, and fulfilled your role quietly. Then you never would have attracted the royal family's attention."

The knight commander rested his chin in his hands. As I stared at him, shellshocked, my mind suddenly flashed back to a time when he'd been injured, his right eye destroyed by a monster's fang. I'd stayed up three whole days and nights to heal that eye, foregoing sleep as I'd utilized my holy power with an unflagging devotion.

And now, that eye stared out at me coldly, its owner scowling at me in disgust. I tried to glean something, anything, from its restored gaze, but in the end, all I took away was that the commander considered his business with me settled.

I left the headquarters of the base in a daze. Once I'd stepped outside, I looked up to see that the townspeople had already gathered, along with the rest of the knights.

"Everyone…" I said softly, my voice catching in my throat.

They all just looked at me kindly, as if they had already deduced what I was going to say.

"You…you all already knew?" I asked, emotion building in my chest. "You already knew that this base and this town would be eliminated because of me, but you still…you still welcomed me back so warmly? An indecent saintess like me?"

"And why wouldn't we?" a one-armed former knight responded with a gentle look on his face. "Did ya think we'd forget the fact you've protected us and the town all this time, little priestess?"

I could do nothing but bow my head deeply. “Forgive me,” I murmured softly. “It was my overly assertive behavior that stained your reputations and led to this untenable situation.”

The one-armed former knight shook his head. “Raise your eyes, girl. If it wasn’t for you, I woulda ended up losin’ all four of my limbs. Instead, thanks to your help, I had myself a jolly ol’ time takin’ my revenge on those monsters.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I just stayed quiet. As I took deep breaths, trying to chase back tears, a white-haired lieutenant commander stepped forward. I recognized him immediately—he had a commoner background, like me, and yet had still managed to rise to such a distinguished position due to his tireless efforts.

“Lass, I’d like to make sure you know one more thing,” he told me kindly. “While you were at the palace, all of us realized something important.”

“And what was that?” I asked tentatively.

“We realized that it’s impossible for us to keep the monsters at bay without you,” he declared.

A flush rose on my face. “Oh, no, I really don’t—”

“Come on, lass, you must have noticed too,” he cut in. “Do you remember that abnormal weather we had last year? When we got that stretch of magical rain, it strengthened the monsters considerably. Honestly, with you gone, our most optimum choice is to comply with the demands that have been passed down from the upper echelon. In other words, it’s in our best interests to escape from this place.”

But that’s the equivalent of declaring defeat against the monsters! I cried internally.

“I-I’ll try harder to persuade them to ch-change their minds,” I stammered desperately. “There *has* to be something I can still d-do to eradicate the monsters in this forest!”

It was the mayor that brought my words to a halt this time.

“Sainted lady,” he said firmly. “Please, be at ease. You’ve already done

enough.”

“But, Mayor…”

“Subduing the monster threat was an impossible task from the outset,” he declared. “And yet, you still persevered for many, many years.” His eyes softened. “It’s time for you to be free. It’s *been* time for you to be free for quite a while.”

I spun around, my eyes desperately searching for any traces of resentment hidden on their familiar faces. But even though they were gazing at a girl who’d been painted as a depraved holy woman, the only emotion that lingered in their smiles was affection.

Another man stepped forward as the mayor drifted back into the crowd. He was a seasoned mercenary who’d been gravely injured many times by the monsters he’d fought. I’d treated him countless times as he teetered on the brink of death, but he had always still gallantly marched out to confront more foes every time he was healed.

“Sweet saint,” he said respectfully, “I would like to extend my gratitude to you.”

Next was a woman who’d come to our town after the loss of her husband. She’d started to do sex work after she’d moved in, and had tackled the job with dedication. Despite her devastating personal loss, she was always smiling, and was unfailingly kind to everyone.

“I second everyone’s sentiments,” she told me, her voice ringing with truth. “All of us ladies of the night have turned tidy profits here, so now we can get regular jobs wherever we choose to go next.”

She gave me a sweet smile as she stepped back, and a young man stepped into her place. When he’d been a child, he’d been horribly abused by nobles, barely managing to escape from them alive. He’d found sanctuary in our base along the front lines, where he’d eventually begun to work as a mercenary.

He gave me a respectful bow. “Holy woman, you’re free to live your life as a normal girl now. You should go live somewhere else, where you don’t have to worry about life and death so often.”

A female knight stepped forward after he was done. Long ago, when I'd first told her of my betrothal to the prince, she had cried tears of joy for me.

"You no longer have any obligation to protect this country," she told me, her eyes serious. "Not after being treated so awfully by the crown prince."

"A-All of you, I…"

I trailed off, unable to think of any way to express the intensity of what I was feeling. At some point during their speeches, tears had begun pouring down my face, and I found myself powerless to stop their flow.

We've all worked so hard together for so long, I thought, grief filling me. *All of these wonderful people have become such dear friends to me. But now…* I choked on a sob as the realization finally struck me. *But now, I no longer have a home I can return to. None of us do.*

I began to curl into myself, filled with pain and regret, but then a voice rang out from behind me.

"Saintess."

I tilted my head back, blinking away the tears clouding my gaze. A tall knight stood in front of me—it was the thoughtful redheaded knight who'd sat with me the night before, who had been so worried about me.

"Saintess," he said again. "Do you have anywhere else you can go?"

"No," I said hoarsely, rubbing a hand over my tear-streaked face. "I don't."

He stared at me intently, his eyes rapt on my face. "Then…would you perhaps care to accompany me to my hometown?"

"Huh?" I blinked up at him in shock, startled by the sudden proposal.

And no wonder! Here I was, thinking I had nowhere to go, and now he'd changed everything.

I didn't know my auburn-haired comrade's real name, but I did know he was the most accomplished knight at our base. In addition, he had a cheerful, gentlemanly nature which had made him a favorite of many of those who lived at the base—man or woman, old or young, he managed to charm just about everyone.

I didn't mind that I didn't know his real name. It was actually an unspoken rule for those of us who lived at the base or down in the town to keep our names secret. It was thought that speaking someone's true name could cause them to fall under the grim reaper's spell—or, in more frank terms, cause them to die.

But this was not the moment to think of such things. I cast my musings aside and blinked up at the redheaded knight, eyes searching his face. "Accompany you…? What do you mean…?"

"The truth is," he said quietly, "my older brother and his wife are feeling quite troubled because they are having a difficult time getting pregnant with their first child."

"They're…barren?" I asked, still feeling puzzled.

He shook his head. "They've both been examined by a magical physician, who concluded that both of them are quite fertile, but—"

"Wait a second!" I cut in. "If they were able to procure the services of such a doctor, that signifies that your family has a rather high pedigree, does it not? To say nothing of how wealthy they must be."

This knowledge only made me feel more confused than I had before. It was incredibly improbable that anyone of such a house would be sent to serve as a mercenary on the front lines, even if my redheaded knight was a lesser son.

He sent me a dazzling smile. "Haha, you really think so?"

I narrowed my eyes at how he'd avoided my question with a question. "Yes, I do," I declared firmly. "But, anyway…" I cast off my astonishment and propped a chin on my hand, thinking over his request. "I think utilizing magic to create life through an artificial womb would likely place too much of a burden on your brother and his wife. Especially since they're both fertile, and don't truly need to use such a method."

"Indeed," he agreed. "which is precisely why we'd like to borrow a holy woman's powers to do the job."

I nodded. "Understood. But, still…are you sure you should be asking someone *like me* for assistance?"

After all, courtesy of that newspaper, everyone in the country now believes me to be a wanton priestess…

In the face of such rumors, it was only natural for me to worry that I might cause issues for his brother and his wife if I were to agree to travel to his home.

But he seemed unperturbed by such worries—he simply waved them away with a hand. “Fear not,” he told me, voice deep and assured. “They’ll most assuredly welcome you with open arms.”

“You’re supremely confident in that, hm?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

He shot me a wink. “Well, we wouldn’t be staying within this kingdom’s borders, for one thing. To be honest, I’m not actually a citizen of Kophe.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. “That certainly explains your unusual red hair then.”

Hair as red as his was practically nonexistent in the Kingdom of Kophe; the few who *were* born with it were descendants of foreigners. It was nearly as rare as a son of nobility to willingly apply to fight on the front lines. The more I thought about it, though, the more I understood why my redheaded knight might have made such a decision.

The chivalric orders of the Kingdom of Kophe were filled with people who had obtained their positions through merit instead of nepotism. Such an organization was highly valuable, as it provided a system in which even outlanders could be handsomely rewarded, as long as they proved themselves capable. Taking that into account, I could see that the order offered some merits, even for an outlander from a highly prestigious family.

“By the way,” I asked, “where do you hail from? One of Kophe’s allies? Perhaps the island nation of Ezeleya? Or maybe the Principality of Schaure…? Latafield could be an option as well…”

“Heh. None of them,” my redheaded knight said with a grin. He bent down, leaning forward to whisper into my ear so that only I could hear his next words. “The place I’m from…is the Empire.”

“The Emp—!” I cut myself off, barely managing to suppress my surprised shout.

My face must have blanched white, for the redheaded knight chuckled as his eyes traced over my skin. He placed a finger over his lips, barely managing to hide a smile.

He could only have been referring to one country when he said those words—the Belktrius Empire, a military powerhouse of a nation that abutted the Kingdom of Kophe's eastern border. Since its founding several centuries ago, the Empire had taken advantage of the many wars that plagued the continent and the general flow of history to expand its dominion both to the north and to the east of its borders.

Currently the Kingdom of Kophe and the Empire enjoyed an amicable relationship, but this was only possible due to Kophe's geopolitical power and their monopoly over holy women. To break it down more simply: the kingdom's position on a peninsula that stretched out along the western edge of the continent had allowed them to establish ports that served as vital trade routes with other nations. In addition, the entire coastline was blanketed by the monster-plagued forest of Mayga Cieux—and the Empire didn't have access to the powerful holy women needed to keep such beasts at bay.

The Empire, I thought, still rendered speechless. *He's from the* Empire*.*

"Oh ho!" the mayor cried enthusiastically, making me jerk in surprise. "Have you found your next destination then, lady priestess?"

"U-Um," I floundered, "weeell, you see—"

"She has indeed!" The redheaded knight cut in. His eyes sparkled at me, as if to say, *Don't worry, saintess, I'll reply on your behalf.* "I expect my brother and his wife will welcome her into their home with open arms."

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Hmph! He didn't even consult me at all! Though, I was clearly struggling to find the right words…*

"Hold on," I said, and both men refocused on me. "I haven't decided yet whether I'll go."

"You said you have nowhere else in mind, yes?" the redheaded knight asked, raising his brows. "If that's so, you might as well come and see the sights with me back home."

“See…the sights?”

“Or…” The redheaded knight’s face abruptly darkened. His flame-red eyes narrowed on my face. “Is it that you don’t feel you can trust me?”

I immediately shook my head in denial. “No, of course I trust you!” I told him firmly. “I know you wouldn’t do anything untoward.”

I held his eyes after I finished speaking, hoping he would glean the truth from my face. I didn’t want him to think such a thing when, frankly, he was the only man I trusted with all my heart. I had always felt completely safe when I was by his side.

The shadows quickly fled from his face, replaced by a beaming smile. “Then,” he declared, eyes crinkling, “it’s decided. You’re coming with me, saintess.”

As we’d spoken, the townspeople had slowly drifted closer and closer, until they surrounded us entirely. They’d been listening to the conversation avidly, and erupted in cheers at the redheaded knight’s words.

“Ya better protect her!” one of them called out over the noise. He pointed a finger at the redheaded knight, who gave a slight bow in response.

“Of course,” he replied seriously. “You have my word.”

The townspeople seemed to relax even further then. The man who’d spoken before turned back to the crowd and yelled, “It’s settled then! We don’t have to worry about our priestess, not if she’s got our redheaded lad in tow!”

The redheaded knight looked back at me, a slight smile playing over his lips. “Shall we depart tomorrow then?” he asked politely.

“O-Oh!” I managed, blinking at him in surprise. “So…so soon?!”

But any chance for him to respond was drowned out by the rousing shouts of the crowd, who had forcibly cast off the solemn air that had hung over us before.

“Huzzah!” I heard a woman’s voice cry. “Tonight, we host a farewell celebration for our little saint! Let’s make it a grand one!”

There was a roar of approval in reply.

“I’ll go tell the rest of the knights!” called one of the townspeople.

The woman who’d spoken before nodded, then called out, “We’ve still got a great deal of food and alcohol on our hands, so let’s enjoy it while we can!”

“Uhhh,” I mumbled, words failing to rise to my lips, “u-um, please wait. Pardon me…”

The townspeople didn’t give me the time of day. They all soundly deserted me, leaving me standing bereft at the redheaded knight’s side.

I’ve…lost the thread of this tale, haven’t I? I thought wryly.

My titian companion turned to me, a broad grin stretching across his cheeks. “My real name is Richard, by the way,” he said cheerfully. “I look forward to the chance to deepen our bond, saintess, for as long a time as this life allows.”

THE next day, the redhea—*Richard* and I got permission to use the teleporter, and we used it to journey to the center of the royal capital, where the headquarters of the organization which was in charge of all holy women resided.

Once there, I inquired if I could leave the country, and was swiftly granted approval from the organization’s leadership.

Whatever happened to the prince’s grand pronouncement that I should continue protecting the country from monsters in spite of the accusations levied against me? I wondered, frustrated.

I found myself disappointed by the organization’s quick, almost apathetic agreement. It made me realize how disposable holy women really were.

Is that what it truly means to be a holy woman? I thought, depressed. *To be a tool, discarded as soon as it has lost its use?*

I wandered back out of the building, lost in my thoughts, and headed back to the public square where Richard was waiting for me. He was sitting on one of the large stone steps that led to the square’s fountain, a kitten laying in his lap. When he saw me, he lifted his hand and shot me a delighted smile, his hand still busy running over the kitten’s fur.

He sobered a little, though, at the look on my face. “That must have been difficult, hmm? But I take it the matter’s settled?”

I nodded, settling down beside him. I couldn’t help but notice that the newspaper he’d been reading had turned into a makeshift bed for the kitten on his lap.

“That was a surprisingly fast process, wouldn’t you say?” he commented. “I honestly thought it would take us much longer.”

“Yes,” I said softly. “I did too.”

“I just have to wonder whether it’s in their best interest to let a holy woman as uniquely powerful as you leave the country so easily. There are no other holy women in the kingdom who can defend against Mayga Cieux’s threats like you can.”

“They seem to think it is,” I said, handing him the document I’d received from the higher ups. “See? Headquarters even gave me a letter from the cabinet minister.”

Richard’s brow creased as he read the document, which was quite long-winded. In the end, the content pretty much boiled down to: “We would like you to leave the kingdom as quickly and quietly as you can.”

It seemed that the scandal surrounding my name after the prince broke off our engagement was enough to prompt the palace to form the opinion that the nation was better off without me. Even though they didn’t say it clearly in the letter, when I’d read it, I could practically hear them shouting, “A holy woman who shakes the foundation of society’s morals must be expelled from the nation!”

“How dare they treat a priestess who risked her own life for so many years on the front line this atrociously…” Richard murmured, a dark look filling his eyes.

I just shrugged. “In the end, saints are just expendable tools for this country, no matter how much they’re elevated on the surface,” I told him. “A holy woman’s powers reveal themselves by the age of ten, and disappear by the time she reaches twenty-five—thirty, if she’s lucky. They vanish even sooner if she decides to bear children. If you add on the fact that I’m already eighteen

years old—which means that my powers could start to wane at any time—they don't consider me very valuable, even despite my strength."

I sighed. "And, anyway, holy women are mostly seen as common, cheap things. The power manifests regardless of pedigree, so the position isn't really seen as noble, or particularly awe-worthy."

In general, effectively utilizing magic required some degree of inborn talent, but beyond that, education could be used to hone an individual's abilities. That was exactly why so many powerful conjurers were men and women of the peerage from respectable families, who could afford the expense of such an education. And since these circumstances had resulted in conjurers being associated with the nobility, they were afforded a great deal of respect.

Not so for holy women, who received training in their skill regardless of their social position. A powerful priestess wasn't treated much more respectfully than any other of her trade, and certainly wasn't given the same level of influence as a powerful conjurer.

Which was why—

Oh, I thought, finally taking note of Richard's expression. *I must have made him uncomfortable.*

His face had gone stiff and grim as I'd explained my position, and his lap was now bereft of the kitten that had once slept there—it must have run off, having gotten its fill of belly rubs.

"I'm sorry," I apologized, my face flushing. "I shouldn't have forced you to listen to such unpleasantness."

"It's fine," he said, giving me a rather strained smile. "Anyway, Saintess…I have a question for you. What do you think about making a stop to buy some bread on our way back to the stagecoach? There's a delectable scent wafting from that street over there that's been teasing me for a while now."

I felt suddenly overcome with gratitude toward him for how skillfully and cheerfully he'd changed the subject of our conversation. "That sounds lovely," I told him, smiling slightly.

I stood up with him, and soon we were making our way together toward the

bakery on the corner. My mind whirred as we walked across the beautifully paved flagstones of the capital city.

Recent events had made it quite obvious that I presented a problem to the Kingdom of Kophe for a myriad of reasons. My position as the prince's fiancée had been mere window dressing, an arrangement that served the royal family's ends. But even before the prince had denounced me, I'd been able to tell that his parents regretted our betrothal. Most likely it had been because they didn't want a low-class holy woman to become the crown princess.

Even supposing the betrothal had gone off without a hitch and had ultimately led to my marriage to Prince Medaikonar, I was certain his mother and father would have used some stratagem or another to annul our union. That, or had me removed from the picture entirely. They had already started maneuvering in such a manner before our betrothal had been announced.

You see, when my betrothal had been arranged, the royal family had put some rules in place before they were willing to acknowledge me as his fiancée. It had sorely vexed me at the time, but there had been nothing I could do about the situation. I just had to accept my position—first consort of the prince's harem.

The royal family had not engaged in polygyny in any of the generations that had come before, but had decided to make the practice official beginning with Prince Medaikonar. Honestly, at this point, thinking of it all made Lord Keunt's vile muckraking sting a little less. The world of the nobility would have taken its toll on me—it had only been a matter of time. Not to mention that someone else would have inevitably made the decision to denounce my unusual power and its ability to force lust onto others.

Nothing about that life would have suited me, I decided as Richard and I joined the line stretching outside of the bakery. *Everything that happened is for the best.*

"You know," Richard said suddenly, "I forgot to tell you before now, but I heard that our outpost disbanded successfully. From what it said in the article I read in the newspaper, everything went well."

"I'm glad," I said softly. "I hope everyone can find new homes soon."

It saddened me that I could no longer return to the soothing, heart-warming town where I'd spent a good portion of my life, but as long as my friends had been able to evacuate safely, I was happy.

As long as we all live, we might be able to see each other again.

I turned to say something to Richard, then froze at the abrupt change to his expression. An ominous tension had fallen over him, and his gaze was fixed intently on some point in the distance.

"Is…something wrong?" I asked hesitantly.

He put a hand on his sword. "I smell blood."

Within seconds, we heard a man scream. Groups of passersby came hurtling down the street in our direction, desperate to escape whatever followed them.

We didn't have to wonder long what the beast was, for a grotesque monster came bounding after them mere moments later. Three swords had been plunged through its body, and a group of knights wearing uniforms with "Institute for Magical Research" scribed across them followed at its back.

It must have escaped after being captured for use as a test subject, I thought, eyes lingering on a damaged carriage resting further down the street.

The monster changed course, stumbling in our direction, and Richard smoothly drew his sword from its sheath. He didn't say a word, just readied himself to confront the creature approaching us.

He struck the monster before I even had the chance to blink, or feel afraid at all. His blade sliced clean through the monster, his precise strike avoiding all the swords sticking from its body, cleaving it neatly into two halves.

What incredible judgment and physical strength, I thought, feeling a little dazed.

My eyes trailed back and forth across the street, taking in the carnage, before they fell on an injured man. He'd collapsed on the street, blood gushing profusely from gashes the monster had clawed open on his back.

"Are you all right?!" I cried, rushing to his side.

The man just stared up at me, his pupils almost fully dilated. He seemed

unable to talk.

I have to save him, I thought. I placed my palms on his gashes, took in a breath, held it—then closed my eyes.

“Heed the voice of my saintly power,” I prayed. “Let thy soul answer my call and liberate the raging pulse of life that burns within thee. Let it break the fetters that bind your flesh. Let it restore the breath seeking to return to its sanctuary.”

Warmth flared in the pit of my stomach as my holy ability burst forth from within me. For the few seconds my ability was active, my body was pierced by sensation, the rush of feeling leaving me light-headed and weak as lust burst through my being.

When I opened my eyes, the man was staring up at me in utter shock, his expression disbelieving. “My lady…you’re a…holy woman…?”

I nodded. “Do you still have pain anywhere?”

“N-No, I’m fine.”

“I’ll take my leave then,” I said, reassured. I went to stand up, but instead ended up lurching forward.

“Huh?” I gasped, turning around to see what had tripped me. The man I’d healed still laid on the pavement, but his eyes blazed as he looked at me. One of his hands was outstretched, his fingers clutched around my ankle.

“H-H-H-H-Holy woman… *My lady*…” he moaned.

The lust in his gaze was so raw that a chill skittered down my spine. I jerked away from him, gasping as I realized I only wore my normal saintly attire. I’d chosen to forego wearing the portion of my clothing with my special defense mechanism sewn in, since we were going to be surrounded by people today, and the medicinal herbs I used had quite a pungent odor.

I clutched at my head, feeling incredibly frustrated with myself. *I can’t believe I made such a blunder!*

“Sir,” I said pleadingly. “Please stop. Let me go.”

His eyes glinted. “My lady, my body is all feverish for some reason. Won’t you

take a look?" He grasped at his pants, panting, "It's all pent up here, in my… lower half."

An ugly feeling was rising in my chest. "Uh, um…" I mumbled weakly. "Sir, I don't…"

I jerked my leg again, trying to shake him off, but he had such a strong hold on my ankle that my efforts amounted to nothing. It took everything I had to even keep standing as he tugged at me, pulling me back toward him.

What should I do? I thought, feeling angry and helpless. *I can't use my magic against a normal person!*

Just as I was succumbing to despair, Richard's voice said softly in my ear, "Calm down, saintess."

Fabric settled over my head—he'd draped a wimple on me, I realized. The embroidery around the garment's edges crackled with a surge of magic as the sharp scent of common rue drifted up to my nose.

The lust in the face of the man clutching my ankle fled immediately, his expression turning serious. It was as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped on him.

This was my special defense mechanism at work—it caused the subject of the spell to view me as their own mother, work superior, or some other such person in their life, quickly putting a damper on their sexual arousal.

"I…" the man mumbled, his face paling in horror. "What in the world am I…?"

That was when the jangle of metal reached our ears, as the knights finally started charging in our direction. They were still far enough away that Richard and I decided to turn around and leave in a rush before they saw my face. We knew that if they found out I was the infamous unholy woman, it would cause total mayhem.

"Thank you…for the rescue," I panted as we ran.

Richard raised an eyebrow at me, letting out an amazed laugh. "Saintess, as much as you don't want to stand out, you still can't find it in yourself to leave behind someone in need, hm?"

“I can’t help it,” I cried, blushing. “My power as a holy woman is meant to aid them, after all.”

We ran and ran until we reached the stagecoach we’d been planning to travel on, then leaped inside. And just like that, we were heading off to the Empire.

THE sounds came to me first—broken, sobbing lamentations and snarling curses. Next was the smell; every breath brought with it the thick, heavy smell of offal that came from the shredding of human entrails, overlaid with the rotten stench that monsters exuded from their skin.

When I finally gained full awareness of my body, I found myself curled over an injured knight, my brand-new holy woman attire smeared in blood and filth. I carefully placed my dirty hands on the knight’s chest, desperately calling to my saintly powers again and again to heal his grievous wounds.

No matter how hard I tried, the knight’s injuries didn’t heal. And as I stared down at his ghostly pale countenance, part of me knew that my efforts had been in vain. The knight’s soul had long since departed for the heavens.

Voices crowded in on me, spitting with disapproval.

“What an utterly useless holy woman!” one cried, just as another demanded, “How could you have failed to save my son’s life?! Are you not a priestess?!”

Something about those voices pulled my past to the forefront of my mind, and the battlefield faded, replaced by scattered snatches of memory. I saw myself at age thirteen, newly dispatched to the front lines, discovering that my predecessor was dead, her life lost to a monster. Upon learning this revelation, I’d had no choice but to immediately throw myself into my saintly duties. The fort’s defenses had already begun to crumble without a holy woman around to shore them up. I had not even had the time to greet my new compatriots, let alone unpack my things.

One by one, the faces of those who had died because I couldn’t heal them in time appeared before my eyes. My ears were filled with the screams of those drowning in the pain of their injuries, and the grief-stricken wails of those who’d lost loved ones.

If you were truly a holy woman, a malicious voice whispered, *you would have been able to heal those people. You would have been able to save them. If you are truly a priestess and a saint, you should be capable of more.*

Ever since the day I'd taken up my post, I'd gone above and beyond to meet everyone's expectations of me. I'd clad myself in my jet-black saintly attire, which I'd had to sew with common rue as a safety mechanism, just so I wouldn't be assaulted by those I healed when I unwittingly aroused their ardor. I'd even drunk harsh decoctions every single day so I could suppress my own intolerable impulses.

And thus I'd worked for many, many years, until before I knew it, I was already eighteen years old. Normal girls that age were busy wrapping themselves up in bridal wear and garlands, preparing to begin their journey to creating families of their own. But me? *I'd* been busy swathing myself in sacred herbs like common rue, swaddling around in holy woman garb that reeked of fish wort. I certainly wasn't preparing for a family, either, as my virtue was still firmly intact.

"*You*," came a voice from the deep, deep darkness that surrounded me. Prince Medaikonar stepped into view, the knight commander following at his heels. "You lascivious, unholy priestess!"

The men grabbed me by my arms, lifting me off the ground. I cried and fought, but they hurled me forward, sending me tumbling violently straight into the depths of hell. But then—

"Saintess. *Saintess!*"

I blinked my eyes open, woken by the large hand gently shaking my shoulder. A striking face with clean-cut features hovered over me, flame-red eyes anxiously peering down at my face.

I'm…in a vehicle, I thought cloudily, my mind slowly registering the sound of wheels clattering, and the way my body rocked as it lurched forward. The scent of grass drifted in from the open window, and sunlight lit up the world outside, its rays cast down from a lovely light-blue sky.

My muscles turned to water as I realized it had all just been a dream, and I'd been dozing in the stagecoach I was sharing with Richard the whole time. I

slumped into my seat, overcome with relief.

It was only a nightmare, I told myself soothingly. I rubbed at my eyes, then glanced over at Richard. He still looked markedly worried.

“Thank you for waking me up,” I told him, sending him a reassuring smile. “I was having a bad dream.”

Now that I was awake, I remembered that the stagecoach we were riding on was heading toward a town close to the Empire’s border with Kophe. The coach had made a number of stops, with a handful of passengers boarding and disembarking each time, but at the moment Richard and I were the only ones left inside.

I stared out the window in a daze, eyes tracing the gentle, tranquil scenery as it flickered by. It was the season to sow wheat, and I spotted a number of village girls in the fields, their backs bent as they buried seeds in the soil. Clouds hung over the stretches of farmland, their white fluffiness reminding me of pieces of bread torn from a loaf.

If my village hadn’t been destroyed, I might have lived an ordinary, peaceful life just like one of those girls, I thought with a pang. I rubbed at my eyes again, but the wind had already dried the last of my tears.

“Please…” Richard said softly, his voice drifting to me from over my shoulder, “don’t push yourself overmuch. Let me know if you need a break. This is a long trek, so it’s important to take good care of yourself. And besides, we’re in no hurry.”

“I’m fine,” I said, voice tight. “I *am* a holy woman, after all. If something happens, I can easily heal myself.”

Richard placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling my gaze to his.

“You do know that’s not what I mean, yes?” he asked, eyes slitted in reproach. “Truly, saintess, I have only the greatest respect for you. I’m well aware that you can be counted on to give your all, even in the most dire of situations. I just worry that you don’t take care of *yourself* properly.”

“And *I’m* telling you that you worry too much!” I snapped.

Richard blinked at me, and the look on his face sent my anger to a quick death.

“I…I appreciate the thought though,” I murmured, awash with guilt.

Thankfully, he didn’t appear to be hurt by my response. He smiled at me softly, and said, “Remember, Saintess, we’re going to be together from now on. It’s all right for you to rely on me more—in fact, I hope you do just that.”

I smiled at him in response, even though I felt a little embarrassed to be on the receiving end of such consideration.

It’s a priestess’s responsibility to look after others, I thought at him reproachfully, *not be looked after herself.*

But, for whatever reason, I kept those thoughts to myself.

ALONG our journey, Richard told me many things about himself. I learned that he was twenty-three years old, and that while he specialized in real-combat swordsmanship, he wasn’t very accomplished with the ceremonial version of the skill. I learned that he’d tried his hands at a variety of performance arts, like dancing, playing the piano, and singing, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to enjoy any of them. When he’d told me that one, he’d shot me a smile and told me that he’d ultimately found the dances and songs he’d learned from the base’s townspeople the ones most suited to his personality.

Lastly, I learned that Richard was weak when it came to magic, with his skills only being rated fifth class. Fifth class magic wasn’t the worst rating you could receive, but it *was* typically the lowest of the levels awarded to those who received an education. Those who were rated fifth class could use simple, beginner level magic, like producing illumination for a limited area or lighting a candle without a flame.

If I was to speak honestly of Richard, I would have had to admit that he was quite a handsome man. He had a sweet face which was rather at odds with his muscular build and tall stature, but I’d come to find that contrast quite appealing.

With how well I knew him, though, I was very aware that there was much

more to him than his graceful, masculine features. His disheveled auburn locks and unfashionable clothes might cloak his true background, but I now felt certain that he came from an extremely respectable family back in the Empire. The idiosyncrasies between his looks and his skills and personality had become quite clear to me during our time together in Mayga Cieux. Whether he wished it to or not, his uniquely refined nature came out in the way he conducted himself, and in the way he spoke to others.

Now that he'd told me so much about himself, though, I felt like I understood a bit more why a man like him would leave the Empire behind.

I'd been so wrapped up in these thoughts that when Richard turned and smiled at me, I felt a slight flush work its way up my neck.

"You know, saintess," he said, "I've been talking quite a bit about myself, haven't I? Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself, instead?"

"H-Huh?" I stammered, a cold sweat beading on my skin at this unexpected change in topic. "You want to know…about me?"

He nodded. "Yes, I'd like to know you better. Now that I think about it, I still don't even know your name."

"U-Um…" I gazed intently down at my hands, fidgeting nervously.

His request left me in a bit of a bind. All these years on the front line, I'd simply gone by "holy woman," never stating my real name. Divulging it now made me feel somewhat self-conscious, as if I was about to expose one of the most private parts of myself.

"Do you not want to say?" Richard asked gently.

"No!" I cried. "It's not that I don't want to, it's just…"

He stared at me a moment, his eyes crinkled in amusement, before finally turning back to facing the front of the carriage.

"We'll be reaching the border soon, you know," he said, voice warm. "And when we do, you'll need to disclose your real name, date of birth, and birthplace to the imperial army."

"That's…a fair point," I murmured.

“Saintess…” he said softly, voice suddenly close to my ear. “I must admit that I rather hate the thought of complete strangers learning about your true identity before I do.”

I let out a little eep, rearing back against the side of the stagecoach.

“That being said…why don’t you just try and whisper it to me then?” He grinned at me, one eye sliding shut in a cocky little wink. “Please…?”

“I-It’s…it’s Monica,” I said quickly, crumbling under his insistent gaze.

A wave of vertigo came over me after I spoke. *How long has it been since I last said that out loud?*

His eyes widened, light bursting out over his face. “Monica,” he repeated, his tone exultant.

I could feel my skin flushing bright red. *Ugh,* I thought, *this is so embarrassing!*

“My full name is Monica Regulus,” I mumbled. “I turned eighteen earlier this year. I was born on the third spirit day during the Month of Blessed Rain in the town of Nowasilo. My father was an artisan and my mother, a farmer. When I was a child, my village was attacked by monsters and wiped out, and my parents both perished during the attack.”

He nodded, taking in this information. “I guess I shall call you Miss Monica from now on then,” he commented.

My brow wrinkled. “Wait, but you’re older than me! There’s really no need to add ‘Miss’ onto my name.”

He gave me an assessing look. “Well, now,” he drawled, “I’m not sure I can refer to you as just plain Monica.”

“*Fine*,” I said, pursing my lips. “Guess I’ll just have to call you Mr. Richard then.”

He let out a bark of a laugh. “Nope, I’ll have to turn you down on that one. Do you know how happy it’s made me to finally hear you call me ‘Richard?’ I refuse to give that up.”

“Well,” I huffed, “do *you* know that you’re not making any sense right now?”

He gave me an amused look, and I decided to change the subject, not wanting to draw his attention to my blushing cheeks.

“Setting that aside, Richard, I rather think it’s your turn to reveal more personal information about yourself.”

“Really?” he chuckled. “Even though I told you so much already?”

I nodded firmly. “I want to know things other than your favorite foods and which songs you can sing well! Things like your last name, or where your family resides. You still haven’t told me any of those kinds of details about you.”

A strange look flickered through his eyes, and then was gone. “Ahhh, well…”

The stagecoach came to an abrupt stop, having arrived at the border gate, and Richard fell silent, too focused on stopping me from tumbling out of my seat to finish what he’d been saying.

“Th-Thank you,” I stammered, looking up at him from the cage of his strong arms.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. He gave me an enigmatic look, then glanced up as the sound of metallic clanking filled the air.

We both glanced out of the stagecoach window, and I realized immediately where the sound had come from. A line of armored knights had formed a line beside our vehicle and were standing at rigid attention.

Is there an aristocrat here? I wondered, feeling rather baffled by all the commotion.

Richard glanced back at my face, letting out a wry laugh at my expression. He opened his mouth, as if to say something to me, but was cut off by one of the knights shouting: “Welcome home, Your Imperial Highness!”

My mind went blank. “Huh…?” I mumbled.

I jerked around, reflexively glancing at the redhea—*Richard’s* face. He smiled sheepishly at me as he rubbed his cheek, clearly feeling awkward.

“I didn’t want to tell you until I absolutely had to, you see,” he said, voice soft. “But this isn’t how I wanted you to find out either.”

“So, you…just…” I took a deep breath. “Hold on a moment. What about all of those things you said about your family? About your brother and his wife?”

“They’re, uh…the emperor and empress.”

My mouth dropped open. “*Wait,* please. Just…wait. I can’t…I can’t keep up…”

As I sat there, mind whirling with shock, the truth hit me—the redheaded knight’s name wasn’t just *Richard.* It was His Imperial Highness, Prince Richard II Belktrius.

Chapter 2: You're the Crown Prince of the Belktrius Empire?!

SO *my engagement's been broken, I've been banished from my own country, and now I'm going to be condemned for insulting the honor of the neighboring Empire's ruling family?!*

"I don't understand any of this," I muttered, mind spinning.

Richard laughed from his spot at my side. "Fear not, Miss Monica, you'll adjust soon enough."

Will I? I thought a bit hysterically, feeling myself pale as my mind lingered on the shocking news of his noble birth. *Maybe I should just give up and start writing a memoir in these final moments of my life, before I end up thrown into prison for disrespect.*

But nothing whatsoever was mentioned about my irreverence toward the Empire's crown prince. Instead, His Imperial Highness and I were escorted politely to a location at the Empire's border where we could make use of some transfer magic, which we utilized to journey to a town located close to the imperial capital.

The town was called Tutalia, and evidently Richard planned for us to relax there for a time before returning to his official duties. He told me the respite was to help us dispel the exhaustion brought on by our long journey, and though I'd acquiesced to his wishes, I rather thought he was the only one who needed to make such preparations.

I soon learned that Tutalia abounded in miraculous natural springs, and at that moment, I was fully submerged in a bath filled with hot water drawn from their depths. I stretched out my arms and legs beneath the water, feeling my mind, body, and magic begin to slowly rejuvenate. I floated there for a while, at peace, but eventually the water cooled, and I made the decision to step out of the bath.

The second my feet hit the floor, a cluster of attendants stirred to life, puttering busily around me. They treated me like I was a guest of honor, as everyone had in the Empire thus far. It felt odd to me to receive such courtesy, but I voiced no words of complaint; I just relaxed into a chair as they pampered me.

One of the women hovered around my head, her fingers carefully pulling a brush through my hair. She carefully stroked a special aromatic oil over my locks as the others gathered around me and meticulously massaged my limbs.

I never even received this level of considerate care when I was His Royal Highness's fiancée! I thought incredulously.

But the women weren't quite done with me yet—they provided me with an entirely new set of holy garments, which included everything from my typical headwear down to my dress. As they helped me dress, I was struck by the rather inane thought that I must be shining as brightly as a jewel, with the way they'd polished me up thus far.

As I dwelled on this thought, one of the women bowed and departed, saying, "I'll prepare the tea." Moments later, one of the other women led me from the bath and escorted me to a nearby room, where Richard sat waiting.

"Y-Your Highness!" I gasped, falling into a curtsy.

Richard gestured to the sofa opposite him with his eyes, clearly inviting me to sit. I complied with his unspoken request, though I felt unbelievably awkward as I settled into the spot he'd indicated.

We sat in complete silence for a moment as Richard's eyes ran all over me, scrutinizing my condition. I'd turned quite red by the time he relaxed, his face filling with deep satisfaction.

"You seem quite refreshed," he commented. "Good."

"Yes," I agreed, staring down at my hands as they twisted in my lap. "I…thank you."

Within moments, the attendants had briskly completed the task of setting up the tea tray. They then bowed and departed soundlessly, leaving Richard and me quite alone. Richard's Imperial Crown Prince aura departed with them, and

he relaxed into his seat, just a man instead of a prince once more.

“Well,” he drawled, “you were certainly astounded by my true identity, hm? But really…you never even suspected?”

He held up two fingers like rabbit ears, grinning shamelessly. I huffed at him in exasperation.

“And pray tell, when would I have had the opportunity to even come up with such an absurd theory? How could I have *ever* guessed that the young man I met on the front lines, the one who so skillfully cut down monsters and so heartily drank cheap alcohol, would be His Imperial Highness, the Empire’s crown prince?!”

Richard chuckled, his eyes crinkling. “Miss Monica, don’t think I haven’t noticed that your agitation over my identity has left you feeling confused over how to go about addressing me. I find the combination of politeness and familiarity you’re currently using quite charming, I can admit, but I must insist that you remain your usual outspoken self when we’re together. Also…don’t forget that I want you to call me Richard.”

“That’s impossible, and you know it,” I snapped.

Richard didn’t even flinch. “You are a lone holy woman here at the behest of the Empire,” he intoned, “and I but a worthless second son who abdicated his place in the imperial line of succession and ran off to the Kingdom of Kophe when the Empire’s internal power struggles became too much for me. If you look at it that way, there’s no reason at all for you to insist on formalities between us.”

“Nevertheless, I shall not call you by name,” I said firmly. “That. *Is not*. An option.”

Richard sighed. “How about this then: why don’t you call me what you wish in public, but call me Richard when we’re alone? When it’s just the two of us.”

“F-Fine…” I mumbled, unable to resist the pleading look in his eyes. “I’ll address you as ‘Your Highness, Richard.’”

“No. *Just* Richard,” he said with a forceful smile. His eyes blazed, trying to bend me to their will. “Now, why don’t you say it correctly for me? Come on, it’s simple. Say ‘Richard.’”

“…R-Richard.”

“Excellent.”

Richard leaned back and crossed his legs, a satisfied look settling over his face.

Then still watching me, he calmly picked up his teacup and brought it to his lips. “Ah…” he said softly after his first sip. “It has been quite a long time since I last tasted black tea grown in the Empire…”

I watched him silently, eyes reassessing him now that I knew his true identity. Everything from the look in his eyes to the way he spoke seemed to exude nobility to me now. His usually unkempt auburn hair was now neatly brushed and arranged, its silky gleam only complimenting his exceedingly refined conduct. His skin glowed too; the thin layer of dust and grime that had accumulated during our travels had been neatly washed away.

He’d shed the clothes he had worn during our journey as well, trading his worn-out mercenary’s outfit for an ultramarine-colored military uniform with a high collar and jackboots shined to a bright finish. The dignified, stately attire was nothing compared to the man himself, though—he wore his stylish clothing like a second skin, the force of his confidence radiating off him.

He really paints quite the magnificent picture, doesn’t he? I thought, letting out a long sigh. *Truly, he looks every inch the sophisticated imperial crown prince.*

Richard glanced over at me, then, probably prompted by the sound of my forceful exhalation.

His eyes really are quite striking, I thought. *They always have been.*

I sank into the shifting scarlet shade of his gaze, which changed constantly based on how bright the area was around him.

How do I even begin to describe such a color? I wondered. *Truly, they are so striking and mysterious…*

At the moment, the best I could do was call them a red-tinged orange. *Though…their brilliance rather reminds me of that jewel housed inside of the Great Church of Kophe,* I mused.

The flame-colored jewel was roughly the size of the tip of someone’s pinky finger, and was always polished to an exquisite shine. The vibrant, remarkable crimson hue was so intense that it was said that if you peered into its heart, you would be caught up in the illusion of being siphoned withi—

“Heh heh.”

I jerked upright in my seat, staring at Richard as he fell into a fit of laughter.

He shot me a grin once he finally got a good handle on himself. “First, you pale in shock,” he said. “And then you brood excessively. Now you’re lost in thought. You’ve gone through such a myriad of expressions and feelings in such a short time! It must be taxing enduring all that alone.”

“And whose fault do you think that is?” I demanded, eyes narrowing.

He shot me a cheeky grin. “Why, mine, of course.”

This response rather stymied me, and I sighed as most of my irritation with him faded away. “Well,” I said, staring rather intently at a point on the wall, “hearing you admit it so honestly…makes me feel a bit guilty for speaking to you in such a manner. I shouldn’t have taken out my anger on you. I’m sorry.”

He waved off my apology, clearly unbothered. “Don’t worry about it. We have more important things to talk about anyway.” I raised my brows, and he continued, “We’ll begin making our way to the capital around midday tomorrow. My older brother is aware of our impending arrival, and has already started to plan us a welcoming party.”

“W-Wait,” I said, pressing a hand to my mouth. “Do you mean to say both the emperor and empress will be in attendance?”

“Indeed,” he said, nodding. “Why else would I garb you in such fine clothes, Miss Monica?”

“Oh,” I said, looking down at my new clothes. “I see…”

I’d not truly considered why I had been provided with these particular holy woman garments, instead of a clean version of my normal outfit. Up until now, my entire wardrobe had consisted of simple, black clothing. But my current attire, while seemingly inspired by my old garb, could only be called a complete redesign—they were truly an outrageously luxurious affair.

Richard seemed to have noticed my preoccupation with the clothes, for he jumped in, “Those have already been embroidered with a special defense mechanism to defend against lust, so don’t worry yourself over that. The

mechanism is currently dormant, but you can turn it on easily by pouring your magic into the various magical stones stitched into the dress."

I inspected the outfit closer, soon finding the small magical stones he'd referred to. They'd been processed into tiny fashionable beads that were sewn onto the outfit's cuffs, neckline, and waist sash.

I called up a smidge of magic, curious to test the ward. I immediately heard a humming sound exude from the stones—the noise was uncomfortably similar to the skittering of insects—and then felt the charm activate.

I shivered in surprise. Those magic stones might not cover much more than a few centimeters of material, but from the way they'd reacted, I knew their price was immeasurable. The cost of all of them combined…it was beyond anything money could buy.

"Richard, *why*…? Why would you give me something so valuable…?"

He just shrugged. "There have always been places where you couldn't wear your usual holy clothing, yes? Whether it was due to the smell of the herbs you used or there being some social rule dictating you go without. I know how dangerous it is for you to go without your protective costume, so I decided to have this made for you in advance. Now no matter what situation you find yourself in, you don't have to leave your safeguards behind."

"But…but, when?" I demanded. "When would you have had the time to do such a thing…?"

"You don't need to worry about that," he replied with a wink. "Oh, and the tailors said that if there are any alterations needed, they can do them tonight. That includes reducing the size if something's too big. So if you think of anything you want done, tell me, all right?"

"J-Just let me change back into my old clothes," I stammered. "*Please.*"

Richard sighed. "Anything but that."

"But I just… How am I supposed to relax in such a gorgeous outfit?!"

A little smile touched Richard's lips at that statement, but his face had gone rather serious. I could tell by the intensity of his gaze he wasn't going to give in

on this one.

“Miss Monica…” he said softly. “I worry about you. Which is why I want to provide you with things like that lovely outfit, so you can live your life free of restraints.”

There was no denying him after that. “Richard…” I sighed. “I understand. I will gratefully accept your gift, Your Highness.”

“Good,” Richard said, his expression relaxing. He let out a relieved laugh. “You know…it was quite a pleasant surprise, learning that your hair is such a lovely, pale pink color. All this time I thought it was silver, but that wasn’t the case, hm?”

I shook my head, meeting his gaze as my fingers tugged self-consciously at a lock of my hair. “I can see how it might have looked silver,” I told him, “since I almost always kept it covered up under my wimple.”

I’d long noticed that my hair appeared silver when only my bangs or lone strands were visible. It had actually *been* silver when I was born, but the longer I’d worked as a holy woman, the more its color had deepened. You could only really see its true shade when I stood in a bright place—it was an explosion of light pink akin to the color of a peach’s skin.

In the Kingdom of Kophe, the color pink represented lewdness and lust. In that sense, it was apt enough for a ‘lascivious priestess’ like me. I didn’t view the color in such a negative light myself, though. I was actually quite proud of its color, as I saw it as proof of my efforts as a holy woman.

“Miss Monica…” Richard murmured, his eyes studying my hair quite closely. “I may be wrong about this, but did you wear your hair out on the day of your failed engagement party?”

I sent him a puzzled look. “Well, of course it was. I had to leave it out, since I was wearing a normal dress.”

A long, drawn-out noise came from Richard’s chest, almost like a growl. “Is that so…?” he rumbled. “So, Miss Monica, you’re telling me all those people at the royal capital got to see your hair before I’d ever had the chance…?”

One booted foot started tapping the ground in annoyance, even though his

legs were still crossed. I almost said something to him, but he was muttering something indecipherable under his breath, so I refrained.

He looks…quite displeased, I thought.

Finally, Richard burst out, “How absolutely annoying that they discovered your secret before I did!” A decidedly pouty look settled over his features.

My lips twitched. “You have a rather strange sense of rivalry, don’t you?”

He sent me a glare, but there was no malice in it. “I just want to be the first to know every little thing about you, Miss Monica. I hate it when someone finds out something about you before I do.”

I couldn’t take it anymore—I burst out laughing. “You’re such a silly man, Richard,” I told him through my giggles.

After that, we spent the rest of the day in a similar fashion—chatting and laughing, the sense of familiarity and comfort renewed between us.

WHEN we woke the next morning, we’d quickly made our preparations and set off for the imperial capital, just as Richard had told me we would over tea the night before. We traveled by carriage, our particular vehicle only one of many in the large procession marked by the imperial crest.

For the majority of our journey, the carriages traveled steadily down a straight road, watched over by the towering verdant mountain range that loomed far off in the distance. Safflower fields stretched endlessly out from the road’s edge, the shadow of those same mighty peaks seeming to envelope them as the sun began to sink lower in the sky.

What an incredible view, I thought.

I turned to Richard, smiling with delight. “The scenery is so lovely!”

Richard glanced over my shoulder to take a look out my window, pride filling his face when he surveyed the landscape of his home country.

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” he told me. “The Empire is always discussed with such terror in Kophe. The rumors are unavoidable, of course, but…I must admit I was anxious about whether you would like it here. I’m relieved to know

that you do.”

I gestured to the fields outside of the window and said, “You know, if our countries weren’t at peace, such beautiful plains wouldn’t be able to exist. That’s part of what makes them so splendid.”

And it wasn’t just our countries that were at peace either—you could tell the people in the Empire were thriving by the way the farmers paused in their work as our carriages passed them by, taking their hats off and waving to us in greeting.

They’re so open and friendly, I thought, my heart warm. *The Empire must rule here with a thoughtful, benevolent hand.*

BEFORE long, we found ourselves drawing up to the gates that sheltered the fortress that housed the imperial capital. Fully armored soldiers were rigidly lined up on both sides of the road, guarding our procession.

Soon we were passing through the gates, and I was immediately overwhelmed by a number of events that happened in rapid succession. First, cheers of joy exploded from the people gathered by the side of the road, their voices so loud I thought I’d go deaf. Then music began to drift through the air, as some nearby orchestra struck up a song. Finally, a lovely shower of cherry blossoms was scattered on the wind, the petals dancing around our carriage.

And then there was His Imperial Highness Richard himself, waving to the cheering crowds from within the coach.

“Hello, everyone! I’ve returned!” he called, leaning forward out of the window. He turned around and shot me a grin. “Come on, Miss Monica! You should wave to them too!”

“What?!” My eyes went wide. “You *must* be joking!”

But there he was, waiting expectantly in the seat right next to mine. He very clearly was *not* joking—he truly did want me to wave to the people of the Empire as well.

At first I thought it was my imagination, but when I peeked out of the carriage

window, I saw a multitude of fiery gazes directed at me as well.

"Lady priestess!" screamed the crowd. "Dear saint, welcome to our country!"

They know, I thought, the bottom dropping out of my stomach. *Oh, God, they know I'm a holy woman!* I looked at Richard in confusion.

"This is much too conspicuous!" I cried nervously. "You must *want* to offend the Kingdom of Kophe at this rate!"

"Don't worry!" he said, laughing. "We've already handled that end of things!"

Don't worry…?! I thought incredulously. Getting a response like that only raised more questions for me. *And what exactly has he handled?!*

I went to push him for more information, but quickly found myself powerless to do so. I couldn't win against him when he was trying to overpower me with that sunny disposition of his.

Faced with no other choice, I firmed my resolve, leaning slowly into view of those outside the window. I dredged up a smile, then raised a hand and gave the people of the Empire a reserved wave.

I felt sick, my stomach aching as it twisted into knots from my churning nerves. A cold sweat blanketed my skin.

"How can they be so enthusiastic about someone like me…?" I muttered hoarsely. My mind was a mess; I just couldn't wrap my head around the situation. Holy women were never celebrated with such warmth and openness back in the Kingdom of Kophe.

"Miss Monica," Richard replied, his face composed and in total Imperial Crown Prince mode, "up until now, you thought yourself unworthy because you were underestimated in Kophe. You're free of that place now, so you should have more confidence in yourself. You're an extraordinary person, you know."

I could only gaze up at him, dizzy with fear and confusion, and yell internally, *No, I don't know!*

I soon discovered that the gate we'd just passed through wasn't the imperial capital's only defense—once we were inside the fortress, I found that the

imperial capital was surrounded by yet another set of tall lofty walls, and you had to pass through a second gate in order to reach the city at its center.

As our carriage trundled its way deeper into the fortress and toward the second gate, my eyes caught on the magnificent white castle tucked away at the fortress's heart, its spires soaring so high in the sky I felt like they could pierce the clouds.

The city itself had been built on a hilly area, so the grounds were made up of gentle inclines and rolling slopes.

The Empire's castle seems to possess a far more rustic, militaristic design than the Kingdom of Kophe's, I thought idly as we drew close to the second gate. But that initial impression was soundly shattered the minute we passed through.

I gasped as the walls of the gate fell away, their sudden lack making the view outside them most dramatic.

"Oh, my!" I breathed, my eyes devouring the sight of the garden that stretched out before us. The grounds were lush and green, fresh with new growth. Carefully tended rose hedges were planted here and there, multicolored blooms proudly dangling from their branches. I took in a deep breath, catching their fragrant scent in the breeze.

When I finally looked back at Richard, he was beaming, clearly incredibly pleased by my reaction. He ushered me out of the carriage—which had stopped sometime during my contemplation of the castle's floral wonders—and into the palace, where I was received by the emperor and empress.

His Majesty, Emperor Christopher II Belktrius, was only twenty-eight years old, and yet I'd heard from Richard that this was currently his thirteenth year on the throne. The emperor was a handsome man whose aura exuded gentleness, a quality which put me much more at ease once I noticed. He had red hair, just like Richard, but it was a calmer color than his brother's scarlet locks, closer to a burnished dark brown.

Seated next to the emperor was Her Majesty, Empress Tundica. She was an elegant woman blessed with an abundance of lustrous black hair. It was strange, though—something about her gave me the sense that she was delicate and fragile.

I abruptly realized I'd been staring, and curtsied deeply to them both.

"Welcome to our empire, Holy Woman Monica Regulus," His Majesty said solemnly. "We are all glad to have you here. For a short time, you will be staying in a room here at the palace as our privileged guest. I have, of course, taken into account that you may have your own wishes and desires that you would like us to grant you, and thus I would like to inform you that I am quite amenable to granting you the status and land you deserve as a holy woman when you are ready."

"Your Majesty," I said, trying to fill my voice with the utmost respect, "I am humbled by your kind words and deeply appreciative of your generosity. I will do my utmost to return the kindness you have proffered to me."

This concluded the official functions of the day, and so I was led to my new room to take a short rest. It was most welcome, as it gave me time to take a breath and relax and recover from our travels.

My night did not end there, however. I was soon escorted from my room to the palace's tea room in order to meet with the emperor and empress once more—this time in private.

"I welcome you again to our empire!" the emperor cried, hugging me warmly. The handsome man, who'd been born into the upper echelons of society and even managed to become the ruler of his nation, had quite shed his imperial gravitas, which left me feeling a bit adrift.

I stared wordlessly between the emperor and Richard, who was standing right next to his brother. Now that I saw both of them up close, the difference between them was palpable. Where His Majesty's features were masculine and finely chiseled, his younger brother's face was much sweeter and more boyish. Yet the latter's muscled physique, honed in battle on the front lines, easily outstripped the former's level of definition.

"I'd like to give you my thanks for looking after my little brother," the emperor told me. "It seems he made quite a nuisance of himself, and yet you still cared for him for all that time."

"Oh, it was nothing, really," I told him.

But His Majesty let out a rueful laugh, his exasperated eyes revealing him as the older brother he was.

I couldn't help but send him a smile of my own. "Truly, Your Majesty, His Highness was always quick to rush to my aid in Kophe. I wouldn't have been able to fulfill my duties as a holy woman without his dedicated assistance."

And I mean that as both a fighter and a woman, I thought firmly. *Richard came to my rescue countless times, against both monsters* and *men.* I couldn't quite get myself to say so out loud, though.

Instead, I told the emperor, "Anytime I was in a dangerous predicament, His Highness unfailingly risked his own life to protect me. So you can imagine my shock when I learned that the man whom I trusted above all others turned out to be Your Majesty's younger brother."

"You dolt, you didn't tell her?"

Richard nodded, grinning shamelessly at the emperor's astonished question. "Indeed," he said with a mischievous grin. "I did not."

The emperor let out a roaring laugh, nudging his brother with a shoulder. "You cheeky whelp…"

Her Majesty came up to me next, hugging me just as her husband had. She didn't stop there, however—she followed the embrace up with a kiss on the cheek, which made me blush.

Her demeanor's so gentle and good-humored! I had the extremely impolite thought that she didn't at all match the picture I had of your typical, serious noblewoman, let alone the commanding majesty I expected of an empress.

"I suspect my brother-in-law used some clever and outrageous words to lure you here, hm?" the empress asked me, her voice amused. "Even so, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your help."

I grew serious. "Your Majesty, if you really think someone like me can help you with your problems, then I promise I'll do everything I can to assist you."

Richard's flame-colored eyes narrowed from where he stood to the side, watching us interact. "We'll introduce you to the cabinet at tomorrow's

luncheon," he told me, voice oddly formal. "Good luck, Miss Monica. I know you'll do your best."

THE sun's rays streamed in gently through the large oblong windows that decorated the dining hall, their light gleaming on the white-painted walls. Bouquets of fresh flowers were positioned strategically throughout the room, adding a lovely decorative note to the space. A long serving table stretched across the wall beside where we sat, its surface scattered with pure-white plates covered in a variety of food in every shade of the rainbow.

I had quickly noticed that meals in the Empire were conducted differently than those in Kophe, where food was served in courses. Here in the Empire, it seemed that a wide variety of courses were served all at once, their contents consisting of local dishes from the Empire's many imperial territories. Those attending the meal were not to serve themselves—instead, servants would arrange a plate for each of the guests, picking a selection of different cuisines according to their tastes.

To drink, we were served fruit wine, which appeared to my eye to be very high quality. A frisson of unease settled into my stomach as I stared at the glass in front of me. *Is there a specific way I'm supposed to go about tasting it? And what if my stomach gets upset since I'm so used to consuming mysterious skewered meats and murky beer…? I've got such an unsophisticated palate from living on the front lines, that I might not even be able to survive!*

And that wasn't even mentioning the issue of table manners. Kophe's rules had been drummed viciously into me during my training as a would-be queen, but I had no idea how things worked in the Empire.

Thankfully, Richard was sitting in the seat next to me, and noticed my rigid posture. He gave me a secret little signal with his eyes, indicating I should follow his lead.

Thank God, I moaned internally.

I made it through the appetizer and soup courses, after which everyone broke into light chatter. Now that the atmosphere was a bit more lively, His Majesty looked my way and apparently decided it was time to break the ice.

“Well now, Holy Woman Monica, you are ranked exceptionally high in the hierarchy of priestesses, are you not? Why don’t you tell us about the sort of work you’ve done thus far?”

“C-Certainly, Your Majesty. I don’t think the details would be appropriate for this particular setting as I wouldn’t want to ruin anyone’s appetite, so I’ll just provide a summary instead…”

All of a sudden, I felt overwhelmed. The eyes of everyone at the table were focused upon me, and though I didn’t know what positions they held, I *did* know that they were all Very Important People within the Empire. All the vile things people had said about me in my homeland came rushing back at once, and my mind went blank. Seized by trepidation, I had no words with which to speak.

Her Majesty seemed to notice my nervousness, for she leaned forward and told me gently, “No one here will censure your work, Holy Woman Monica. I swear that to you on my oath as the empress.”

My nervousness faded a little. “Your Majesty…” I murmured. “Thank you very much.”

After that, I finally mustered up the courage to speak about my professional experiences. Naturally, I politely glossed over any unsavory bits regarding the grotesque or sexual. The words came to me more easily the more I spoke—I told them of the construction of the massive defensive perimeter around the forest of Mayga Cieux, built to stop the expansion of the forest of monsters; I spoke of the training regimen the knight’s used to strengthen their bodies; I spoke of the development of new healing methods that only holy women could use, which allowed us to heal multiple wounded patients simultaneously; and finally, I spoke of my research into different methods to relieve psychological trauma.

Once I was done, one of those at the table asked, “How many other holy women were you stationed with?”

“I was the only one appointed to Mayga Cieux,” I replied. “For situations that necessitated the use of greater magic, I relied on the knights capable of magic to help me.”

Choosing my words carefully, I also related to them other duties I had performed. These included food preservation techniques, relief methods for pain from aging-related illnesses, and other treatments I had provided to the civilians—some of which had been restorative, though the most considerable number had been contraception for the residents of our vanguard town. But those details were best left unmentioned in polite company. All of these activities were technically outside of a holy woman's job, but in my specific case, still fell under my purview.

"Here in the Empire, a colossal supply of magical stones would be necessary to do so much with magic. There must be a cost to activating your supernatural powers as a holy woman, yes?" one of the men at the table asked. He had been introduced to me as the head of the Empire's Institute for Magical Research, and currently, his face was thoroughly puzzled.

A…cost? My blood ran cold as I tried to figure out how to answer.

But Richard came to my rescue, as he always seemed to do, and smoothly, seamlessly interjected on my behalf. "I ask that you content yourself with the information already provided on what it means to be a holy woman for now," he said. "Consider our current conversation an introduction. At His Majesty's discretion, a meeting will be held at a later date for a more thorough discussion on the topic. At the moment, I think we should thank Saint Monica for giving us such a thorough impromptu lesson. I'm sure you all agree that it would be difficult for anyone to hold a lecture of any sort calmly in this environment."

With his piece said, Richard turned back toward me with a smile. I settled back into my chair, relieved when I noticed that his words had very effectively cut off any more questions from the director of the Institute for Magical Research.

I snuck a glance at the emperor's face, curious to see his reaction, and found him staring at Richard with frighteningly serious eyes.

"Richard," he said heavily, filling the room with tension once again. "Was it honestly that easy for you to bring such an incredibly powerful priestess here? You encountered no problems at all?"

Richard met his older brother's gaze steadily, with his usual blithe smile. "Yes,

Your Majesty, it really was that simple. The Kingdom of Kophe has grown much too accustomed to being blessed with the existence of holy women. Its people neither recognize nor appreciate the wonder of their abilities—particularly hers. Possessed of both miraculous powers and an honest spirit, she has devoted herself earnestly to her role for most of her life. And yet the Kingdom disregarded all of that and saw her only as a broodmare.

"They made her into the crown princess, but only so that they could have a claim on her children if they are born with her powers. And after all that, when they discovered that there was a cost associated with her skills, they were unwilling to accommodate her needs. All this to say, the royal family of Kophe drove her off and consider her nothing more than a nuisance. They refused to even treat her as a human being."

"That is absolutely appalling," the emperor murmured quietly, his voice pained. His eyes dropped to the table. "How she must have felt enduring such behavior…" The emperor sighed. "Am I to believe, then, that you brought her here because you discerned all these things about Kophe?"

Huh? Wait, wait. What does he mean by that? What are they talking about?

I was completely lost at sea now, bewildered by the rapid-fire discussion. I couldn't stop staring at Richard and the ice-cold expression on his face; I'd never once seen him look like that before.

"It is an unavoidable fact that the Kingdom of Kophe holds its holy women and their rare powers in tremendous contempt. The monarchy and those who support it undervalue both their abilities *and* their efforts. The government uses up priestesses one after another, then tosses them aside once their powers are consumed. That's why I was trying to determine what sort of individuals holy women are and if it was possible to invite them to work in the Empire. I needed to find out what I could about them even if I had to hide my true identity."

I did a double-take. *What is happening? He never told me any of this!*

Richard's hand clenched on the table, as if anger was boiling up inside of him. He stared directly into His Majesty's eyes. "Our country must safeguard Saint Monica," he declared firmly. "By *any means necessary*."

The emperor tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Agreed. We must be

strenuous and true in our efforts to protect her. We do not want to repeat the mistakes of our neighbors."

The emperor let out a long exhale, shaking the tension from his shoulders. All the other officials in the room followed his lead, their expressions serious as they exchanged looks with one another.

"Oh, no," I whispered to myself, the force of my worry wringing the words from my mouth. "This does *not* bode well for me…"

Richard beamed down at me, clearly having heard my whispering. "Be at ease," he said with a chuckle. "Because Miss Monica? I'm going to protect you with the entirety of the Empire's might behind me."

Um, if I may, Your Imperial Highness…I must say that though I find your smile as charming and gentle as ever, I cannot shake a hint of fear at the underlying steel behind it…

"UGH, I'm exhausted…" I moaned.

As soon as I'd gotten back to my room after the luncheon, I'd flung off all my new sumptuous holy attire and stretched out listlessly on the bed. Just as I was about to lose myself in the pillowy softness of my comforter, the sound of a quiet knock on the door reached my ears. Once I heard the designated number of raps, I called out, "Come in."

Solarus Nova strode into the room, quickly shutting the door behind her. "Lady Monica," she said, bowing slightly. "I apologize for interrupting your rest."

Solarus had been assigned to look after me during my stay at the imperial castle as a bodyguard-cum-attendant. Slender and small of build, with a lovely melodic voice, she appeared to be a beautiful young girl hovering around the tender age of fifteen. Her looks, however, were quite deceiving—in actuality, she was even older than me.

She walked to my side, her feet moving with graceful efficiency across the floor. Her standard, black maid's outfit was pressed to perfection, and the expression on her lovely face neutral.

I watched her idly as she walked, fascinated by the cat-like sleekness to her movements. My eyes lingered on the way the curly, fluffy ringlets of her bobbed hair quivered slightly, brushing her soft cheeks with her every step. *Her hair…it's the same delightful gray shade as a handful of plush down,* I found myself thinking.

But my thoughts were cut abruptly short when Solarus drew up next to me and declared, "His Highness has instructed me to pamper you."

"I— What…?" I blurted out, startled. "Whatever did he mean by that?"

Solarus inclined her head. "Please allow me a few moments to show you, milady."

As I looked on in bewilderment, Solarus moved efficiently about my room, finally placing a wooden pail on the floor near a chair near the corner. She then knelt down and pointed to the chair.

"Have a seat, then please slip your legs in here."

"Oh…certainly," I said, climbing from my bed with reluctance.

"I'm a maid, milady," Solarus reminded me. "There's no need for you to speak formally with me."

Under her silently urgent gaze, I felt compelled to walk over to the chair, sit down, and present her with my feet. A flicker of satisfaction filled her eyes as she politely took them, and submerged them in the hot water inside the pail.

My lower limbs sunk into the water with a soft *splash,* and…the temperature was *perfect*. A light, sweet citrus scent drifted up to my nose.

"Ahhh…" I moaned. "That feels wonderful…such a nice aroma too."

"His Highness informed me that you like citrus scents, Lady Monica," Solarus informed me, a slight smile in her voice. "Today, I prepared a sweet perfume with an orange base for you."

"Even though only my feet are immersed in the water, I feel like the heat's traveling through my whole body," I murmured to Solarus. "It's so relaxing…"

"Indeed, this method is quite effective in warming a person up," she replied. "The blood flowing through one's legs makes its way all around the body, and

the heat that gathers in your feet can be carried along with it."

I nodded, recalling the hours of human anatomy lessons I'd taken. It had been part of my training for using my saintly powers, since holy women needed to be aware of the structure of a body in order to heal it.

Solarus began to slowly roll up her sleeves as I dwelled on my memories. "Milady?" she asked, drawing my attention to her. "May I massage your legs for you?"

"A-Are you sure?" I stammered. "I feel a bit guilty having you do that…"

Solarus gave me a droll look. "My massage ability has been certified by a magical physician, even despite the fact that I have no magic to speak of. I am quite accomplished, milady, but I shall of course refrain from touching you if that is something that causes you discomfort."

"O-Oh, don't worry, Solarus, I don't have a problem with it at all. So…please, go ahead. I'd appreciate it."

Solarus nodded before lifting one of my feet from the pail. She wiped the warm water down my leg, wetting my skin from my knee to my toes. Then she swiped a soft towel over my newly dampened skin, applying some sort of cream that seemed to be a mix of perfumed oil and ointment. With all these steps completed, she finally started the massage, rubbing my leg slowly but vigorously.

"Wow!" I said, genuinely impressed. "That…feels…incredible!"

The slightest of smiles touched her lips. "Since today is your first time under my care, I devised a light course more suited for relaxation," she told me, continuing to massage my legs as she spoke. "But please do let me know if you have any preference for the amount of force you would like me to use."

Her hands are so strong! I thought incredulously. *You'd never know it with how dainty she is.*

I relaxed into the chair and watched in awe as, without breaking a sweat, she unknotted my muscles easily. Before I knew it, I'd gotten so comfortable that I dozed off.

“That was wonderful…” I moaned, still slouched over in the chair. “Thank you…”

“I’m very pleased to hear you enjoyed it.”

I watched with half-closed lids as Solarus restored my room back to order. As I watched her, I couldn’t help but remember what Richard hold told me when he’d assigned her to my care. He’d said, “You don’t have to worry about her—she’ll be fine even if your power’s side effect activates.”

What a peculiar stamp of approval, I thought, vaguely curious as to why he’d said such a thing. I didn’t worry over it much, though, since I trusted him. He’d certainly been finding ways to care for me, one way or another, ever since we’d entered imperial territory.

Shortly after Solarus had been assigned to me, I’d learned that maids were relatively uncommon in the Empire. Apparently the country’s specialization in magical research—and magic’s practical applications in particular—had resulted in the development of magical apparatuses that could do routine automated tasks like cleaning and laundry. Because of the widespread use of such devices, it wasn’t truly necessary for women to go into that field of work.

In short, I’d discovered that having a maid in the Empire was a much greater luxury than such a thing had been in Kophe. Which made me wonder, with a slight bit of unease, how much exactly a maid like Solarus, who could provide massage services, was really worth.

Possibly even more than a gold ingot, I thought, stomach clenching. *Far too lavish an expense for me, in any case.*

To be frank, after being born and raised a commoner, I wasn’t used to being taken care of like this. I’d always been at least allowed to do the bare minimum myself, such as changing clothes and whatnot.

In the end, though, my reservations about having a maid didn’t matter. If I took my position into account here in the Empire, it wasn’t as if I could proclaim, “I don’t need a maid.” It would be incredibly rude of me to make such a fuss, not to mention awkward. And Richard *had* given her his endorsement and told me she’d be fine regardless of if my ability incited lust in her, myself, or others.

I'll just have to rely on her, I thought with a sigh. *However, I can still…*

"Solarus," I burst out. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," she replied.

"How…how is it that you're not affected by my, um, *unusual* issue?" I asked. I was determined to find out the truth.

"Your *unusual* issue…?" she repeated. "Ah, are you referring to the ruts you cause in others?"

Her eyes had rounded like a cat's at my words, and now she just stared at me, eyes unblinking. *She really does bring to mind a feline,* I thought with a smile.

Her direct response had made me a bit self-conscious, but I nodded anyway. "Y-Yes," I replied. "I am."

Solarus didn't even blink. "I don't have any problem with desires like that, because I only experience such things in the form of feelings spurred by sadism."

"Sadism?!" I cried. I hadn't expected such a scary word to suddenly appear in our conversation.

She inclined her head. "I first became interested in massage techniques because of my personal proclivities. Before I knew it, I came to adore hearing people scream as I loosened the tension from their muscles. I loved watching them drown in the unbearable ecstasy, knowing they couldn't resist me at all. Then, after all that, to have so many of them requesting my massages over and over again… Ahhh, such excitement I feel!"

I let out a little *eep* of terror, shifting slowly away from Solarus's face, which was alight with excitement.

"The point is, Lady Monica, that should I ever be unnaturally stimulated by your power, you can rest assured that I have the methods and partner to fulfill such desires."

"The me-me-me-methods and partner…? Wh-What does *that* mean?"

"Massaging, binding, that sort of thing." Solarus grinned at me, which gave me a little shiver. This level of expression was distinctly unusual for her.

I felt like I could most likely forgive anything my seemingly sweet, cat-like maid said, but decided it was probably for the best if I stopped this line of questioning before it went any further. I wasn't sure my brain could take any more.

"One more thing," Solarus said, expression cool. She twisted both arms and flexed, making the muscles in her biceps bulge powerfully. "Should you lose yourself in a self-induced heat and attack me, I can subdue you easily. Which means there's even less need for you to fret. Please keep in mind that I am a member of the chivalric order, just like His Imperial Highness."

"I-I see…" I said slowly.

"Oh, and if you *do* wish for such an aggressive massage, I would be happy to play along…"

"I-I don't!" I cried. "And I absolutely *won't*!"

"So certain, hmm?" Solarus asked, her voice a tad bit disappointed. "So be it."

She dropped her arms, then stepped out of the room for a moment.

Thank God that conversation's over, I thought with a shiver. I had a creeping suspicion that if I had taken her up on her offer, I would have become her eternal slave.

Just as I'd finally relaxed again, the door swung open, and Solarus returned. She had a glass of hot lemonade in her hands. "His Highness mentioned that you like to drink this," she said, placing the drink in my hands.

As expected from a considerate, service-oriented sadist, I thought wryly.

I took a sip of the lemonade, then closed my eyes in satisfaction. "I'm so happy," I murmured. "I can't believe Richard remembered."

Every drink I took reminded me of him. I thought of our time on the front lines together, and how I'd depended on him far too much. I'd needed his help many a time when I'd encountered knights consumed by their ruts, and that wasn't even mentioning all the danger I'd found myself in way back in the early days, when I'd still been unused to my situation and my new profession as a holy woman.

Whatever the occasion, Richard had always saved me anytime I needed help. He'd protected me constantly, finding ways I could shield myself so that the same things wouldn't happen to me again. Thanks to his efforts, after I'd been working at that base for around a year, I'd rarely ever felt like I was in danger.

Still, though it felt rude of me to admit it, I hadn't been sure I could trust him early on in our acquaintance. Before I'd met him, I'd had plenty of hard lessons in the truth of men. I'd learned that no matter how gentlemanly they might be, if their libidos exploded, a majority of them would revel in the animalistic wildness hidden within.

But I had never once seen Richard discomfited by my priestess abilities. Eventually, I'd become convinced that he lacked a sex drive entirely. I had changed my mind regarding that though after learning about his true identity. I figure that due to his standing as the Empire's crown prince, he must have had to temper himself and his emotions every day. In fact, I was almost positive that he kept himself disciplined at all times.

Because that's just the kind of honorable man he is, I thought, my heart aching sweetly.

As I took the last few sips of my lemonade, Solarus struck up another conversation with me as she tidied up the room.

"If you're feeling reenergized, His Highness stated that he would like to see you." She took a sidelong glance at me, seeing how I'd perked up. "Specifically, he said, 'Shall we do the usual together and make ourselves sweat?'"

"*Huh?!*" I blushed scarlet at hearing our secret spoken aloud. "Richard… invited me?"

"Yes," Solarus confirmed. "He has already reserved a sound-proof room, so I'll guide you there once you're ready to depart."

"Thank you…" I murmured thoughtfully. "Perhaps now would be a good time…"

Solarus's expression didn't change at all. Shaking off my embarrassment, I stood up quickly and changed into comfortable clothes I could easily move in. Then I followed her out of my room and into the palace.

Within a few minutes, Solarus and I had arrived at a small ballroom with a high ceiling. Richard stood in the middle of the floor, dressed in neatly pressed clothes.

“Ah, hello again, Miss Monica,” Richard said, smiling cheerfully.

“Have you been here long?” I asked, blushing. “I’m sorry for making you wait.”

“No apologies necessary,” he drawled. His cheeks were more flushed than usual, and his eyes held a distinctly beastly glint when they met mine. “I wanted to have some time to prepare, so it was no trouble at all.” He took a single, anticipatory step forward. “Are you ready then, Miss Monica?”

“I am,” I said, shrugging off my jacket and handing it to Solarus. “I’ve been wanting to do this for so long. I’m feeling rather energetic today too.”

Richard gave me a wicked grin. “Then let’s begin, Miss Monica. I’ll keep you company until you can no longer stand up straight.”

“HAH! Yah! *Hyaaah*!!!”

“Come now, Miss Monica, you need to drive more power into your legs! Your center of gravity is off balance!”

“Nh…ugh… Ahhhh!!!”

Thwap! Whack! Explosive sounds of impact echoed through the ballroom. Drops of sweat flew. I panted heavily as Richard looked down on me, looming over me with his superior height. His gaze gleamed at me, as sharp as it was on the battlefield, as he skillfully riled me up with his comments.

I dredged up every bit of power in my body and attacked him relentlessly, but I didn’t stand a chance against Richard. He deflected my blows lightly, almost casually, with the palms of his hands.

“Miss Monica,” he chided me, “your right side has been weakening steadily!”

I let out a growl, throwing a combination of punches and kicks right and left, right and left.

Richard blocked another of my blows from the left, and then…

Thwack! I'd finally hit him—this time, it was with a spinning kick I'd launched using my right leg.

Richard blew out a breath, his eyes twinkling. "Nicely done. Looks like you've improved yet again, Miss Monica."

"Bah!" I snorted. I shot Richard a wry grin as I wiped the sweat from my forehead. "Your unreasonable demands just keep growing, so there's no way I *wouldn't* get stronger."

I'd been training in martial arts, particularly in hand-to-hand combat, ever since our time back at the base. I'd asked Richard to teach me, thinking I could use the exercise to channel the raging lusts that plagued my body and turn my weakness into physical strength. Richard had worked me hard from the start, not taking it easy on me for even a moment. Until eventually, I'd decided I wanted to learn martial arts seriously, so I could use them for self-defense.

I had to forego some of my nun's garb for these practice sessions, but Richard had never once acted strangely about it, which I deeply appreciated.

Now he just laughed at my retort. "Solarus will partner with you when I can't," he told me smiling. "She's certainly much better at instructing women than I am."

She executed a perfect bow without saying a word.

"By the way, Miss Monica…" Richard said, sending me an apologetic look. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble."

I took a sip from the cup of water Solarus had given me, looking at him from the corner of my eye. "Well, well," I teased, "you're bringing this up now?"

"You're…not angry?"

I smiled. "Of course not."

Richard frowned and peered more closely at my face, clearly not believing me at all.

I burst out laughing—I mean, I couldn't help it. A lowly plebeian girl like me being on the receiving end of such contriteness from a tall, handsome crown

prince? *Would wonders never cease…*

"I won't deny that I was surprised by how forcibly you dragged me here to solve Their Majesties's fertility issue," I told him with a smile, "But it ultimately was for the best. Now I can still continue working without having to worry about surviving."

Some of the tension left his shoulders. "Do you truly feel that way?"

I nodded. "I do. Plus, now I can return the favor for all those long years you protected me, Richard. You can be sure I'll go above and beyond."

"Thank you," he said softly. He smiled at me gently, his eyelids fallen to half-mast. "As ever, Miss Monica, I'm humbled by your kindness."

I must be the luckiest girl in the world, to be able to monopolize the gorgeous crown prince's regal smile, I thought with an inward giggle.

Though my good fortune had managed to outstrip even that! To think that I'd be given the luxury of receiving personal combat instruction from His Imperial Highness himself… *I rather hope I'm not exceeding the limits of my blessings…*

"I'll take full responsibility for protecting you, Miss Monica," Richard vowed.

"I'm much obliged," I told him honestly. "I'd appreciate having you as my backup, since my responsibilities as the Empire's sole holy woman will have me in constant contact with Their Majesties."

"That…wasn't completely what I meant…" Richard muttered. He recovered quickly, though, beaming one of his usual, good-natured smiles in my direction. "But of course, I'll be happy to aid you in any way I can."

AFTER escorting Monica to her room, Richard slipped into a seemingly empty room, Solarus following close behind. Behind the door, there stood a man who had perfected the art of blending into the background.

He was a young knight, approximately sixteen years old. The piercing blue of his eyes was nearly undetectable, tucked as they were under the long, wavy forelocks of his black hair.

“Darius,” Richard said sharply. “Report.”

“Yes, sir!”

The knight—Darius Sye—immediately activated his magic and relayed his gathered knowledge so that only Richard could hear him.

“To sum everything up…due to the widespread malicious rumors about a lascivious priestess, holy women as a whole are losing their authority in the Kingdom of Kophe. These women have very few ties with each other, and the few they do have happen to be quite weak. The way they’re treated as disposable by the state means that they have few bonds with those outside of their realm either.

“The Great Church of Kophe, which is technically responsible for managing these saintly women, does not look favorably upon them either, due to their ability to gain quick and substantial support from the masses. The infamy that now surrounds one particular holy woman has now given the Church’s leadership a convenient opportunity to further sully the dignity of *all* holy women.”

Richard nodded brusquely, having listened attentively the entire time. He activated his own magic, using a similar silencing technique, and responded: “Hm… The Great Church maintains a strong relationship with the crown prince, so its leaders must be amplifying the Church’s influence under the mantle of his…” Richard trailed off, chuckling, but there was no humor in the sound. “In other words, it’s all business as usual in Kophe. You have my thanks, Darius. I’m relying on you to gather information from merchants as you go about your duties surveilling the borders.”

Darius nodded. “Understood. At present, none of the rumors circulating in Kophe appears to have had an effect on Lady Monica’s reputation within the Empire.”

“Excellent,” Richard said, his eyes narrowing to pleased slits. “It paid off to be proactive with our preparations ahead of her arrival, hm? Not only did the people welcome her with open arms, but they also remain enthused about her continued presence.” Richard smiled thinly, his gaze cold and determined. “Miss Monica is a strong person. I’m confident she’ll accomplish great things and earn

high praise through her own merits. The only thing left for me to do is keep supporting her so that she achieves the recognition she deserves."

"It's clear to me that you admire the lady priestess a great deal, Your Highness," Darius replied, bowing his head slightly.

The scary look in Richard's crimson eyes faded at Darius's words, and he relaxed a bit before finally replying, "Well, of course. Miss Monica is an extremely important person, both to the Empire and to me."

I'D been a veritable ball of nerves for my first few days living in the Empire, constantly worrying about how things would go. But thankfully, once I'd actually got used to the new rhythm of my life, I found that my days floated by in slow swells of peace and comfort.

I'd been granted a section of Their Majesties' palace as my own residence. They'd even appointed several attendants exclusively to me, so that I could become familiar with the castle grounds in particular and daily life in general. The ones I was closest with were my maid, Solarus the sadist, and a young man named Darius. He was a fairly mysterious fellow, but I thought he was a good person nevertheless. Whenever he was around, I'd get this feeling that there was something rather…special…about him, but I was never quite able to figure out what. To be honest, part of me feared finding out.

I mean, look at what happened when I asked Solarus about herself…

Despite my attendants, my palatial life here in the Empire wasn't much constrained at all. The way I was treated here was worlds away from what I'd experienced in Kophe. As a visiting holy woman employed directly by the emperor, I'd been given a great deal of freedom. The only exceptions were that I was not to go beyond the castle's walls, and that if I decided I wished to venture into the city itself, I must bring Richard with me.

I paused in the middle of the hallway I'd been strolling down, letting out a yawn. "Life here has been much too serene," I muttered, "especially when everyone treats me so courteously. I feel as pampered as someone's pet cat…"

I had spent much of my time in the castle thus far garbed in the pristine

priestess's attire Richard had given me, doing things like drinking tea, leisurely reading a book, or taking a stroll around the estate. *If anything, a pet cat works* harder *than me to keep its place within a family.*

But naturally, those halcyon days soon came to an end. *And so it goes.*

"MISS Monica," Richard asked, inclining his head to me in a light-hearted manner, "are you used to palace life yet? And if so, would you consider now a good time to discuss a few matters of interest?"

"Of course!" I replied immediately. "Now's perfect! I feel absolutely terrible about the whole heaps of nothing I've done, so please tell me you come bearing ample work."

"I appreciate your enthusiasm, Miss Monica," Richard replied with a laugh.

He practically twinkled as he led me to another area of the castle grounds. There was a large sign standing out in front of the building in front of which we stood, and upon looking at the words printed on its surface, my brow wrinkled in confusion. I glanced from Richard to the sign, reading it a second time. It still said, "The Chivalric Order of Knights - Special Forces' Headquarters."

"Oh, my…" I murmured, abruptly feeling nervous. "This is…the headquarters of the knight's special forces?"

"That's right."

But why am I *here?* I wondered.

I didn't have time to ask since Richard strode away rapidly, his long legs eating up the ground. I rushed after him, and he steered me into a conference room. A middle-aged man with a stern face and several bureaucrats in sleek uniforms stood inside. They saluted Richard, then turned to look very intently at me.

I feel…uneasy for some reason…

"Holy Woman Monica," Richard said formally, "today's request for a consultation comes from Duke Heathcomille, Minister of Environment and Agriculture and acting administrator of all imperial lands. He also happens to be my maternal uncle. He mentioned to me earlier that he's quite keen to discuss

strategy with you regarding our country's monster problem."

A small squeak of surprise slipped from my lips. *Well, that's news to me!*

Seeing that I was visibly shaken, Richard stooped down, tilting his head close to mine.

"What's the meaning of this?" I whispered quietly into his ear. "Didn't you bring me to the Empire to work as a holy woman?"

Richard had invited me here to try and solve Their Majesties' fertility issue. So why was he escorting me here and asking me to advise a cabinet minister on another topic entirely?

"All you have to do is what you've always done," Richard said under his breath. "Just treat it as one of your usual responsibilities out in the field."

"But back then, I wasn't in charge of anything! I had no real authority!"

"The knight commander may have been the one to take all the credit and receive recognition, but *you*, Miss Monica, were the one who racked your brain incessantly for solutions and performed all the actual work. You can do this. I believe in you."

He's not budging, is he…? I thought, a ball forming in the pit of my stomach.

Sensing victory, Richard leaned even closer, his lips brushing my ear as he murmured his next words. "I'd greatly appreciate your support in this, Miss Monica," he crooned. "Just think of it as a favor to me. Won't you give me a hand?"

When he looked at me like that, with his head tilted imploringly, I had no choice but to acquiesce.

"Fine…" I muttered.

Richard's face lit up in delight. He took a step away from my side, then grandly gestured an arm in my direction. "Well then, Lord Heathcomille, if you please."

Lord Heathcomille's eyes were focused squarely on me. I would've known exactly who he was, even if Richard hadn't introduced him. It was quite hard to forget a face full of spite, you see. When I'd met him at the luncheon, he'd

watched me the entire time, his eyes calculating and mistrustful.

"Lady priestess," he proclaimed in a booming voice. "I would hear your thoughts on how to mitigate the damage caused by monsters in the Empire's southern reaches."

Perhaps he's naturally that loud, I mused. *But I can't help but think he's projecting like that deliberately, in an attempt to cow those around him.* Regardless, I'd now promised Richard I would work with him.

I sighed inwardly. "Damage caused by monsters?" I asked slowly. "Hmm."

I sat down in one of the chairs scattered around the conference table, and the rest of the government officials followed suit. A map was promptly and efficiently spread out, followed by a handful of different documents.

I squinted at the map. It seemed one particular area had been marked out—one corner of a seaside delta in the southern part of the Empire.

"This region in the south is known as Psyend," Lord Heathcomille informed me. "The area has infertile soil due to the ashfalls which drift over it every time there is an eruption on the volcanic island just off the coast. As a result, most of the subjects there make their livings through fishing. *But*…"

Lord Heathcomille's brows scrunched together as he paused, glaring fiercely in my direction.

Please, stop! I screeched internally. *You're scaring me!*

"Five years ago, we started receiving reports of monster attacks. At first, we were able to manage the problem with the help of the local chivalric orders and young folks' associations. But recently, we can no longer make do without support from the imperial capital. The number of direct casualties has increased, and there has been severe damage inflicted on the fishing grounds. As a result, the fisheries have experienced a dramatic decline in the quality of their catches." Lord Heathcomille let out a gusting sigh. "That's not all, unfortunately. The havoc the monsters are wreaking has not been limited to the sea alone."

"I presume the monster's attacks have extended to the land as well, then?"

Lord Heathcomille nodded. “Yes. They’ve been raiding settlements, devouring the few livestock the villagers have left. Now that their additional food sources are gone, those people can no longer survive without additional supplies from the capital.”

As the daughter of a former farmer, I felt a chill snake down my spine. Those people had lost the foundations of their existence—they may have been used to living on infertile lands, but to have lost their fisheries and livestock as well…? I couldn’t imagine the level of despair they must be feeling.

“Most of the towns in the area have been deserted, their people fleeing and taking refuge elsewhere. It’s an untenable situation—we cannot let it stand. Moreover, Psyend is a region that is valuable to the Empire because of its direct access to the sea. It isn’t just an imperial territory, it’s an important part of our coastal defense. We *need* to protect it, but at this rate, we’re going to hit the limit of what we can afford as far as defensive and maintenance expenses.”

“Miss Monica,” Richard said seriously. I turned to him, falling into his clear, flame-colored eyes as they stared intently into mine. “Originally, the governance of Psyend was entrusted to me, the crown prince, in His Majesty’s stead. That locality used to be filled with quiet, remote villages, but in the time I’ve been gone from my homeland…” Richard grimaced, looking pained. “I must admit some of the responsibility for this debacle falls to me. So, please…lend me your aid.”

“Your Highness…” I murmured.

Richard’s voice had gone low and serious, a drastic change from his usual easygoing tone. The weight of the concern he carried for his fellow countrymen filled every word.

Well, I certainly can’t just run away with a pithy, “That’s impossible!” when people are so desperately in need, I thought. *Dealing with things like this is most certainly a part of a priestess’s job.*

“I’ll do whatever I can,” I swore. “I shall make thorough use of all the skills at my disposal.”

AFTER that, I spent every day working diligently to solve the problem of Psyend. In the mornings, with either Solarus or Darius as an escort, I ensconced myself in the library or consulted with experts. Then in the afternoons, I would synthesize that knowledge by utilizing my powers as a holy woman.

Currently, I was settled in a room in the library that had been specifically designated to me. Books and documents lay spread out on the table before me. As I carefully read through them, one by one, I couldn't help but marvel at the mountains of information they contained.

I'd been shocked when I discovered that even obscure subjects like paganism had a wealth of tomes available for perusing. There were very few books available on that subject—or even on the subject of holy women—back in Kophe. Most likely this was because the Great Church had used the powerful influence it had over the country to have such resources removed.

"The Empire's management system for data is superb!" I told Darius excitedly. "I can't believe how well-organized the materials in this library are! It's clear that the Empire considers information and records valuable national assets."

Darius nodded in agreement, smiling gently at my exclamation.

Darius—full name Darius Sye—was a strong, dependable knight whom Richard trusted whole-heartedly. He had a boyish face and wavy, black hair, plus a friendly nature and overall competence I was happy to attest to. As we'd spent more time together, I'd learned more and more about him, including the fact that his talents didn't just lie on the battlefield—they extended to practical duties as well.

This wasn't even mentioning the fact that the young man held a dual status as both a mage *and* a knight. The mage's rank insignia pinned to his collar read "Second Class," which was only two rungs below the highest available ranking. It was undeniable—Darius was an extremely capable individual and a skilled warrior. And yet…I couldn't help but think of him as closer to like a winsome, thoughtful chamberlain than a fierce knight.

"The Belktrius Empire controls territories with pagan populations as well as a multitude of ethnic groups," Darius kindly explained to me as he stared absently at the bookshelves around us. "But we still strive to the fullest extent to protect

those peoples' cultures and rights. That's why we instituted a system to keep records of all the knowledge we've gathered over the years. Though of course access to such information is strictly regulated."

I hummed thoughtfully. "I'm guessing there are many things in here that I normally wouldn't have been allowed to peruse, yes?"

Darius shot me a little smile. "Remember Lady Monica, His Highness has given you free rein of the castle. As long as you have his permission, you can do anything you want. Within reason, that is."

I gasped audibly in shock at his words. *How can Richard trust me so much?!* Goosebumps spread over my flesh as it truly hit me how powerful, yet still enigmatic, the imperial crown prince was.

Darius seemed to not notice my reaction, though—a flicker of some feeling ran across his face, as if a thought had come drifting to the surface. "I apologize if my next question is impolite, Miss Monica, but I was wondering…are you of common birth?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"I see. I only ask because I was quite startled by how easily you've been reading our nation's reference works. Many of them are written with nonstandard, formal vocabulary and grammar that is not typically used in daily life. Is the literacy rate just that high in Kophe that such skills are considered normal…?"

"Oh, not at all," I replied. "The literacy rate is abysmally low—for common women in particular."

Puzzlement filled Darius's eyes. "Can I then conclude that your proficiency with such advanced material can be attributed to special language learning that you undertook as part of your holy training?"

"Actually…" I said, smiling slightly, "that assumption is wrong as well. *This* is why." I patted a hand on the dictionary that lay in front of me on the table.

"A dictionary…? I don't understand."

"If I read through a dictionary with my holy powers activated, I can create a

mental linguistic framework that allows me to conduct simultaneous translation of any text I read in that particular language thereafter. The Empire's alphabet and phraseology are different than Kophe's, but the grammar is actually practically the same. It's allowed me to be able to parse these imperial documents fairly easily."

"R-Really?!" Darius demanded. He stared at me, frozen in shock, before muttering an astonished "Incredible…" to himself. "I consider myself proficient in magic, but to be able to use translation magic for such long periods of time… I can barely manage an hour before I hit my limit!"

"Well, the only reason I can sustain my magic for such a long period of time is because I can bolster it with my holy woman abilities. My mage rank is technically the same as yours, Darius, but when I activate my special powers, they increase the potency of my magic until it equates to that of a First Class mage. Which," I said with a wry smile, "is frankly akin to foul play."

"No, no, no, I wouldn't go that far!" Darius exclaimed. "It isn't as if you chose to be born like that."

"Very true," I agreed. "I should mention, even with my powers activated, I can only sustain my translation magic for around four hours."

"Ah-ha!" he said, grinning in realization. "Now I understand why you only read books in the mornings."

"Indeed. If I push myself beyond that…well, um, *that* would be an issue…"

"What do you mean by that?" Darius asked, his head cocking curiously to the side.

My eyes dropped to the table as I struggled to find the words to explain. I couldn't very well be explicit, and I loathed talking about it, regardless. "Umm…" I finally said, "you're aware of the…side effects…of my holy powers… right?"

"Oh. *Ohhh*." Darius's eyes lit up as he caught on to what I was alluding to. He smacked a fist into his opposite palm in triumph. "I see! You wouldn't be able to control your lust!"

My face flushed crimson. "G-Good grief, how blunt!"

“And if you ended up in that condition,” Darius muttered, taking no notice of my mortified expression, “no doubt it would be impossible for you to read, much less do anything else. So basically, you need to read as much as you can, while you’re using a safe amount of your saintly superpower. I see, I see.”

Darius nodded excitedly, an invigorated smile unraveling across his face.

He must have been pondering all this for quite some time, I thought, observing him.

“Oh, Lady Monica, now I understand what happened those times when you were acting strange, like you were in a daze, and then started gazing upon those illustrations of animals mating. Back then, I found your expression inscrutable to say the least, but it all makes sense to me now. You were nearing your limits on those occasions, weren’t you?” Darius nodded to himself as he continued to ponder, his hand coming thoughtfully to his chin. “Hmm…” he rumbled. “Yes, yes, that’s right…”

“I, um, well…” I stammered. “I didn’t seek those out deliberately! My hands just moved of their own volition!”

Darius laughed, his smile gentle. “It must be difficult for you, yes?”

I looked away from Darius’s face, feeling overcome with the urge to run away. I truly hadn’t been lying about my hands moving on their own—my saintly superpower clouded my mind if I used it for too long, and when that happened, I would unconsciously reach for anything sexual as my urges bubbled to the surface.

Ever since I’d learned the cost of my holy woman powers, I’d been terrified that it would cause me to do something reckless or make a horrible mistake. To try and prevent such a fate, I’d deliberately avoided any and all knowledge that had to do with sexual matters. Despite my best efforts though, I had picked up fragments here and there over the years. As the daughter of a former farmer, livestock breeding was an inevitable part of life…so I wasn’t unaware of the specifics concerning animals, at least. That knowledge had led to bad habits—the primary one being picking up materials that stoked the flame of my desire even higher. Sometimes, I even found that such materials…*excited* me.

I stared hard at the table, wanting desperately to run away, but I jerked my

head up to look at Darius when he laughed. “Lady Monica,” he said, smiling, “there’s no need to worry. Should you ever find yourself lost to your libido’s effects, please know that I would most certainly be able to subdue you and convey you safely to your room. So please be at ease and continue your work.”

“O-Okay…” I mumbled. “Thank you.”

Although I couldn’t quite muster the nerve to say it, I appreciated his thoughtfulness very, very much. On the other hand, I couldn’t help but be embarrassed that I was letting a boy even younger than me be my source of comfort.

“Oh, and one more thing,” Darius said suddenly, eyes sparkling. “I’m certain that your preferences in men lie elsewhere, but on the exceedingly slim chance I spark your libido, it would not bother me one bit.”

“I… *Pardon*?!”

“His Highness was quite emphatic when he warned us about your condition. He said, and I quote, ‘Once she’s aroused, even something as innocuous as the grain of a wooden pillar becomes pornographic fodder for her overly stimulated senses.’ He wanted to make sure we’d be prepared for any eventuality.”

“I can’t believe Richard told you that! The absolute *gall* of the man!” I clutched my head in my hands, appalled by this ridiculous conversation.

Meanwhile, Darius was strutting about the room, chest puffed in pride. “For my part, I swear to never engage in improper conduct with you, Lady Monica,” he declared in a ringing, confident tone. “Even if you pin me down and try to have your way with me, I swear that I will not react in *that way* at all. Not even a single indiscreet twitch from me.”

“Well…” I said weakly, “I sincerely thank you for being so honest…”

Any normal girl would have grappled with a complicated mix of emotions after hearing such a direct declaration from a charming young man. As for me, though? I felt only gratitude for his frankness. As a so-called “lascivious priestess” who tempted others *and* myself, I was the furthest thing from being normal.

“Additionally,” Darius continued cheerfully, “I have placed a magical restraint

on myself that would make mincemeat of my manhood should I lose my virginity. I hope knowing that further allays any concerns you may have."

I stared at him, aghast. "Why would you go so far?!" I demanded. "I mean, that's not to say I'm not grateful, but *why would you go so far?!*"

"Because! It's the most effective way to amplify my magic!"

"O-Oh…" I stammered. "Is that so…?"

There *were* a fair amount of people who magnified their magical energies by putting constraints on themselves, but I had to admit that this was my first time meeting someone who strengthened his magic at the cost of his chastity. By magically binding his *male* organ, no less!

To have such outrageous conviction…he must be incredibly strong. But I wonder what compels him to go to such extremes…?

With this new information in my head, I found it nearly impossible to look Darius in the eye. He smiled at me, noticing my chagrin.

"Just so you know, Lady Monica, if you ask it of me, I will gladly excuse myself and wait outside for a while."

"Uh…why would I do that?"

"Well," he admitted, "I thought perhaps you'd be able to concentrate better if I was not around to provide a distraction."

"Y-You really don't have to be so considerate of me!" I told him, flushing deeply once again.

"Understood!" Darius said, laughing. He flashed his canines at me in a toothy grin and gave me a breezy nod.

His personality reminds me of Richard's, I realized all of a sudden. *He's got that same quality of coming off as unconcerned on the surface, only to turn around and say something that penetrates all the way to the core of someone's defenses.* I put my head in my hands. *Does that mean…*all *the men in this country like them?!*

But I truly didn't have time to ponder the question—I needed to get back to my research.

“Time for me to pull myself together…” I muttered to myself. “All right, ten more pages! I can make it through at least ten more pages!”

“Good luck!” Darius said, giving me a jaunty little salute. “I’ll go refill the teapot with some more chameleon plant tea while you get started.”

I nodded, slapping the flat of both of my hands to my cheeks. *Begone, haze!* I thought determinedly.

Thus prepared, I took a deep breath, and dove back into my work.

WITHIN a few days, I heard tell that Lord Heathcomille held me in poor regard for spending my days in the library researching. His followers had started whispering among themselves, spreading rumors that I was only acting as I was to hide the fact that I couldn’t find a solution to the problem the lord had presented me with.

“I mean, *come on,*” I heard someone scoff from down the hallway. “A *real* holy woman wouldn’t be having so much trouble, don’t you think? Something like the lord’s request would be child’s play for them!”

“I haven’t seen her pray once, you know. She just shuts herself in the library every day.”

“I heard back in Kophe she was a priestess of some renown, but that her personality left a lot to be desired. Sounds like she doesn’t have any feminine charm at all—just a level of impudence unbecoming of a woman.”

I sighed, turning around and heading back down the hallway where I’d just come. I *hated* how often I ran into people whispering about me in such a manner, and the awkward atmosphere these conversations left behind once I stepped into a room.

The fact that Lord Heathcomille was a prominent member of a party that was highly critical of his nephews—Emperor Christopher and Crown Prince Richard both—did not help. It seemed likely that he had opposed their proposition to bring me to the Empire as a visiting saint.

Now that I thought about it, I did recall Richard mentioning something about

going into hiding in Kophe after getting entangled in some sort of power struggle here in the Empire. It couldn't have been easy to return and discover that his former domain had been taken over by a hostile party like Lord Heathcomille, and had moreover met with such devastation in his absence.

The whole thing reeks *of political skullduggery to me.*

AS I worked away busily in the library, afternoon came on swift feet. It felt like I'd only been there a short time when Richard popped in, extending me an invitation to join him for tea.

"Come, why don't we take a break?" he'd cajoled me, eyes twinkling.

I was weak to such expressions from him, and so now, only a scant few minutes later, I was settled on a seat in a gazebo located in an herbal garden on the castle grounds.

I took a sip of tea and placed the cup back down carefully on its saucer, then turned to Richard. "I wish you would have warned me in advance that I'd be forced to confront a man like him," I muttered, my lips pursed in displeasure.

Richard gave a light-hearted roll of his eyes. "You'll encounter people like him no matter where you go," he told me, his devil-may-care attitude firmly in place. "But don't worry, Miss Monica—you've got the skills you need to handle such people just fine. It's just a part of who you are."

I took another sip of tea, eyeing Richard over the cup's rim. "You have a lot of faith in me, hm?" I commented.

While I appreciate your trust, your uncle and his supporters are turning out to be quite the nuisance, I thought, sighing.

I set the teacup back on the table, the small amount of liquid left inside quivering at the movement. The intensely powerful scent of the tea seemed strangely at odds with the delicacy of the china. It was a medicinal blend that I'd made from fishwort, which was also known as the chameleon plant. Fishwort grew rampantly in the castle's herbal garden, so I'd plucked all of it, dried the leaves, and condensed what was left into a fine powder. Then, using other compounds, I'd created a top-secret mix designed to control my sexual urges.

I'd created the special elixir myself a long time ago.

Thankfully, the fishwort tea wasn't the only thing I had to look forward to at teatime. Snacks were always made to accompany the tea, and this teatime was no different.

Today's menu consisted of pastries. The one I was currently enjoying was a fried confection in the shape of a flower bud. I cut into the top of it—which was scattered with edible flowers—and spread some jam on the small morsel I'd taken for myself before popping it into my mouth.

Despite its adorable appearance, I'd discovered that the sweet possessed exceptionally high nutritional content. The only unfortunate thing was that it didn't pair well with the fishwort elixir. But I couldn't do without my special tea. If I abstained from drinking it, I wouldn't be able to control my heat in the afternoons after using my powers during my morning work.

Once I was finished chewing, I looked back over at Richard and broke the silence between us. "Well, you're right, in any case," I told him. "I'm quite used to fighting my own battles at this point, and enduring the derision of others. I'll just have to do the best I can and keep marching forward."

Since it was clear to me that the Empire's experts and governmental officials weren't able to solve the monster problem through their own trial and error, that left me the task of investigating the spots in their methods they'd overlooked. That meant I had to analyze all the records and campaigns concerning the monster subjugation efforts in the south until now. I needed access to any and all of the information available, from beginning to end. I couldn't just act blindly without a grounded framework.

I'll just have to suffer their contempt for however much longer it takes to complete my analysis, I thought, my resolve firming.

"To be clear, Miss Monica, I have already taken preventative measures on that front. So that, at least, you don't have to worry about."

I cut another piece of pastry, tossed it into my mouth, and swallowed before I finally decided to respond to Richard. When I looked over at him, he was observing me with a pleased twinkle in his eyes.

“My daily necessities are taken care of, and I can continue to work as I always have,” I told him seriously. “After being so blessed, it would be absolutely unconscionable of me to say I couldn’t solve this issue for your country. Especially when I know that there are still many people out there who are in distress while I sit here enjoying my tea…” A wave of determination built up in me. “So I’m going to eat as much as I can, so I can bolster my energy and work as hard as possible!”

Richard’s flame-colored eyes crinkled into slits as he smiled widely at me. “I must say, I adore that part of you, Miss Monica.”

I smiled back at his beaming face, but I couldn’t help but wonder, *What will happen to me in my coming days and weeks here*?

In the end, there was no point in agonizing over the question. This was a path I’d willingly chosen for myself. And as the holy woman with an expressly unholy side effect, I would carry on as I always had, accomplishing what I could, one thing at a time.

TWO weeks later, I found myself the focal point of a debriefing.

The location for this session was a room twice as large as the special forces’ conference room; aside from Lord Heathcomille, there were a number of other cabinet members present. From what Richard had told me, those present had specifically mentioned their interest in meeting me in person. All told, our gathering looked terrifyingly like a true congress.

B-But no one informed me that the meeting would be this important! I thought in horror. I honestly wanted to dig a hole, crawl into it, and disappear. I turned to Richard, hopeful he would help me escape, only to find an amused gleam glinting in his flame-colored eyes.

He leaned back in his chair—which just happened to be the one reserved for the highest-ranking official in the room—and gave me a thumbs-up in support. His well-defined lips curved as he soundlessly mouthed, “Good luck!”

Curse him! I thought, hands clenching into fists. *I hope he knows that one day he’s going to hit my limit as far as these unreasonable requests!*

I closed my eyes and blew out a breath, doing the best I could to release all the nervous energy from my body. *I have to do this,* I thought, resigned. *It is rather unfortunate, but I should be used to it by now. I have been long without paths of retreat in my life.*

And so, with my loins successfully girded, I took my place behind the podium at the front of the room and greeted the assembly of people before me. “Everyone,” I said, going for a polite but firm tone, “thank you very much for attending this inquest.”

There were a few token replies murmured for the sake of courtesy, and I acknowledged them warmly, feeling almost like I was about to conduct a lecture at school. I surveyed the small crowd of people around me, reminded myself to make use of the map of the southern region, along with the other pertinent documents pinned up on the wall behind me, and finally began to speak on the main topic of the day—Psyend.

“Let me start with my conclusion,” I declared. “I believe I have pinpointed the cause of the monster influx—the felling of a sacred tree at one of Psyend’s temples during the winter festival six years ago.”

Murmurs and shouts filled the room. Some seemed to be deeply skeptical of my statement, while others had thoughtful looks on their faces.

“You think this is all because of a sacred tree?!” Lord Heathcomille snarled. There was no doubt in my mind that he was the one most staunchly in denial of my claims. “That is preposterous! How could a tree have anything to do with the monster invasion?!”

“At present,” I stated calmly, “a majority of the Empire’s citizens are adherents of the religion of Chasselé. But up until 300 years ago, the people of Psyend had their own indigenous religion in which they worshiped animals, such as fish and dragons, as local gods. In effect, they treated the creatures we consider monsters as gods.”

“They worshiped *monsters*…?!” the lord asked, clearly disgusted.

A few officials frowned at my revelation, but many others nodded in agreement. Most likely they were familiar with the Psyend’s history.

I'm doing pretty well, I encouraged myself. My audience reacted to my findings in a variety of different ways, but I felt good that they at least listened closely to my words.

"It is actually fairly common for people to worship beings that could cause them harm as gods," I continued. "In regions constantly attacked by monsters, this particular trend is quite pronounced. These facts are readily available to all who wish to learn them—the Belktrius Empire's stance on historical records made it quite easy for me to find the information once I knew what I was looking for. But, to circle back to the beginning… I concluded that the sacred tree that was cut down six years ago was more than just a tree—it was a powerful, mystical barrier that warded the area against monsters."

Lord Heathcomille folded his arms, snorting scornfully. "Impossible," he scoffed. "I don't believe a word you're saying. I mean, *honestly*, if what you say is true, then why did none of our nation's scholars uncover any of this information you're telling us?"

"If I may…" another voice cut in.

Lord Heathcomille and I both froze, turning to see who had spoken. A frail old man with glasses nestled over his nose nodded at us from a seat nearby. His hand was raised to indicate his desire to speak.

"I must beg your pardon, Lord Heathcomille," the older man said calmly, "but I recall coming across something similar while doing research that had to do with magical folklore."

Wait, I know him! I realized. *That's Professor Martinez!*

Professor Martinez was the man who'd questioned me at my very first luncheon in the Empire, the one who held the position of head of the Empire's Institute for Magical Research. I'd later found out that he taught at the imperial academy as well.

The older man leaned forward in his chair, eyeglasses gleaming. "I agree with the lady priestess's viewpoint," he said firmly. "The Empire's research into the application of magic in combat and in practical situations is quite advanced, but the same cannot be said of the field of religious folklore, which includes subjects like monster worship. To be frank with you, our research efforts in that

area are sorely underdeveloped. It is very likely that if something like what Holy Woman Monica describes was built in the past, then those alive today wouldn't be able to recognize the design. *Especially* if such construction happened under a different religious regime."

He relaxed back into his chair with a sigh, looking incredibly fragile now that all of his passion had faded. "All you need to do is look at all the studies the imperial academy has conducted on holy women to see how behind we are in our religious research. We have yet to come close to even determining the catalyst for their existence, let alone anything else about them."

"Is that right…?" Lord Heathcomille rumbled. Unable to refute the research of one of the Empire's own academics, he fell silent, appearing to quietly consider Professor Martinez's findings.

I thought he might finally resign himself to listening to me, but then his head jerked up. He looked up at me with triumphant eyes.

"Tell me, then," he demanded, "if felling the sacred tree was the cause of the monster outbreak, why weren't they out in full force during the winter festival itself? How do you explain the gradual increase in their sightings, or the fact that they originated from the sea?"

Ah, I thought. *So he's decided to come at it from a different angle.*

"Truthfully, lady priestess, I would like to know that as well," Professor Martinez admitted.

"From my research so far, I'd like to posit that the incantation that was melded into the sacred tree was designed to work like a scarecrow."

"Like a…scarecrow?"

"Yes," I replied, nodding. "Scarecrows essentially work as deterrents to whatever creature you are trying to ward off. For example, in my hometown, which was a farming village, there were dead crows hung up all over the place. We would kill them and string them up around the fields as a warning to living crows, to try and keep them from devouring our crops."

Everyone froze, their horrified eyes locked onto my face. They were plainly revolted by what I'd just said.

Oh, please, I thought, rolling my eyes. *As if there aren't worse things in this world.*

"Ah, what a wonderful analogy!" came a sudden shout. "I understand it now!"

Well, at least someone got it.

Solarus came slinking over to my side like a shadow, then, and whispered the man's identity in my ear. "That was Sir Nauhils talking," she said, pointing to a large, muscular gentleman sitting at the table. "He's the chief of the Chivalric Order of Knights' headquarters, and head of the imperial chivalric order's anti-monster task force."

I eyed the beefy older man; he took up so much space that you could have easily fit three people into his spot at the table.

"It's the same as when I cut off a giant monster's head and leave it somewhere!" he thundered in his naturally booming voice. "If weaker monsters see it, they won't come near the area until it's gone. But…" He paused dramatically. "That effect doesn't work at all on more intelligent species! Instead, the monster heads just instigate them to commit even more heinous attacks." He thumped his fist dramatically into the table, then burst into roaring laughter.

"Exactly!" I cried without thinking. I couldn't help it—I was in emphatic agreement. "That's exactly right, sir!"

"Don't tell me ya did the same thing on the battlefield, lady priestess?"

"Indeed I did!" I told him with a smile. "Using such a strategy is useful, since it doesn't incur any expense upon the armed forces. And, to boot, it's incredibly easy to do!"

"Hahaha! A young lady who knows what she's doing! I like that!"

The older knight and I grinned at each other, both of us realizing we had a kindred spirit in the room. Some of the other elites in the room were not looking quite so cheerful, though—they had horrified looks on their faces, and were looking at each other with eyebrows raised, as if to say, "Such barbarians…"

Lord Heathcomille seemed to be in agreement, as there was quite an ugly scowl on his face. “I’m starting to wonder what precisely a holy woman’s job includes,” he muttered, sarcasm clear in his voice.

Perhaps I could have been annoyed, but I just shrugged it off. *Once a commoner holy woman, always a commoner holy woman,* I reminded myself, straightening my spine.

“But I digress. Returning to my explanation, I posit that the cause of this phenomenon has to do with the construction of the warding mechanism in the sacred tree. I suspect that the people of long ago Psyend savaged the sea monsters so thoroughly that when they went to make examples of their carcasses, the sight was absolutely unbearable. All those remains would have been placed by the sacred tree, which would have gradually absorbed the monsters’ magics within its own being. Those magics would have carried an echo of the monster’s deaths, and would have effectively created an invisible barrier that warned monsters to ‘Approach and die’ whenever they drew near. Monsters in the vicinity would have sensed the energy coming off the tree at an instinctual level.”

From what I’d surmised, the temple where the sacred tree had grown had most likely been a workshop of sorts to create magical shields against monsters. Well, that or a place to expose corpses. Either way, the end result would have been the same. And with the passage of time, the temple had become sacred ground for another set of religious beliefs, which was a common thing for holy places of any kind.

“To sum up,” I continued, “if my conclusions are correct, there are two pressing needs that need to be met in order to quell the monster uprising in the Empire’s southern lands. First, we will need to stop the monsters in the sea from approaching by constructing another barrier. Second, we will need to subdue the monsters already on land.”

“Holy woman,” Lord Heathcomille said, voice dry, “Do you mean to tell me that this is the extent of your abilities?”

I could feel my brow wrinkling in confusion. “Would you kindly elaborate?”

“That conclusion is one that our own specialists would have drawn sooner or

later, as evidenced by how easily Professor Martinez and Sir Nauhils understood your explanation. Would it not be reasonable for us to expect a much more powerful, even *saintly* resolution, from one who has been welcomed to our Empire expressly in their capacity as a holy woman? And who has been cared for with the funds lining the national coffer, no less?"

A sardonic burst of laughter filled my mind, though I didn't let it show on my face. This *is the tactic he's going to use to rebuke me?!*

It seemed the lord had assumed that holy women were omnipotent. As one of the highest-ranking holy women in Kophe, I could definitely tell him he was mistaken. The reality of it was, my holy woman duties had required me to become knowledgeable in battle tactics. Sir Nauhils himself had correctly deduced that information during our lively banter. Most of my time on the front lines of Mayga Cieux had been taken up by planning out our next move in battle. I'd taken advantage of any kind of strategy that was remotely viable against the monsters, from using their unique traits against them, to utilizing the remnants of ancient magics still embedded in the area around our field of battle.

There had been a good reason for all this strategizing—my lust-inducing saintly superpower, of course. Because of the danger it put me in, I'd stuck strictly to my battlefield motto: "Do your best not to succumb to your urges or induce those urges in others." In practice, this had meant I had to be diligent about applying my rare abilities minimally but efficiently.

The long and short of it was, I'd had to learn to think creatively about battle strategies since I constantly had to factor in my unfortunate side effects.

I hadn't immediately responded to Lord Heathcomille's questions, and he seemed to have taken that as a cue to press his point further, since he continued, "I have another bone to pick with you as well. Your second point—the one about subduing the monsters already on land. You declared it so matter of factly, but such a thing is easier said than done. Our knights had been struggling to achieve that goal for quite some time before you arrived. Am I to understand that you have already come up with a plan to solve all the issues they face?"

“Have no fear,” I said lightly, sending him a pointed smile in response. “For indeed, I have. And I’ll be implementing that plan myself, as I’ll be assisting in the next wave of monster elimination efforts.”

“What?!”

Lord Heathcomille opened his mouth to raise more objections, but Richard, who’d been observing in silence until now, quickly cut in and took control of the conversation. “Lord Heathcomille, please be at ease,” he said firmly. “I have already accepted Holy Woman Monica’s request and dispatched a unit of the knights’ special forces.”

“You *have*?!”

Richard nodded. “My knights followed her instructions and formed a simple barrier at a designated location two weeks ago. In that time period, there have only been five incidents of structural damage caused by monsters and zero human casualties.”

At this unexpected bit of news, the atmosphere in the room changed dramatically. Even Lord Heathcomille couldn’t conceal his shock. And no wonder, as he’d been laboring under the misconception that all I had done for the past few weeks was sequester myself in the library.

Several officials turned to one another and started murmuring excitedly, clearly relieved by my optimistic report. Naturally, their enthusiasm only strengthened the glare that Lord Heathcomille sent my way.

“One moment, if you please,” he snapped, shushing the others. “Holy woman, as I’m sure you are aware, *I* am the official in charge of this matter. Why did you not inform me of your actions?”

“Because,” Richard responded on my behalf, “as the commander of the special forces unit, I am the only one who can approve such an operation.”

Richard stared at Lord Heathcomille with cold eyes. Despite their frigidity, the red shade of his irises seemed to be set alight, burning with some icy inner blaze. His expression sent shivers down my spine; I’d never once seen a look like that on Richard’s face.

“As an honest woman,” he continued, “Holy Woman Monica insisted that we

notify you. It was me, *personally*, who made the decision to dispatch my men without an official consultation. It would have taken too long if I'd gone through the proper channels." Richard raised a brow, a wintry smile spreading across his lips. "Or perhaps there's another problem you have with our methods?" he challenged the lord. "I don't see why you would, considering you've been just as insistent about resolving the issue in the south as everyone else. But please, *do* tell me if I'm wrong."

"I…" Lord Heathcomille's face had gone blank. For once, he seemed to be at a loss for words. "Indeed, Your Highness, you are not."

Richard glanced over at me then, prompting me to speak. I turned my gaze back to my audience and continued calmly, "All the magical equipment required to create barriers has been assembled and shipped to various sites in the southern territories. Tomorrow, I'll be joining the special forces on the front. On my third day there, the full-scale development of wards will commence after we complete the necessary preparations."

"I'll be accompanying her as well," Richard added, his voice projecting clearly across the room. "It will be vital for me to conduct the needed inspections there before reconstruction can begin in earnest." Having finished up his masterfully worded speech, Richard turned to Lord Heathcomille and winked. "Should you wish to see Holy Woman Monica's miraculous works on the field, you are welcome to travel with us," he said cheerfully. "What say you, Uncle?"

Lord Heathcomille didn't say a word. He certainly did not assent.

As I climbed off the podium, I braced a hand against my chest, trying to calm the racing of my agitated heart. *Such an incredibly tension-filled exchange!*

Perhaps sensing my feelings, Richard turned and smiled at me.

You know, my intuition whispered, *that imperial crown prince of yours might in fact be a very scary man…*

ONCE the meeting had adjourned, I made my way over to the special forces' headquarters. Darius met me there, and soon began assisting me in my preparations for the battle at Psyend. I didn't know where anything in the office

was, so he ended up running around all over the place, scooping up supplies on my behalf.

I smiled fondly at him as he came running back with yet another thing I'd asked for. *I wouldn't be able to get anything done without his caring nature.*

"Lady Monica!" he called as he drew up by my side. "I've readied one hundred doses of magical tablets and a hundred vials of miracle water. I also collected thirty of the embroidered amulets." A slight line appeared in the middle of his forehead. "Are you sure that amount of miracle water will suffice? It's only half the usual."

"That amount should be fine," I soothed him. "If we come up short, we can always make up the difference with the tablets. I do think we should reduce our luggage, though. We need to create more space for the relief supplies, and ensure there's enough room for any other knights who may travel with us."

"Understood! Is there anything else?"

I tapped a finger to my lip in thought. "Hmm… Once you're finished loading up the carts, would you perhaps be able to draw me a diagram showing where everything is located?"

Darius grinned at me. "No problem. I've actually started those already, so I'll give them to you when I'm done."

I sent him a grateful smile. "You're such a great help, Darius."

"Oh, that reminds me! The lieutenant commander would like to confirm our lodgings and the route he's planning on taking with you, so I'll guide you to conference room number three when you have a spare moment."

I pushed myself up from my seat. "Why don't we just go now?"

Darius quickly ushered me toward our destination, and soon we were striding down a hallway at a steady pace. "Darius," I said, smiling up at the younger man, "I want you to know how thankful I am for all the help you've given me thus far. I couldn't have been nearly as efficient or organized on my own."

"Heh, think nothing of it," he said, waving me off. But I could see him grinning widely out of the corner of my eye, his canines flashing.

A knight significantly older than Darius came striding down the other half of the hallway, stopping abruptly in his tracks to give the younger man a crisp salute. “Chief Sye, squadron three’s preparations are complete!” he boomed.

Darius gave him a nod. “Understood. You may proceed with your next task.”

“Yes, sir!” the knight replied. He launched back into movement, marching quickly out of our sight.

This was a frequent sight at the special forces’ headquarters, I’d noticed. I might think of Darius as a charming little pup, but the knights absolutely did not share my point of view. Despite his age, they unquestionably upheld him as a superior officer, giving him the awe and respect such an office was due.

“Chief Sye, huh…?” I said, voice light. “Darius, are you telling me you’re actually a high-ranking official?”

“Indeed,” he replied, “His Highness promotes those of the special forces division based on abilities, not age, so before I knew it, I had advanced quite far up the ladder!”

His voice was joking, but if Richard had promoted him that far, I had no doubt he possessed significant combat experience. Not to mention, a young man who would sacrifice the appendage that was so dear to the rest of his gender just to strengthen his magic was definitely not your average person.

“Darius,” I said thoughtfully, “what motivates you to work so hard and with such zeal?”

A considering expression came over his face. “Well, it’s a combination of returning a favor I owe to His Highness Richard and being determined to exact revenge on my sworn enemy.”

I blinked. “R-Revenge…?”

“I was born in a small principality that used to exist in the northern region of the Empire. But when a neighboring duchy drove monsters into our lands, we were overrun, and my homeland was annihilated.”

The nonchalant way he spoke of his gruesome past left me speechless. I could only gape at him in shock.

“I was on the verge of becoming nothing but a demon hellbent on revenge when His Highness rescued me. He sent me to the front lines to give me a place to exorcize my rage and regain my sense of self. Thanks to him, I was able to start a new life as a knight and serve the Empire proudly.”

“I…I’m so sorry for bringing up those painful memories,” I said softly.

“No, don’t be! Please don’t worry!” He anxiously waved his hand from side to side, trying to calm me. “For me, it’s a happy story because His Highness saved me, so I don’t mind talking about it one bit. If anything, I would love to tell you about it every day for that very reason!”

His exuberance chased away some of the ache in my chest. “I appreciate your enthusiasm,” I said, smiling slightly, “but I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“All right then,” he agreed. “To continue, the special forces’ division was originally a group of imperial guards placed under His Highness’s direct supervision. In truth, after Prince Richard left the country due to the political strife, our unit was on the verge of being dissolved. But even then, His Highness made secret arrangements to ensure that we received at least our minimum salaries. When I learned he’d done that and more for us, even despite his own perilous situation, I swore to myself I’d do anything and everything I could to repay him.”

My heart softened. “You love and respect him greatly, don’t you?”

“Yes!” Darius declared resolutely. “More than you can even begin to imagine! Honestly, your imagination can’t even come close!”

I burst out laughing. “My, my, so much that you needed to say it twice, hm?”

Darius nodded vigorously, totally unaffected by my laughter. “His Highness is truly a splendid person. He possesses such remarkable strength that many of those who fear him refer to him as the Ferocious Crown Prince.”

My eyebrows rose. “Th-The Ferocious Crown Prince…?”

“Ah, you didn’t know?”

“Correct,” I told him. “Honestly, I…I’ve never once thought of him as ferocious…”

The Richard I'd always known was strong and charismatic, but he'd never been ferocious or scary. To me, more than anything else, he was a sunny, carefree young man who always had a smile ready to send my way. But…all of a sudden, the image of Richard scowling coldly at his uncle popped into my head.

"Well, maybe that's not entirely true now," I admitted. "I saw a hint of that side of him during the debriefing. His words and demeanor were gentle as usual, but there was this aura of strength hovering just beneath the surface. Not the normal kind of strength, but the kind that belongs to an imperial prince. I'm not sure how to describe it, really."

Richard hadn't quailed one bit confronting that gaggle of old men. Instead of making him look inexperienced, his youth had actually intensified the impact he'd made. With those fiery, flame-colored eyes of his, he'd forced everyone in the room to do his bidding.

After being gone from his homeland for so long, *and* having renounced his place in the line of succession, Richard should have been at a disadvantage in that room, no matter his relation to the royal family. His influence should have diminished in all those years that he'd been gone, and yet…that hadn't seemed to be the case at all. It just went to show how strong and unyielding a force Richard really was.

Darius nudged me lightly with his elbow. "Did you know that after he graduated from the academy, His Highness formed the special forces' unit and traveled all over the Empire with them, leading them in many successful campaigns against the monsters inhabiting imperial lands? But it wasn't just monsters that he skillfully routed—he expertly quelled domestic rebellions and border disputes alike. That's where he exhibited his *true* strength. He'd established his current level of standing before he'd even grown out of his teenage years."

During this tirade, I'd felt my eyes going wider and wider. I'd known Richard was amazing, but I hadn't known he was *that* accomplished.

I think I understand things a little better now though, I thought. *Richard wasn't ousted because he was too weak or lacking in some other way—he was ousted because he was too strong. He was a threat.*

“Is…Is that how he managed to retain his authority and support here, even during his time in Kophe?” I stammered.

Darius shrugged. “I’d assume so. I can certainly understand how easily his brand of strength attracts people.”

“His accomplishments on the front line in Kophe were quite impressive as well,” I murmured.

“Yes!” Darius cried, happy to find a partner in his adulation “Isn’t he a sight to behold?!”

He’s like a dog with his favorite bone when it comes to Richard, I thought, smiling. Honestly, I liked his exuberance and inability to contain his excitement.

“Indeed, he is,” I agreed. “His competence in battle against monsters was always undeniable, but thinking back, he conducted himself really well too. He was forever raising everyone’s morale with his bright smile. And whenever there was a battle so awful that everyone would lose their appetites, he’d eat anyway just to remind everyone how important food was in the bolstering of someone’s spirits. He was always doing stuff like that to cheer us up.”

And then—there he was. The man himself entered the hallway, briskly marching in our direction. He drew up at our side, then suddenly turned and slammed Darius into the wall. He caged the younger man in his arms, planting his hands on the plaster beside his head.

My mouth dropped open. “H-Huh?!”

Richard lowered one arm, his hand sliding around Darius’s chin. He tilted his trusted retainer’s face up to his, then stared moodily into his eyes.

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I just stood there, gawping at the scene in front of me.

Oh my, oh my, oh myyyy*! What in the world is happening?!?!?!*

“Darius,” Richard rumbled, voice low. “You weren’t ogling Miss Monica just now, were you?”

Richard’s face was so blank, and the look in his flame-colored eyes so deadly… I suddenly felt deeply afraid for Darius.

“No, sir, I wasn’t ogling her at all!” Darius replied happily, saluting him as if all that was occurring was perfectly normal. He was acting more like a little black-haired puppy who’d finally managed to get his owner’s attention than a knight being scolded by his commander. “I’d rather die than do that!”

“I…*what is*…?!” I sighed, clapping a hand to my face. “Please, I just…tell me what sort of relationship you two have. Truly, I… I *need* to know…”

“We’re master and servant,” Richard said blandly.

“Master and servant, Lady Monica!” Richard cried at the same time.

That…wasn’t what I was asking, though… I thought futilely, even more confounded than I’d been before.

“N-No,” I tried again, “I understand *that*. What I meant was—”

“Your Highness, I would never look at your precious Lady Monica with wicked eyes,” Darius swore. I fell into a mortified silence. “To be frank, the mere thought alone is absurd. First of all, the only ones I would ever consider as potential romantic interests are my fellow imperial citizens. Secondly, love and romance don’t interest me at all right now.” Darius bounced on the soles of his feet, bobbing in Richard’s hold. “Only two things excite me at present, Your Highness! Those whose bodies are tougher than the finest steel, and those whose heart’s desire is to subjugate the entire world in the name of our Empire!!!”

The fervor in Darius’s voice had grown steadily, reaching a zealous crescendo toward the end of his passionate speech. I certainly didn’t have a tempered physique or plans for world domination, I’d grant him that. Although…the more pressing question was what in the world those two things had to do with matters of the heart. I ran a hand down my face. Honestly, at this point, I was even more mystified than I’d been before.

Richard finally relaxed, persuaded by his subordinate’s words and the blazing devotion in his gaze. “Darius, I trust you completely,” he said solemnly. “But I would have you bear one thing in mind. Though Miss Monica may seem sweet and soft on the surface, appearances can be deceiving. Just underneath that innocent outer appearance lies an experienced, powerful, and fearless fighter. Even a man like you can’t guarantee that her unexpected strength won’t cause

a quaking in your heart. So you must never drop your guard around her, understand?”

“Wha…what in the world…?” I mumbled.

But Darius seemed to take his words entirely to heart. “Yes, sir!” he cried. “You can count on me! If I ever feel even a smidge of anything untoward for Lady Monica, I’ll take responsibility and immolate myself!!!”

Richard finally released Darius, leaning back and laughing. “Well said, well said.”

I couldn’t make heads or tails of their bizarre chat. Truthfully, I felt a bit left out, but…the two of them looked like they were enjoying themselves. Their bond was truly unmistakable.

It’s probably best for me to just leave it be, I decided. *I don’t think I’d be able to chase down a much clearer answer, anyway.*

THE next day, early in the morning, Richard and I departed for the Empire’s southern region. We rode together in a carriage, with a convoy surrounding us on either side.

“What a wonderful breeze, wouldn’t you say, Miss Monica?” Richard asked idly. “I hope it doesn’t rain.”

I looked at him in blank confusion. “Um…pardon me, but I don’t think that’s really relevant to our circumstances…?”

Richard leaned toward the carriage window, squinting into the wind. No one would ever think we were headed toward a battlefield against monsters, not with his easygoing attitude. With the exception of his silky locks, pristine ultramarine military uniform, and silver armor, he was acting much the same as the redheaded knight who’d protected me on the front lines in Kophe.

I still can’t believe this is the same man known as the Ferocious Crown Prince… I thought, looking at him out of the corner of my eye. *The same man who’s famous for silencing the Empire’s elites…*

“Uh, Richard…why exactly are we in the same carriage? Moreover, it’s just the

two of us in here. For goodness sake, you're the commander of the special forces unit *and* the crown prince."

"Why, I'm here because I'm your bodyguard, Miss Monica," Richard answered matter-of-factly.

"My *what*?"

He rolled his eyes. "As if I could leave you alone with any of the others. I would of course trust you with Solarus and Darius, but when I can be by your side, *I* want to be the one to protect you. Also…"

"Also…?"

He beamed charmingly. "You won't call me Richard unless we're alone, Miss Monica."

"W-Well, that's a given!" I replied. "I don't have the right to address the crown prince so informally under normal circumstances."

"I'll have to disagree with you on that one, Miss Monica. You are after all not only an exceptionally highly ranked holy woman, but also another crown prince's former fiancée. So why not call me Richard in formal company?"

"Absolutely *not*," I told him firmly.

"I will admit there's one more reason I joined you today," Richard said, leaning forward with a sigh. He rested his elbows on his knees as he gave me a pleading look. "Lately, I haven't been able to find any time to be with you, Miss Monica."

I blinked up at him blankly, my brain shorted out by his closeness, when he whispered next to my ear, "Plus, I don't know if or when one of Lord Heathcomille's subordinates will strike."

I gasped and reared back, looking into the calculating slits of his flame-colored eyes. Those smoothly spoken words sent a chill rioting over my flesh.

"That's why it's best for the two of us to be alone, whenever we have something we need to discuss," he added softly.

"What do you mean by his subordinates…?" I whispered back, an uneasy feeling filling my stomach.

He gave me a wide, engaging smile. “My uncle has many people in his employ, as well as others who support him. They’re scheming to use you as fodder for censure against me and the emperor, but don’t worry—we’re going to strike them first. We’re going to drive home the truth of your talents, until they can no longer act so freely.”

“Richard, *please*, I really don’t need any more pressure,” I said, mostly joking but also a tad serious. “I already feel as if I’m about to be crushed by it *now*…”

He sent me a wink and a smile. “Have no fear, Miss Monica. I’ll protect you. From monsters as well as any…other appetites.”

I made a little moue of frustration. “That genuinely pure smile of yours is *so* unfair,” I complained. “How can I possibly fight with you when you’re looking at me like that? Gosh darn it…”

“Truly?” Richard asked, his face lit with delight.

I narrowed my eyes at him. *Vexing man.*

But, in the end, I couldn’t deny that I was hoping for a measure of relief from lust-induced attacks by dint of having his protection. To be honest, such a thing was owed to me, since Richard had brought me here to further the Empire’s goals.

“By the way, Miss Monica…”

“Hm?”

“How fares your new holy attire?”

“Oh, this?” I asked, waving my hand over the outfit I was currently wearing. “It’s perfect. On the few occasions my libido started affecting me terribly in the library or the palace, no one around me ever noticed a change in my behavior. Oh, and that time I was in a period of arousal after producing all the magical medicine destined for Psyend—the person who accepted the shipment didn’t notice either.”

Over the years, I’d become quite sensitive to the uncomfortable change that took over the atmosphere of a room once people had realized I was in heat. That sensitivity was almost moot now, though, thanks to the effectiveness of

my new garb. Now it was quite easy to tell if my struggles had been revealed or not.

Truth be told, I hadn't yet had the opportunity to test the outfit's full potential yet, as I'd had no need to activate my healing powers. But its incredible effectiveness in concealing my heats had given me very high expectations.

"That being said," I told Richard, "Solarus and Darius have still been able to detect periodically that I am suffering under my magic's effects. It's possible, though, that that might be because it's much harder to hide my heats when I'm with people I spend so much time with."

"Indeed," Richard agreed. "You can fool others with your expressions and overall mood, but words and actions will always reveal the truth."

"Yes," I sighed, "I need to make more of an effort on that front. That's my own problem to handle, though, so let's leave it at that. In any case, magical properties aside, my new clothes are just wonderful in general. They're comfortable and I don't even need to infuse them with the scent of common rue."

I think that may be my favorite thing about them, actually, I thought. The combined smell of both fishwort and common rue had been especially pungent in my old priestess outfit, sometimes almost unbearably so.

The corners of Richard's eyes relaxed in relief. "I'm glad you like them so much," he said softly. "Mind you, your old outfit suited you just fine, but I wanted to see you clad in a color that emphasized the glow of your eyes and the lovely pale peach of your hair. It feels good to know that you like the clothes I designed especially for you."

"I…I just hope that it's not too much?"

"Perish the thought," Richard said, his eyes running over me. "The clothes suit you wonderfully."

I fussed with the wimple on my head to diffuse some of my shyness, feeling increasingly embarrassed at being the object of his piercing gaze. "Will you stop smirking like that?!" I muttered fitfully. "You *know* you're embarrassing me."

He hummed thoughtfully, completely ignoring my pleas. “The truth is, I still think a design that showed more of your glorious hair would be quite becoming. But, as you know, I’m not keen on having your unique coloring on display for just anyone to see.”

“You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?!” I cried, my face flushing bright red. “Are you *trying* to kill me with embarrassment…?”

Richard chuckled. “That’ll be the day.” He winked at me, then added, “By the way, Miss Monica, did you know that I asked the tailors to create the flower designs for your outfit based on fishwort and common rue?” He leaned forward, murmuring, “That’s because when I think of you, those are the flowers that come immediately to my mind.”

It was abundantly clear that His Imperial Highness wasn’t the *least* bit concerned with my bashfulness. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying it tremendously. In my head, I knew that it was considered normal for high-born men to shower women with compliments. In fact, it was a very popular practice. But my heart…it belonged to a common girl, and she couldn’t help but be utterly embarrassed. His sweet words made me feel even more self-conscious, because whenever we were alone, he acted just like he had back in Kophe, when he’d only been Mr. Redhead. And that was a side of him I knew he reserved only for me.

The thought only made me die even more from embarrassment. *What an* unbelievably *vexing man.*

“Oh,” Richard said, glancing out the window. “Looks like we’ll be arriving soon.”

I leaned forward, looking in the same direction he was. Beyond the arid plains, I spotted a marine-blue horizon and a volcanic island.

He’s right, I thought. *It won’t be long before we’re in Psyend.*

Richard took a breath from his spot beside me, and with that, he had transformed back into His Imperial Highness, Richard II Belktrius once again.

WE used the relocation devices countless times as we headed further south.

Using it, we could skip from valley to valley of the parched, sand-colored mountain range we were traveling in.

Unlike the imperial capital, which was overgrown with greenery, the south was a dry, arid region. In fact, the south was completely barren—which explained why the flora here that did manage to sprout was so incredibly unique. Even the air and earth smelled different here—to a degree where I felt like I'd journeyed to another country entirely. You could even see an active volcano if you looked out past the sea's edge, nestled on a small bluish-black island. Occasionally it would have a minor eruption, and ash would scatter everywhere in the vicinity.

After a long day of travel, we finally arrived at a refugee settlement that was built far back from the coastline. A number of people were out in the streets, and they welcomed us with loud cheers.

The local magistrate in charge of this safe haven stepped forward, clearly taking on the responsibility of representing the entire crowd.

"Your Highness!" he cried, clearly excited to see us. He clasped Richard's hands with both of his and gave him a tight handshake. "We have all been eagerly awaiting your arrival!"

Richard inclined his head respectfully. "I thank you for your meritorious service to our nation in your long, hard-fought battles against the monsters," he declared, the very image of a prince. "You may now take your ease and allow us to handle the situation moving forward."

Galvanized by his words, the people exploded with enthusiasm.

"Long live Crown Prince Richard!"

"Your Highness! Please exterminate them all!"

I was suddenly reminded of the fact that Richard was incredibly, tremendously esteemed by the masses. Now that I thought about it, the grand welcome he had received upon his return had been a rather amazing sight too.

Darius leaned forward, whispering in my ear, "His Highness is an extremely popular individual among the people."

My surprise must have been rather obvious, I thought, wincing.

“I think I understand why,” I murmured back to Darius. “A strong prince who excels at defeating monsters is essentially a hero to them, hm?”

“Correct. Additionally…” Darius peered at me from behind the fringe of black hair brushing over his eyes. “Ever since he brought you here, Lady Monica, and began proclaiming you as the promising new hope of our nation, his stock with the people has been rising exponentially.”

“Promising new hope…?! Surely, you’re exaggerating…?”

Darius opened his mouth to answer, but Richard cut him off, holding a hand out to me with a smile. “Miss Monica,” he asked, cloak fluttering in the wind, “shall we?”

I stared at him for a moment, taking in the perfect picture of boundless masculine grace he made. The people around us—men and women alike—were mesmerized. I could understand their spellbound gazes *very* well. After all, he was the inimitable crown prince who not only understood the hearts of his people, but had also proved his own mettle with a successful military record.

No wonder his influence is considered an overwhelming threat that goes beyond mere politics, I thought. As far as the top officials were concerned, Richard was someone who couldn’t be manipulated or controlled for their ends.

AFTER the proverbial welcome wagon departed, we unpacked quickly so that we could focus on readying ourselves for the upcoming campaign against the monsters. Thanks to the combined efforts of the local forces and the advance units we’d sent from the capital, and their willingness to follow our directives, the monsters controlling approximately half of the Psyend region had lost a third of their power in one go.

At the moment, we were in the barracks’ conference room with some of the knights in the advance unit.

“The instructions you sent us on how to ward have been a godsend, lady priestess,” one of the knights said excitedly. “They were so simple but *so* effective, and following them has allowed us to defeat the monsters without

incurring any casualties. The elixirs you sent were incredibly powerful too. Those who were severely wounded have been recovering very quickly because of it."

"I'm so glad I could help," I said, smiling. "But I should mention that I wasn't the only one who worked on the various types of magical medicine. Their creation was a joint effort with the wonderful researchers in the medical department. Regardless, I'm happy to hear that our first attempt was so successful."

The knights nodded proudly at this information, happily acknowledging their academic comrades' talents.

"With many others' assistance," I added, "we managed to create a new magical compound as well. We've brought boxes of both the original elixir as well as the new formula, so please use them as necessary. We have more than enough for civilians too, should they have a need. There's a limited supply of the original elixir, but the new compound should make up the difference."

I picked up a magical tablet from one of the boxes and placed it on my palm for everyone to see. "Let me explain to you how these work. You place a tablet in a pail of holy water, then stir continuously until it dissolves and the foaming stops. If you drink the solution within twenty-four hours, it will have the same efficacy as any other normal magical elixir. Please keep in mind that after a tablet is dissolved, the liquid can't be preserved, so it's important to prioritize using this medicine first once it has been concocted."

"That's incredible!" one of the knights cheered.

The magical tablet had been born out of my collaboration with Professor Martinez, the seemingly frail old man who had attended my first official luncheon, and who'd defended my ideas at the conference a few weeks later. He just so happened to be a well-known expert here in the Empire on the practical applications of magic.

In the Kingdom of Kophe, medical treatment was left solely in the hands of holy women, which had resulted in the extreme lack of any kind of developmental methods when it came to magical drugs. The same couldn't be said of the Empire, with its advanced technology in both magical medicine and

medical treatment. In fact, in the relatively short time since Professor Martinez and I had joined forces, we had succeeded in developing a new medicinal formula that capitalized on my holy powers—the magical tablet.

According to the good professor, he had been drafting a plan to create a medicine along the same lines as our tablet long before he had met me. He'd hit a snag, however, when his calculations had shown that his invention would require magic many times greater than the amount used for the production of normal magical medications. Due to a deficiency of magical input, all of his team's experiments had thereby failed to produce anything worthwhile. That was, at least, until I came along. My supernatural holy powers had been just what he needed to realize his hypothesis.

Once I'd completed my live demonstration of how the pill turned into an elixir, the knights burst into a chorus of joyous cheers.

One of the knights leaped up from his chair, unable to contain himself any longer. "I'll make arrangements to have these delivered to each infirmary in the region posthaste!" he said, his voice so loud it was practically a scream. I'd only just realized he was one of the men who served as a messenger as well as a knight when he went racing out of the room.

Before long, I could hear the villagers' thrilled voices filtering into the room as they rejoiced over the additional relief supplies.

Thank goodness, I thought, finally relaxing a little. The positive reception really took some of the weight off my shoulders.

Having said that, I was still the only person currently in the Empire who could make the tablets. I was acutely aware of the fact that even more lives could be saved if I just found an efficient way to mass-produce them.

I must brainstorm possibilities with Professor Martinez, I thought, determination filling me. *And the sooner, the better.*

SOME time later, in the calm lull after the supplies had been distributed and equipment verified, a number of us gathered once more in the barracks' conference room. Aside from Richard and me, the top brass of the special

forces and the leaders of the local squadrons were present, along with the town's magistrate. Currently, we were standing around a map that was spread open on the conference room table, discussing which locations would be best to establish barriers in.

"Now then, saintess," Richard said with a smile, "if you would so kindly explain your plan to everyone."

"Thank you, Your Highness," I said, inclining my head. I glanced around the room, taking in all the faces surrounding the conference table. There were stern-faced knights, older men of high status, and finally, the magistrate. I was the only young woman there.

I'll soldier on for Richard's sake, I thought, determination filling me. *No matter how acutely out of place I feel! He staked his reputation on bringing me here.*

My spine snapped straight, and I took a deep breath before finally picking up a pointing stick off the table. I angled it so it was aimed at a spot on the map in front of me.

"I believe you may have already been informed by the advance team," I began, "but let me once more reiterate the proposed sites for the barriers. There are these two along the coast, and this one here, which is on the temple grounds where the sacred tree was originally located. I chose these three areas because they enclose the delta of Psyend."

I glanced around the room—everyone still seemed to be with me. Satisfied, I continued, "Now, if we decide to go ahead with these locations, we'll be placing monster corpses in each of those spots to establish wards. *However*…we're going to need to kill three large monsters in order to create the sacred vessels that will eventually become the wards."

I turned my head and gazed outside the conference room's window. Through the glass, I saw a monster that the local troops had managed to kill with some help from the advance unit a few days before. It was a grotesque marine amalgamation of a hermit crab and cephalopod. The monster was so large that even the building we were currently in was dwarfed in front of it. Magic had been used to stop it from decaying, so at the moment, it stood in the center of the makeshift town square like some atrocious, tasteless statue.

“Thankfully we already have that,” I said, inclining my head toward the window, “so we only need to gather two more carcasses to reach our goal. Large monsters have been sighted at points A, B, and C. His Highness will provide details regarding strategy and deployment of personnel to each location, so please follow his orders on that front.”

Richard took that as his cue to step in and stepped forward. “Listen well, everyone,” he said, projecting his voice so it echoed powerfully throughout the room. “I cannot begin to imagine the amount of labor you put in to survive over the many years I was away from our nation. In light of that, I would like you to consider this upcoming expedition as my recompense to you, as well as the start of a new chapter for us all.

“Hereafter and forevermore, I swear that idyllic days *will* return to the people of the south. They will be able to welcome the spring without the menace of monsters hanging over their hearts. I, Prince Richard, make this vow—the citizens of Psyend will once more lead joyous lives with their families.”

Richard’s well-modulated voice complemented the strength in his words, weaving it with an appeal that impacted every heart in the room. Both the tired, aging knights and the scarred young ones were mesmerized by their prince.

Their prince, who, bathed in the light of their burning eyes, was turning his attention directly to me.

Oh, no.

“Moreover, we now have a holy woman in our midst.”

“P-Pardon?!” I cried without thinking. Everyone’s gazes suddenly focused on me, and my heart jumped straight into my throat.

“As you’re all well aware, this is Monica Regulus. She is an exceptionally highly ranked holy woman and an outstanding individual who has experienced bitter hardships at the hands of her own countrymen. Regarded as an enemy by The Great Church of Kophe, she was unfortunately exiled by her own people.”

Everyone nodded vigorously in sympathy.

I felt certain my eyes were bulging out of my head. *My goodness, everyone*

knows?!

Despite being the person under discussion, I found myself thoroughly baffled. When I met Darius's eyes, one of his closed in an almost cheeky wink, as if he was saying, "No need to fuss."

Wait just a minute, young man! How can I not fuss, when I'm the only one present who didn't know my entire life story had made the rounds in the masses?!

With all eyes still on him, Richard stared at me like *he* was the one bewitched. And deliberately ignoring my turmoil, he smiled his ever-charming smile. "Miss Monica," he crooned. "Let's get out there and work our hardest. *Together*."

I gasped for air—clearly this man had made me forget how to breathe.

Richard smiled at me, his entire body vibrating in delight. "I'd love it if you would provide everyone here with some words of encouragement."

Why would he call me "Miss Monica" here and now of all places?! Vexing man!

But no matter my inner turmoil, everyone in the room was now watching me with expectant eyes. *What should I do? What should I do? What should I do?!* I screeched inwardly.

In three seconds, I thought as hard as I normally would have in twenty-four hours. Finally, I pasted on a grin that felt much too brazen for my face, and returned their stares with a confidence I didn't quite feel. "Everyone!" I shouted, "There is no need to doubt! We *will* succeed, and we w*ill* blast those monsters back to the sea from whence they came!"

Exultant cheers burst through the room, making my head ring. I felt like my ears would explode from the outrageous volume.

Richard grinned and winked shamelessly at me while I reciprocated his look with a narrow glare. *That outrageous crown prince,* I thought, thoroughly annoyed, *he's always got everyone around him dancing in the palm of his hand, and he always knows* exactly *what strings to pull to get what he wants.*

And, much as I hated to admit it, I was obviously no exception.

A short while later, a runner delivered a report confirming a sighting of a monster on the scale we needed to create the sacred vessels. Richard decreed that the entire assault squad, including me, would set out immediately, and so we headed out to the location where the monster had been seen. It turned out to be the site that housed the remains of a former village, which had now been repurposed into the monster's nest.

I took a deep breath. *At long last, my first battle in the Empire will soon commence.*

Richard rode his horse up next to me, then leaned over and scooped me up. Once I'd been firmly placed in front of him in the saddle, he lightly dug his heels into the horse's side and off we went, galloping over the withered land.

"Hold on tightly, Miss Monica," he urged me.

"I will," I replied.

Before we even reached our destination deeper in the abandoned village, we were met with a massive pack of monsters hovering around the outskirts. They filled it to capacity, almost like a swarm of locusts devouring wheat. The creatures had stripped every building down to pieces, leaving nothing behind. I could tell that reconstruction would take quite a long time.

"This is awful," I murmured, heart aching. I took a quivering breath, pushing the pain I felt for the village and the people who'd once lived in it aside, and formed a holy sign with my fingers.

"Seethe, my holy powers," I chanted, hands pressed tight to my chest. "Stir, my life force. The torrent of my magic knows no bounds as it rushes toward the heavens."

Heat flared in the depths of my body. My magic wove its way through my veins, matching the rhythm of my pulse, as it grew stronger. Now that I'd activated my saintly superpower, my magical strength rose and rose.

I had now elevated my magic to First Class rank. I patted the horse's mane, then leaned forward and placed my hands on Richard's thighs.

“With my power, I offer this strong, noble warrior and his horse divine protection. With my power, I grant them a shield against all enemies.”

The horse neighed in response as my magic clicked into place. The spell I’d just used was a defensive one, meant to strengthen the bodies of Richard and his horse, and which would also provide a defensive barrier that would last for a limited number of enemy attacks.

Richard let out a long sigh from behind me, leaning forward until his lips pressed against my hair. “Thank you, Miss Monica,” he murmured.

He pulled the horse’s reins back, forcing the animal to a stop, then leaped off and dashed toward the monsters. He moved unnaturally fast, my power enhancing his movements as well as his strength.

I leaped off the horse myself, leaving it in the care of a groom before I ran after Richard. Horses were valuable assets, so it was just common sense not to take them into battle.

When I caught up to Richard, the less powerful riffraff of the group of monsters had already gone charging in his direction. I spread my arms wide, calling to my magic to aid him in his fight. “Ye bringers of woe,” I cried, “let the might of the fire goddess consume thee!”

Orbs of flame burst forth from my palms, incinerating one monster after the other. Soon backup arrived, the additional knights jumping from their horses and entering the fray as well. Richard brandished his sword, and the knights surrounding us let out a prodigious war cry.

“My comrades!” Richard shouted. “All those long years of resistance, of training and gaining experience—they have all led to this moment! For now is the time to unleash your reserves of grit and courage!”

“Aye! We’ll show these filth that *we* are the masters of our lands!”

A roaring cry burst from the knights, their morale reaching a fever pitch.

Richard seemed like he had the front line handled, so I turned and surveyed the battlefield for places where I could help. I quickly noticed that the magic corps, which would comprise our rearguard, had just arrived, so I rushed over to them, slapping my hands on each person’s back to reinforce their bodies with

my holy magic. After I finished that task, I used my magic to build a defensive wall around the medical unit's base.

By the time I'd finished that, Darius had found me. He ran up with an inquisitive look on his face, and I nodded emphatically at him. "We're going to the front line of the battle too, Darius!" I told him.

He nodded. "Yes, Lady Monica! I'll protect you even at the cost of my own life!"

Wheezing, I wiped the sweat off my face, then raced over to the target location.

THE battle was fierce, but Richard's charisma and leadership, combined with the soldiers' high morale, led to successive victories at every point of contact. The advance squadron had already erected barriers around the refugee settlements as well as the few remaining neighborhoods still standing when I'd gone running past. And with those in place to protect the general population, every last military personnel could be safely dispatched to eliminate the monsters. So we all pressed forward, presenting a strong, united front.

"Let the might of the fire goddess consume thee!" I called out, mowing down monsters incessantly as I shouted my flame incantation. The relatively weak monsters bounded around like flying fish when I blasted them with my fire. The one I had just burned to ash resembled a particularly hideous sea cucumber.

How revolting, I thought, wrinkling my nose.

Even as I killed monsters, I was zooming around the battlefield—fleet of foot now that I'd enhanced my body with my own magic—making sure that I blessed each knight often enough that the spell reinforcing their bodies and providing them with magical shields remained active. I used up every iota of magic in my frenzied efforts.

Despite that, I found my burden lessened considerably upon an Empire-run battlefield. Unlike in Kophe, the Empire had dedicated medical units, so I didn't have to heal others while I was fighting. And since I didn't have to activate my saintly superpower in order to heal the injured, I didn't have to worry about

inciting lust in them, either.

Still…that didn't negate another, more fundamental issue with my holy powers. As a reminder, other people weren't the only ones who suffered their peculiar, libidinous price—I was on the receiving end of it as well. The entire time I'd been on the battlefield, I'd been amplifying my magic with my saintly abilities so that I could support and attack as necessary. In short, it was only a matter of time until I—

"It's here!" I heard someone shout. "The target is approaching!"

That's when I saw it. The massive, octopus-like monster that had taken over the entire village was sliding its way toward us, its mucus-covered tentacles squelching again and again as it moved. It was large enough that it looked like it could devour an entire house whole.

"Sooo…biiig…" I mumbled, feeling abruptly overcome.

The monster's viscous secretions glistened slickly in the sunlight, bubbling stickily in some sections. The suction cups on its tentacles made a wet, sucking sound with every twitch. *Shlick… Shlick…* My eyes went wide as it slid closer on its lumbering, sliding march, the sensitive, pointed tips of its feelers waving in the air. And within its eight limbs I glimpsed a conspicuously massive hectocotylus, the stalk of the fertilizing tentacle fully erect…

I unconsciously swallowed the saliva pooling in my mouth as the spectacle of the obscene octopus drawing closer to us battered at the door guarding my sense of reason. My breathing became raspier without conscious thought as I struggled to control myself. If I dropped my guard and gave into the clamoring hunger, I had a feeling I would be lapped up by its suckers.

Ahhh, I wonder how it would feel, having those tentacles coil around me in front of God, beasts, and men. I would be at the octopus's total mercy as it slithered its feelers around my holy attire, drenching me from head to toe in its thick, syrupy mucus. Bound in its vice grip, I imagined it would display me proudly as prey worthy of capture. And then—

"Ahhh… What an incredible appendage…"

“Wow, Lady Monica, you’re deep in the throes of some violent thrill, hm?”

I reared back with a gasp, snapping back to reality at the sound of Darius’s mellow voice. I looked over at him in horror, hurriedly mopping up the unseemly drool dripping from the corners of my slackened lips, but he wasn’t even looking at me. He was just nodding to himself, this proud, all-knowing look on his face.

H-How does he even know what state I’m in? I stammered internally. *Did the special defense mechanism in my clothes stop working?*

“I… Was my face that obvious?”

“Not at all,” Darius replied casually. “The mechanism is working just fine to conceal your condition, even if you *are* actually dribbling. As far as I can see, you just look like an idiot in a daze. You don’t seem the least bit aroused, so you can rest assured on that front.”

“I…I see.” I almost apologized to him, since in a way, I had indeed exposed my stupidity regardless.

“Well, based on the quantities of magic you’ve used so far, I suspected you might be nearing your limit soon anyway,” he said thoughtfully.

I nodded. “Your insight is right on the mark. I expected no less from a second-class mage kni—”

At that moment, the giant octopus’s goggling eyes spotted us. It changed course and barreled in our direction, raising a tentacle high before slamming it down directly over us.

Darius deflected the attack with blinding swiftness, slicing the limb right in two. His eyes narrowed, looking for an opening, and then suddenly he shouted, “There!”

In the next instant, he threw a dagger into the monster’s eye. The cephalopod attacked again, using multiple tentacles this time, but it was no match for Darius. The young knight kicked hard off the ground and sprung into the air, hacking at the feelers until wide, hefty pieces of the creature’s appendages dropped down with heavy *thuds*, kicking up clouds of dust.

“Y-You’re so strong, Darius…” I said in awe, head tilted back so I could watch him.

All of a sudden, I could hear other knights shouting behind me. “That’s it! That’s the giant octopus monster!”

I turned around just in time to see a flood of knights running in our direction, finally having noticed the massive monster ravaging its way through this portion of the village. As they ran past me and started attacking the monster, they kept up their battle cries.

“Time for you to become a sacred object!” shouted a knight, and the rest responded with a roar of approval. In seconds, the group of them had cut the weakened fiend to pieces with their swords.

Ah, such a waste… Wait, no! What am I thinking*?!*

I reminded myself firmly that this was exactly what needed to happen, then geared myself up to aid in the ongoing battle. I kept my eyes focused on the surrounding area, using my magic to blow away the smaller, oncoming monsters so the knights could focus on fighting the octopus. The sexual arousal pounded at my mind and body, making me dizzy, but…

I still have a job to do.

Just as I was thinking I couldn’t manage much more, the knights finally subdued the octopus, imprisoning it behind a magical barrier. Soon, all that would be left of it was a pristine sacred vessel.

“Only one left…” I mumbled, breathing heavily as I dabbed sweat from my brow.

Then I heard a knight’s voice coming from further off. I realized in seconds that his voice was being transmitted from another location entirely. He shouted: “Relay! A large fish-type monster sighted at point C!”

That was where Richard had headed some time ago.

“Darius, with me!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I took off toward Richard’s location, eventually stumbling my way into an area

that used to be a town square. That was where I found the monster—a huge creature with the body of a fish and human-like arms and legs growing out of its torso. It was covered in gray scales that sparkled in the sun, and had long streams of drool oozing out of its mouth. Its sixteen bloodshot eyes darted around constantly, glowering at the humans surrounding it from below. Occasionally, the grotesque beast whipped its tail fin, attempting to drive away the encroaching knights who sought to confine it, but ultimately destroying buildings instead.

If this had been my old group of ragtag soldiers battling away on Kophe's front lines, no doubt a number of them would have already charged in rashly and injured themselves. But not this squadron. These men were from the special forces unit under Richard's command—they wouldn't let themselves be led astray by any hot-blooded foolishness. In fact, I could tell they hadn't; there wasn't a single wounded knight hobbling around the town square.

Safe in my position, I took some time to examine the formation of Richard's knights a little more. They appeared to have split into pairs consisting of a knight and mage knight. Making use of their combined specialties, a group of these duos had surrounded the monster, pinning it down so it couldn't adjust its position. The creature's bodily fluids and saliva still presented a problem though, it seemed. Both liquids appeared highly acidic, sizzling through cobblestones and flowerbeds alike as they dripped to the ground.

"Well, I certainly won't stand idly by and let them push themselves so hard," I said with a grin.

I stepped back a few paces, taking stock of the situation as I tried to decide how best to proffer aid.

Wait… I thought, sensing something off. *Where's Richard?* Worry flickered through me, but just then I caught a flash of silver from a watchtower on the brink of collapse by the edge of the square. *Oh,* I thought, flooded with relief, *there he is.*

I picked up a broken piece of cobblestone near my feet and used my magic to crumble it to dust, then turned to face where the knights were fighting and bellowed, "Knights, fall back!"

Thankfully, they all heeded my warning, because I was already calling up a burst of wind magic. “God of wind!” I yelled. “God of wind, I call upon thee!”

Wind came rushing forward from behind my back, swirling the dust from the cobblestone up into its grasp. It whooshed into the fish monster, churning and churning until suddenly the little gust of wind had become a full-blown tornado. The dust mixed with the beast’s bodily fluids to form clay, which dulled the monster’s movements.

It was the perfect opportunity for an attack—and Richard took it. He kicked his way through the roof of the crumbling watchtower and leaped nimbly into the air, his sword flashing as he brought it down in a powerful strike!

The monster’s head tilted back, its gaping maw tilting toward the sky…and then Richard’s blade cleaved right through it with a *fwooosh*.

The monster let out a roar as Richard landed lightly back on the ground and positioned his sword horizontally, tearing it upward in a vertical slice so neat even an expert fishmonger would have applauded him.

The monster roared again, bellowing horrifically as it thrashed its limbs around in its violent death throes. Richard adroitly avoided the creature’s arms and legs, then dealt the finishing blow. At this point, he was awash in the monster’s bodily fluids, and the shield I’d placed on him with my holy powers crackled around the edges as it fought to negate the liquid’s toxicity.

“Everyone,” I shouted out, “I’m going to shield you all again!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

I frantically patted each knight’s back, activating my magic to recreate their defenses. As soon as I was done, the knights went running forward, joining Richard in hacking away at the dead fish monster.

“The barriers won’t last more than ten minutes!” I yelled. “So do as much as you can within that time frame, then come to me and I’ll restore them!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

With the urgency of the situation having mostly gone, Richard finally turned and started walking toward me, swiping the sweat off his face, victory

emanating from every pore of his body.

That was too close! I thought, horrified. I could tell that his shield was seconds away from disappearing,

“Honestly!” I shouted, rushing over to him. “Have you forgotten that you’re the Empire’s sole crown prince?! I’d appreciate it if you would curb your recklessness!”

I’d moved without thinking, unable to even wait the few more seconds it would take for Richard to reach my side. Now that I had him in my grasp, I stood on tiptoe, cleaning the filth from his face. I wiped away at the mucus covering his entire body, which was not poisonous anymore due to the neutralizing effects of my magic, but remained equally sticky.

“Thank you, Miss Monica,” Richard murmured, holding still and letting me work. He smiled at me, and it was such a gentle and kind expression that I found it hard to believe that he’d been out there, fighting all those monsters on his own until a few minutes ago.

“It was extremely irresponsible of you to face that thing alone,” I chided him.

“Well, I needed to give my men a show,” he said, winking, “considering it was my first battle in the Empire after so many years away.”

“I understand, but even so…you had me worried!”

Richard threw his head back and laughed, then shrugged his shoulders like a mischievous child. I marveled at how handsome he still looked despite being doused in monster fluids. *Truly, the beautiful are in a league of their own,* I thought wryly.

I went to say something else to Richard, but in that instant, the thread holding my nerves together suddenly snapped. *Oh, dear,* I thought vaguely, watching idly as slime trickled down his armor. *I must have gone over my limit.*

I wavered, almost collapsing, but Richard grabbed onto me and steadied me with his hands. “Miss Monica?”

Oh, dear… His voice thrummed through my body.

Covering my face with the wimple, I mumbled to him, “Richard…I…I think I’m

in a bad way.”

“I know,” Richard said gently. “It doesn’t show in your eyes because of the warding mechanism, but I surmised you’d been struggling to endure your side effects for some time now.”

I clasped his hands between my own, mumbling, “Just…one final spell. And then I’m done.” I funneled what little energy I had left into my magic, activating my holy woman powers once more.

“Heal this warrior’s wounds and rejuvenate his life force,” I said firmly, directing the entire force of the spell at Richard. I didn’t feel comfortable healing anyone else in such a state, but Richard? I knew, I *knew* that he would never let his sexual urges overwhelm him. So I didn’t worry or question what he would do—I just leaned into my magic, making sure every one of his wounds mended fully. When my magic finally gave out, my strength vanished with it. I fell to my knees.

“Miss Monica…thank you,” Richard said, patting my shoulder. “All we have left to do now is withdraw, so please be at ease.”

I nodded, feeling dizzy and exhausted. “I’m sorry I…couldn’t do more. And thank you.”

“Lady Monica!” a familiar voice called from behind me. “I’ll accompany you!”

I tilted my head to see Darius loping toward me. His battles appeared to have left him covered in monster liquid as well, but he and Richard maneuvered me up on the saddle in front of him regardless.

Thus settled, my escort turned his horse around, riding back toward the refugee settlement with me in tow.

Shortly after we left, the rest of the knights arrived and flooded the area with personnel. With their help, the mission was executed successfully, without a single casualty in sight.

Unfortunately, that still didn’t stop me from having a dream that night—one where I was endlessly tortured by an octopus and its meandering tentacles.

ONCE I unraveled the mysteries of the charms and rituals that were a part of the area's ancient beliefs, I worked together with the locals and knights to successfully build the protective wards for the area. More specifically, this meant that I supervised the burial of each monster carcass in all three of our predetermined locations. Above each of the plots we stored a quartz crystal that contained sealing magic. When we finished our work at the third and final point of the massive, invisible barrier, the atmosphere changed almost instantly, like a weight had been lifted.

"And with this…Psyend will again know peace," I pronounced with a relieved grin.

After that, we executed a clean-up operation to eliminate all of the weakened monsters now trapped within the magical barrier's borders. Thanks to all the preparations made by the special forces' advance unit, only three days passed between our arrival and the achievement of both of the goals I'd set for us at the debriefing.

Suffice it to say, the mission had turned out to be an outstanding success.

As for me? Well, fortunately for all of us, the strengthening magic I had placed on everyone during the battle lasted for several days. That allowed the knights to focus on their duties and me to execute my responsibilities at the warding sites. After I was done with those duties, I shut myself in my room and quietly concentrated on the development of magical tools.

"Ugh, good grief…" I muttered to myself. "I can't believe even the cords we used for the barrier fueled my lewd thoughts…evoking images of the twisting, squirming tentacles…" I shook my head harshly, trying to cast the thoughts straight out of my head.

Needless to say, the desires of the flesh hadn't ceased their rampage against my sanity. So while I grappled with the sensations filling my body and the incredible nuisance they were to me, I diligently devoted my time to producing various magical tools and medicines, tackling every order request that came to my room.

Darius and Solarus supported me by taking turns bringing me my meals and changes of clothes. They also performed other miscellaneous chores on my

behalf.

“Lady Monica, you’re the first person I’ve met who consumes the chameleon plant’s leaves as a staple food,” Darius commented. He’d just brought me one of my meals for the day, but he seemed rather distracted, his face paling as he watched me munch on said herb.

“I hate it too,” I admitted, “but I don’t have a choice since it’s the most effective medicine for me.”

“How unfortunate for you…” Darius murmured, some of the horror in his eyes replaced by pity.

What has the world come to? I thought, rolling my eyes. *Here I am, a holy woman who incites lust, being pitied by a young man. And not any young man, oh no!* This *young man’s an extremely talented, eccentric lad who has placed a magical restraint on himself—one so strict that it would explode his male member should he lose his virginity.*

I let out a little giggle and plopped my head into one of my hands. It all seemed way too ridiculous, and yet here we were.

Nevertheless, I reminded myself, I had much to be grateful for. Despite cloistering myself in my room, many people had stopped outside my door to pay their respects. A few had thanked me earnestly, their voices clogged with tears. Others had silently left bouquets in gratitude.

I idly reached out to one of the bouquets lying on the table in front of me, plucking a single flower from it and easing it gently into my hair. “I…I hope I did enough for everyone,” I murmured softly.

Though I was still unnaturally seized by hellish, vulgar fantasies of the giant octopus and its marauding tentacles, I felt my heart calm a bit as I thought back on the pure, honest tears of my visitors and the lovingly arranged wildflower bouquets they’d left at my door. A measure of soothing comfort stretched over me like a warm blanket.

Yes, I thought with a slight smile. *I have much to be grateful for.*

TWO days had passed since the battle had ended, and I was yet again ensconced in my room. I took a drink of my incredibly strong fishwort tea, my face wrinkling in thought. But before I could think too hard, I heard the familiar sound of Darius's footsteps through my door.

He knocked once, then called out, "Lady Monica, His Highness would like to see you. May I accompany you to the lounge?"

"Yes, please," I called back. "I'm quite well now."

Since our victory against the monsters, Richard's busy schedule had clashed with my convalescence, so we hadn't seen each other at all. Today would be the first time we saw each other in days, and I could barely contain my happiness as I called back my agreement to Darius.

Up until yesterday, I had still been in such an agitated state that even the bedside lamp provoked obscene delusions. But as of this morning, I felt composed, freed of the raging lust. *Thank you, fishwort,* I said internally, bowing my head in gratitude. *And thank you as well to all the kind voices that lifted my spirits.*

Once Darius confirmed he'd wait for me to get ready, I quickly cleaned up and changed. By the time I walked out of my room, I was nearly bouncing with excitement. Seeing my enthusiasm, Darius grinned at me and led me to the lounge, where I found Richard waiting for me. The prince stood gazing out a window, moving restlessly.

"Richard?" I asked hesitantly, eyes on the stern lines of his face.

But I shouldn't have worried—at the sound of his name, Richard turned around, his face brightening instantly. "Miss Monica!" he cried, grinning.

I blinked, feeling nearly blinded by the beauty of his sparkling smile. *So… dazzling…*

Richard straightened from his place by the window, striding rapidly across the room to where I stood. "It's been much too long since we've spoken," he complained. "I've been waiting on pins and needles to see you. How are you feeling? Have you been eating properly?" Then, his sharp eyes fixated on my hair. "Is that…a wildflower?"

I couldn't help but smile at all his questions. "As you can see, I have been eating just fine. I am admittedly nowhere close to becoming an emaciated waif. The flower is from one of the refugee children; they passed it to me through my window."

"You look radiant," Richard gushed, beaming down at me. The corners of his eyes were crinkled in delight. "The yellow bloom sets off the color of your hair beautifully, Miss Monica."

As I stared at Richard's happy face, I couldn't help but think that the Empire's gallant, strapping, charismatic crown prince was currently radiating the kind of joy toward me that was typically reserved for a dog discovering its master. "Has…" I paused, debating how to appropriately ask the question. "Has anyone said anything to you about your…attitude toward me?"

Richard's forehead wrinkled in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Well…how you, as the crown prince, so intimately refer to me as Miss Monica even though I'm just a common holy woman? Or the way you're always so eager to look after me? It's fine right now since Darius is the only other person here, but sometimes I worry, you see."

At this explanation, Richard's face cleared, his lips kicking up slightly at the corners. "Oh, that's not a problem. No one would dare complain about my speech or conduct."

I narrowed my eyes at him, but couldn't find even a hint of spite in his smile. It was such a gentle expression, in fact, that it bordered on touchingly sweet. Which, to be clear, only made it all the scarier to me, because that smile belonged to a man powerful and courageous enough to cleave a giant monster in half with one stroke of his blade.

I relaxed a bit, releasing a tiny sigh. "You're in an even better mood today than usual, hm, Richard?"

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "I finally get to see you again after we were apart for so long, Miss Monica. Nothing can dampen my spirits today."

"*So long*?" I asked him, laughing. "It's only been two days."

I shrugged my shoulders at him in exasperation, though this just seemed to

please him more. He turned to the side, his happy smile still playing around his lips as he looked out the window again. “There is also the fact that peace reigns once more in Psyend,” he commented. “That being true, I naturally have many things to be happy about.”

I nodded, firmly in agreement on that point. “That’s very true.”

A few moments passed, and then before I knew it, I’d followed his lead and begun to stare outside as well.

Knights, men, women, and children worked together harmoniously underneath the sun’s serene light, doing their best to clear up the aftermath. These people knew that the road to recovery would be long, and that their lives would continue for some time in these temporary shelters, and yet, as I stared at them, I could tell they no longer carried any tension in their bodies. As I watched the little ones play and the adults laugh, I could sense that there was now room for hope in their hearts once again.

“Thank you, Miss Monica,” Richard said softly. “Without you, we couldn’t have solved this problem so easily.”

I jolted, turning my head to the side in surprise. Richard stood right next to me, his fascinated eyes running over my face. I flushed in realization—he’d been watching me this whole time.

“I-It makes me happy to hear you say that,” I admitted.

“The Empire will honor your achievements so that you receive the recognition due to you,” he swore, his eyes burning with the force of his intent. “Thus an action is only the first vital step my nation will take toward protecting and nurturing your valuable talent. You *will not* be used and discarded here. This, I swear to you.”

“Richard, I…” but I fell silent, unable to finish. I was swept away by the brilliant light shining in his crimson eyes, unmatched by even the sun.

He’s so angry, I realized, finally understanding the depths of his rage regarding the way the Kingdom of Kophe had treated me. *He’s angrier than I’ve ever been.*

My heart felt close to bursting in my chest. Suddenly, I felt intensely aware of

the fact that I had never before met someone as kind as Richard, and the bone-deep knowledge that I never would again.

“By the way, Miss Monica…” he murmured. “Have you recovered enough for an outing?”

“Wh-What? Oh…um, yes.”

“Good,” he said, clearly pleased. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to show you. And there’s no need to fret, because I’ll protect you.”

His carefree smile and innocuous suggestion suddenly prompted an ominous feeling in a corner of my mind. “*Because I’ll protect you…”* I thought dubiously. *That sounds like I’ll need to keep on my toes.*

But even so, I couldn’t deny him. How could I, when I owed him such a great deal? “As you wish,” I readily agreed. “Lead the way, Richard.”

IN the end, we ended up riding double on a horse, Richard steering the animal to the edge of the Psyend region. Our destination turned out to be the plaza in front of the temple that had hosted the sacred tree which had been felled six years ago. As we approached, my eyes caught on the withered bodies of a group of trees, left mere husks after the fertile earth had turned to nothing but sand. Particles of it lifted into the air with every gust of the sea breeze.

It seemed that everything that had once used to exist around the temple lay in desolate ruins, destroyed by monster attacks over the intervening years. Even the paving stones had been torn away, leaving the square bleak. In the middle of it lay the sacred tree’s stump, which had been pulled out from the ground. It rested on its side, its roots pointing toward the sky.

“I had the knights dig up the stump because it was the only thing left untouched by the monsters,” Richard told me.

I sighed, getting off the horse to brush my fingers over its dried-up roots. The trunk was so thick that several adults with their hands linked would have been needed to encircle it.

“It devastates me to see just this part remain, when it protected this land for

such a long time," I said softly. "But the question of why exactly the people of Psyend suddenly decided to cut it down still niggles at me."

"Then, you thought it strange too, hm, Miss Monica?"

I nodded. "Yes, I did…because no one cuts down a tree unless there's a good reason."

I ruminated on the puzzle of it as I continued to stroke what was left of the sacred tree. I knew that the monster outbreaks had begun in Psyend after it had been logged—there were details aplenty about those incidents. But oddly enough, I hadn't heard much about the tree cutting itself nor the motivation for it. In truth, I'd restrained myself from asking too many questions about the event, because I felt it would be impolite as a newcomer to investigate so aggressively. Yet it was hard *not* to think about why such an important tree had been felled in the first place.

"Would you like to know what happened to the tree itself after it had been cut down?" Richard asked.

My head jerked up. "Oh, you're right! I don't see it anywhere around here."

"It was found abroad."

"Huh…?" I stared at Richard in shock, trying to process this unexpected news.

In the meantime, Richard continued speaking, thumping a fist against the stump as he did. "The wood itself doesn't contain any magical properties. In that respect, it's just a normal tree. And yet, for some reason this sacred tree was processed into smaller pieces within the country, then sold off as materials abroad for repairing carriages, making wooden crates, and the like."

My brow wrinkled. "I don't understand…" I murmured. "Do you mean to tell me that the people were having trouble making a living, so they just decided to cut it down to make some coin?"

Richard shook his head. "Think harder."

"So that's not it, huh…? Hmm, let me see… Before it was overrun by monsters, the territory of Psyend had been functioning normally despite its arid geography, and though the local economy was limited, people still managed to

eke out a living…" I gasped in realization. "If it wasn't the people themselves who decided to cut down the tree, is it possible that *somebody else* convinced them the tree was worth more than they ever thought?"

"That's what I thought too," Richard agreed quietly.

Something about the whole situation sent an icy shiver running down my spine. Seeing how stiff with tension I was, Richard tried to change the subject by pointing at the hole in the ground where the stump had been. "By the by, Miss Monica," he said casually, "why don't you take a peek inside?"

Giving into his urging, I leaned over the hole and glanced down. I was immediately left speechless. Deep within the depression I spotted a glitter that shouldn't have been there.

"This…I…*what*?!" I crouched down, bracing myself over the hole in order to get a better look—and promptly almost fell right in.

"Eeek!" I squeaked in terror.

But Richard had already caught me. He held me to his chest, having easily scooped me up with an arm around my waist. "Best be careful," he murmured in my ear, chuckling softly.

"Th-Thank you, I will." I mumbled, slipping out of his grasp and hoping he wouldn't see the embarrassed flush of my cheeks.

I could see Richard's lips twitching in amusement from the corner of my eye, but I valiantly pushed through and asked him the question that was burning in my mind anyway. "That's a sacred object in there, isn't it?" I said slowly. "And not just any simple one either. It's an enormous crystallized magical stone. The monster's remains must have transformed into this after being buried down there a thousand years…"

"Indeed," Richard said, nodding. "The sacred tree's roots were so powerfully embedded within the stone that it couldn't be pulled out. No one uncovered the stone's existence, not the subjects who felled the tree, nor whichever villain was behind this conspiracy. Because if they *had* found this before us, I imagine our troubles would have been a thousand times worse."

I shivered. If what we'd seen was how bad the monster invasion had been

with the ward still partially intact because of the presence of the stone, I didn't want to know how bad it would have gotten in Psyend without it.

The only reason we could even engage in this sightseeing venture safely now was because of the protective ward and the monster extermination. Otherwise, the entire area would still be a danger zone crawling with creatures. That new security was also the reason the knights were able to dedicate time and effort to digging the stump out.

I glanced at Richard, noticing he was staring down at the magical stone with a subdued look on his face. "This place," he said softly, "it may very well develop into the Empire's largest mining operation for magical stones."

Awe flickered through me. "Who else knows of this?"

"Besides you, Miss Monica, only Darius and a handful of knights I trust," Richard replied. "We only succeeded in excavating it yesterday. I had the idea, you see, that Darius might be able to pull it out using his own magic in combination with your strengthening spell. So we came here to test out my theory."

"*What*?! H-He dragged out the stump by himself…?"

Richard grinned. "Yes, he did."

Astounding, I thought, head spinning. But I pushed aside Darius's accomplishments for the moment, focusing back on the magic stone once more.

"I still just can't believe it," Richard admitted. "A majority of magical equipment runs on minuscule magical stones, no bigger than the size of a nail on someone's little finger. So I can't even imagine what something this humongous might be capable of."

Magical stones were such valued minerals that even one of the small beads sewn into my saintly attire would feed an entire commoner's family for the rest of their lives. Thinking of how valuable the stone that lay before us was, my whole body began to tremble.

"I have a policy in such situations, of course," Richard explained to me. "It's always best to keep an open mind and not take anything at face value. But even

I never imagined I'd find something like *this*."

"Though you *did* suspect something strange had gone on," I said, poking him in the side with a finger.

Richard gave me his usual sunny smile. "Just my intuition. Nothing more. And anyway, *that* is not what's important. "This magic boulder may very well be the key to accelerating Psyend's revival. In the near future, I'm planning to host a conference with experts and local citizens alike regarding reconstruction strategies. I'd truly appreciate it if you would give your input as well when the time comes, Miss Monica."

"Certainly!" I replied, fully on board. I nodded vigorously.

The people of this arid land had fought strenuously to survive under the monsters' threat. As a holy woman who was blessed with the power to help others, I would do whatever I could to ameliorate their lives.

"Miss Monica, would you mind placing a camouflage spell here?" Richard asked. "My magic isn't strong enough to do so."

"Leave it to me," I said in return.

I closed my eyes, building a magical barrier that hid the space from everyone except those Richard approved. No one else would be able to step foot inside the invisible wall. Once I finished, we mounted the horse again and made our way back to the refugee settlement that was serving as base camp.

Richard's strong hands gripped the horse's reins masterfully as we rode double, me sitting behind him this time. My body swayed in the saddle, rocked by the equine's steady trot. I could feel my excitement dimming as another emotion slowly bubbled up, taking its place. Fear. Someone had deliberately threatened Psyend, which was under Richard's jurisdiction.

I thought about it deeply until we arrived at the base and dismounted. Richard began to rub the horse down, and I…I found I couldn't keep the words in anymore.

Richard," I declared, "I think I…might finally be starting to comprehend the world you grew up in."

“Well, Miss Monica,” he replied, his flame-colored eyes crinkling, “I find that quite heartening to hear, since we’ll be together forever.”

WHEN we climbed into our carriage to begin our journey back to the imperial capital, the civilians and local military personnel waved us off with smiles. On the ride here, Psyend had seemed like a stark and dismal place to my eyes. But the scenery outside my window seemed different to me now. All I could see was the beauty of the vegetation sprouting indomitably despite the barren land, and the beautiful, cloudless blue sky.

I’ve always heard that a person’s mood and mindset affect the way they perceive things, but I didn’t realize how true that was until now, I thought.

“Oh, Richard, by the way,” I said abruptly, breaking the comfortable silence. “I still don’t think it’s appropriate for you to call me ‘Miss Monica.’ Especially when I’m the only one you address so intimately.”

Richard slowly turned his head to look at me from his seat on the other side of the carriage, his expression and body totally relaxed and at ease. “But Miss Monica…” he drawled, “I distinctly recall you referring to me as ‘Richard.’”

I choked, my face flaming bright red.

“And no one rebuked you for it either,” he said with a wink. “So it’s fine. Stop worrying.”

Toward the end of our hectic time in Psyend, our close friendship had become public knowledge. Through a faux pas *I* committed no less. I had been half a second too late in adding “Your Highness” after I said “Richard” during a chat, accidentally revealing how intimately we addressed each other. It should have ended there, but Richard being Richard, *of course* it hadn’t.

Before I could gloss over my delay, he had neatly interjected in an outrageously loud, outrageously happy voice: “Miss Monica, please, how many times must I insist that you call me by my name? If this is about maintaining your respect for your homeland’s customs, that is all the more reason for you to use ‘Richard’ and for me to continue addressing you as ‘Miss Monica.’ Considering your former vaunted status as Kophe’s intended crown princess

and primary consort to its future king, I think it is only fair. After all, I am but a humble knight commander who renounced his right to the imperial throne. So, please, just grant me this boon already."

Naturally, all within hearing distance didn't miss a word.

Hearing the brightness in his voice and seeing the grin on his face while he spoke, everyone nearby accepted his words without any qualms. Their expressions seemed to say, "Ah-ha! Is that how it is between them?"

Thinking of it now, I scrubbed a hand over my face. *His Imperial Highness's charismatic personality is a true terror.*

Not that I wasn't grateful for his quick action. By displaying a lack of concern over my momentary disregard for formalities, he had protected my reputation while simultaneously fulfilling his own agenda.

With his elbow on an armrest, Richard rested his chin on his hand and grinned at me like he was having an absolute ball. "Just so you're aware, Miss Monica, I don't intend to stop calling you that, even if you hate it."

I narrowed my eyes at him. *I wish that vexing man would put himself in my shoes for once!*

"All right, fine, have it your way," I said, rolling my eyes. "But tell me why the 'Miss' in particular? That has always confounded me because you're older than me *and* the crown prince. I would frankly feel more comfortable if you dropped the 'Miss' entirely and just called me 'Monica.'"

During our time at Mayga Cieux, he'd used to call me "saintess." I hadn't minded it at all and could even confess that I felt wistful thinking about it now, with all the memories the nickname represented. But that nickname and "Miss Monica" were two different things. Because whenever he called me "Miss Monica" with his usual, joyful smile, I felt…unsettled. *Unnerved*. Tickled by fluttering emotions I couldn't identify.

"I actually have a very good reason for that," Richard replied, his expression unusually intense as he contemplated me. The smolder in his fiery eyes almost scorched right through me. "I respect you, Miss Monica. You're someone who others have great expectations for."

“Is that…all?”

“It’s a very important quality to me.”

Puzzlement swirled through me. “But I have no memory of doing anything impressive enough to earn your admiration like that…”

This brought a warm smile to Richard’s face. “There is no single event because you’re *always* meeting and exceeding any expectations I have for you. Case in point, the recent expedition at Psyend. You were awe-inspiring.”

I flinched, face flushing at his unexpectedly sincere tone. “O-Oh, bother! Why must you be so frustratingly direct with your praise…?!”

Richard’s eyes gleamed, my reaction seeming to spur him on. “You know, Miss Monica, I like that part of you as well. That part that doesn’t preen about your strength or buckle under the burdens you bear. In truth, I respect you more than you’ll ever know.”

“I… Th-Thank you…”

I desperately needed him to stop. That awfully thoughtful compliment, combined with his probing, vivid gaze, practically made me melt in embarrassment. Wilting under the pressure of the moment, I hurriedly changed the subject. “I-In any case!” I cried. “What about Their Majesties’ infertility problem? As the holy woman you brought to the Empire, aren’t I supposed to be involved in finding a solution?”

It was a question that had been hovering in the back of my mind, as despite my busy days of work since arriving here, I had rarely crossed paths with the emperor and empress.

“You’re already involved, Miss Monica.”

“I…I am…?”

“The cause of their inability to have children is psychological stress, stemming primarily from domestic issues.” Richard shifted in his seat, recrossing his legs. After a pause, in a rare action for him, he sighed deeply as he gazed at the landscape passing by. “I don’t make it a habit to discuss the things that aggravate me, so I won’t be bothered if you choose to ignore what I’m about to

tell you."

Richard glanced out the window and lowered his voice, continuing, "Our parents are no longer with us. The previous emperor—our father—died from an illness that is suspected by many to be an assassination. Our mother died in childbirth not long after him, along with our stillborn younger sister."

He shrugged at my sharp intake of breath. "There's no need to make that face. It's a common enough tale, after all."

"Be that as it may, it is still an important one to you and His Majesty, Richard," I told him firmly.

He smiled slightly. "Thank you," he said softly. His expression shifted slightly, as if he was pulling his emotions back inside of him. From there on out, he spoke as dispassionately as possible about the burdens weighing him and his brother down. It was almost like he was telling a story about someone else.

"Since my older brother ascended to the throne in his teenage years, his publicly political stance has been a moderate one. He has mostly followed that path in order to maintain the balance of power between the Empire's six most influential aristocratic families. He refuses to allow the might of the imperial family to be manipulated by any one lineage."

The Empire had been a military powerhouse since its founding several centuries ago, and had since taken advantage of the many wars on the continent and the flow of history to its dominion to the north and east. Incidentally, the Kingdom of Kophe lay on the Empire's western border while the ocean dominated its southern boundary.

If one turned back the pages of time, the outlying border provinces in the north and east of the Empire had originally been small, independent nations of their own. With that history behind them, the powerful aristocratic families from those former states still held tremendous influence in imperial politics. They were known as the three borderland houses. Beyond them, there were also the three imperial houses, whose power came from their lineage's proud histories as the original retainers of the Belktrius dynasty. Their forebears had supported the first emperor since the Empire's inception.

During the previous emperor's reign, the emperor had possessed

monumental authority, and had easily maintained an absolute hold over parliament as well as the six houses' influence. But without warning, a mysterious "illness" had afflicted the emperor, and had ultimately killed him. Shortly thereafter, his wife, Her Majesty, also lost her life in childbirth, along with her stillborn daughter. The dowager empress had originally been born into the Heathcomille house, one of the borderland houses.

Bereaved of their parents and sister, the two sons of the empress and emperor were left behind as the only two legitimate heirs to head the Empire. Christopher, at fifteen years old, was the first in the line of succession, followed up by Richard, who had been ten years old at the time. The day they lost their family marked a turning point in both their lives, as ever since, they'd been fighting a war against the six houses of the Empire for control of the nation's throne.

"At the age of fifteen, my brother became emperor, and one of the first things he did was install Lord Heathcomille as regent in order to avoid disrupting official government operations," Richard told me. "For the next few years, he performed his duties as the Emperor with Lord Heathcomille's assistance. But once he turned twenty, one of the Empire's laws came into play.

"It states that an emperor must do one of two things upon his twentieth birthday—either confer the position of grand chancellor upon the regent, leaving him at the same level of power, or appoint the regent as a normal chancellor in the imperial government, diminishing his influence. Instead of appointing Lord Heathcomille to the post of grand chancellor, my brother instead nominated Lord Adenthal, who had been working as chancellor since our father's generation. By choosing to honor our father's last wish, my brother established a political system that paid homage to our predecessors."

My head was spinning a little at this information. "I…I had no idea Lord Heathcomille was that much of a leading figure here," I said weakly.

I really wish Richard hadn't set me against him so soon after coming here, I thought, mortified. *Good grief.*

"If I had told you, I'm certain you would have held back, and your work would have suffered," Richard said, not the slightest bit guilty.

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

His lips twitched slightly before he continued. “It was a given that Lord Heathcomille wouldn’t take any of that lying down. He put forth a proposal to my brother that he would only accept his removal from the office of regent in exchange for making his own daughter the empress via marriage to Christopher. Lord Heathcomille’s plan was to keep power in his grip through his position as the emperor’s father-in-law. Unfortunately for him…”

“His Majesty chose a bride from a line outside of the six families… Her Majesty, yes?”

“Correct.”

I exhaled slowly. “Hm…it’s no wonder all those tragedies and conspiracies led you, as the crown prince, to flee, and His Majesty to become impotent.”

“The existence of a successor would transform and solidify my brother and sister-in-law’s positions,” Richard explained. “But as you know, we lost our mother and little sister in childbirth. And that makes my brother deeply hesitant about the prospect of creating an heir.”

I suddenly recalled my own experience with royalty in the Kingdom of Kophe. With the official enactment of polygyny in the crown prince’s generation, I had been affianced as the first consort.

“What about a concubine?” I asked hesitantly. “Is that an option here in the Empire, to bring another young noblewoman into His Majesty’s fold?”

“We do technically have a concubinage system in place,” Richard admitted, “but only as an *extremely* last resort. If my brother takes on a second wife, or more, new issues would arise. There would be the matter of hierarchy among the wives, how each would be treated as a result, and so forth. Polygyny would only embroil him in further responsibilities and add stress he frankly doesn’t need.”

“It truly is a complex problem…” I murmured. Then an unexpected thought popped into my mind. “Richard, I’m curious about something.”

“Yes?”

“Well, um, have there been any discussions about, uh, your marriage to an aristocratic lady?”

“Naturally,” he said, nodding matter-of-factly. “I’ve had quite a few aggressive offers too. When I lived in the capital before my self-imposed exile, letters would be delivered to me nonstop. There was even a young woman who pursued me relentlessly while trying to make all our meetings seem like a coincidence. In reality, she had of course been lying in wait for me each time we met.”

“Oh, dear…” I murmured, eyes wide.

“Another one colluded with a servant within the palace to compromise me while I slept.”

That one made me full-on choke, which made a slight smile rise to Richard’s lips. “I actually found those innocent little traps fairly entertaining. But when one of them chased me all the way to the front lines where we were exacting a campaign against a group of monsters, and had the *gall* to ask me if I wanted to join her for tea, that was where I drew the line. Just thinking about it still raises my hackles.”

“That…must have been awful indeed…”

Then, a thought suddenly occurred to me. *Perhaps some secret hidden in his past is the reason he never allows his libido to rise to the surface?* My face heated even just dwelling on it for a single moment. I could never ask Richard such a thing.

Richard sighed. “Unfortunately, no matter how much I would have liked to, I couldn’t *actually* forcefully expel daughters of the aristocracy from my presence. Even despite the fact that *they* were entering places like my bedroom, carriage, and anywhere else I so happened to be without my consent. That’s why I hired myself such a competent maid. I needed to employ a woman confident in her own abilities, who could also politely capture any intruders and mete out an appropriate punishment on them. Most of all, her personality had to be the sort that would absolutely kill any thoughts I had about marriage and romance with the fairer sex.”

“H-Huh?” I abruptly felt as if I was losing the thread of conversation. It

seemed to be sliding in a most uncertain direction.

Richard's face filled with amusement. "Well you see, Miss Monica, Solarus's female domination techniques have been an absolute godsend for me."

"Female domination techniques?!" I choked out.

"Indeed!" Richard agreed, a smile taking over his face for the first time in quite a while. "Allow me to explain. Solarus can seize any nefarious young lady she likes, as she's a woman too. It helps that she's quite familiar with sadism, and can tie them up without leaving any marks behind. Even when she *punishes* them to a certain extent while she has them bound, the young women ultimately end up entranced by her. You cannot imagine how many reports I've received about those very women requesting *more* of Solarus's unique brand of *discipline*…"

"Wait, wait, wait!" I cried, holding up a hand in front of my very flushed face. "Are you telling me you deliberately chose eccentrics like Darius and Solarus to be part of your inner circle?!"

Richard beamed at me, but I didn't quite trust the look. It was the refreshing smile he typically reserved for his imperial crown prince persona. Nevertheless, when he leaned forward and crooned, "I like to think of them as trustworthy subordinates who are masters of their own special arts," I felt like I was going to dissolve into my seat.

Honestly, who even is this man? I lamented. Although…upon reflection, it would be the height of hypocrisy for me to treat Darius and Solarus as freaks considering I was a holy woman who roused lust…

Then another thought hit me, making me feel abruptly guilty. "Hold on a moment. Does that mean Solarus is still doing double duty, doing her official responsibilities as well as those shadowy activities?"

Richard shook his head. "No, not anymore. Ever since I renounced my claim to the throne and threw myself into the boring task of managing the Empire's territories, interest in me as a prospective husband has suddenly cooled. I no longer appeal to noblewomen's refined tastes, you see. Which was exactly what I wanted, so all's well that ends well."

“I see…” I said thoughtfully. For better or worse, I felt all tangled up inside at his revelation, like my complicated jumble of emotions were churning around inside my stomach. “Well, I can’t say I agree with them. You work so diligently for the sake of your country…”

Richard’s expression softened. “You’re the only one who thinks that, Miss Monica, but I truly appreciate it, coming from you. Though truthfully, those aren’t the only reasons the ladies now avoid me. There’s the fact that I’m constantly plunging into battle along with my knights in the special forces unit as well. Well-born ladies fear marrying husbands in such a dangerous line of work because the women think the men will die young. More than that though, my alias presents a greater fright to them.”

“The Ferocious…Crown Prince,” I murmured. I stared at the man in front of me, with his vibrant red hair and strong, dependable battlefield presence that made the moniker fit so well. Back when we’d been fighting at the front lines in Kophe, the knights had accepted Richard quickly and without question. All they had to do was see him fight to understand his outstanding talents.

What a waste, I thought moodily, *to fear such a dedicated, honorable warrior.*

“Besides, Miss Monica, now I have you≡!” Richard said cheerfully, grinning.

“Wh-What…?” I replied, blinking at him repeatedly in confusion. “Why would you say that?” I demanded. “What relevance could I possibly have in all of this?”

Richard cocked his head to the side, an amused smile playing about his lips. “Mmm, perhaps because anyone can tell just by looking at me that I’m besotted with you, Miss Monica?”

I rolled my eyes. “Hmph, *again* with your foolishness. I feel sorry for anybody who misunderstands our relationship as anything except professional.”

“Is that all you think of our connection?” Richard cried, leaning back in his seat and pressing his hand against his heart. “You wound me!”

“R-Richard, please!” I exclaimed, trying to use indignance to hide my blushing cheeks. “I request that you stop teasing me.”

He just let loose a delighted laugh and changed the subject. “At any rate, Miss

Monica, you did me a great favor by knocking Lord Heathcomille down a peg. Thank you.”

RICHARD lounged in one of the audience parlors of the imperial castle, waiting for his uncle, Lord Heathcomille, to appear. A few days had passed since the events at Psyend, and he felt it was time to wrap up this particular loose end.

When the old man finally entered the room, his expression was *supremely* displeased. It seemed being ordered around by a lowly knight commander who no longer held any right to the Empire’s throne was offensive to him.

Richard bowed his head, a faint smile wending its way across his face as he gestured for his uncle to take a seat on the neighboring sofa. “Uncle, I must thank you for coming.”

Lord Heathcomille snorted derisively at his nephew’s demeanor. Richard’s charmingly polite manners were wasted on him. “I demand to know why you suddenly asked to see me,” he spat.

“I simply wanted to relay to you the results of our campaign in the southern territories, Uncle,” Richard said smoothly.

Lord Heathcomille dramatically widened his eyes, feigning shock. The crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes wrinkled at the movement. “I’ve already been apprised of everything at a debriefing,” he replied, shrugging dismissively. “So why are you calling me out here now to tell me alone?”

Richard’s lips stretched into his usual gentle, enigmatic smile. “Well, Uncle, I wondered why you still seem so unhappy even though the problem has been handled.”

Lord Heathcomille rolled his eyes. “What an absurd accusation, considering I myself was the one who requested the holy woman find a solution.”

Richard chuckled, but there was no humor in the sound. “You thought she couldn’t do it, but on the off chance she *could*, you intended to make sure she didn’t succeed, hm?”

The room fell into adversarial silence as a servant entered the parlor carrying a tea tray, poured each man his tea, and departed. There was not a bit of warmth in the eyes of either uncle or nephew as they stared at one another; their gazes were more akin to that of two stampeding male animals seeking to rip out the other's entrails.

Richard crossed his legs casually. "Psyend is far enough away that it takes several days to reach it from the capital, even utilizing teleporters. Its only residents are the poor locals and the military personnel under your patronage, Uncle. I'm well aware that during my time in hiding, you allowed the monsters to wreak havoc freely there."

Lord Heathcomille leaned back in his chair. "Come now, Richard, why on earth would I ever do such a thing? It is not in the national interest for an imperial territory to be destroyed."

"You'd do it," Richard replied, "Because letting the south fall to ruin while I was not here was crucial to your crusade to crush the support behind the Ferocious Crown Prince. Then you further hypothesized, mistakenly might I add, that not even a holy woman of Monica's capabilities would be able to revive a land so devastated by monsters that it was no longer inhabitable."

"How dare you levy such ridiculous charges at me," Lord Heathcomille snapped. "I'll have you know that I tried my best to solve the problems in Psyend even during your shameful escape abroad. You should be *grateful* to me."

The corners of Richard's mouth curled up in a cold sneer. "Haha. Escape, indeed."

And who do you think forced me into such a position, Uncle?

"Did you know, Uncle, that the theory Monica proposed during that first debriefing session, was proposed once before? Three years prior, a scholar named Weitel Majensky put forth a proposal that bore a striking resemblance to hers."

Lord Heathcomille's fingers twitched ever so slightly on the couch's arm.

"No official records remain of it, of course. But I *did* obtain a register of the

books and documents Lord Majensky procured, as well as his family's testimony. It was a proposal that conjectured the sacred tree's felling as the source of the monster upsurge. And, believe it or not, he submitted the document to *you*, in your capacity as the Minister of Environment and Agriculture and the acting administrator of the imperial lands."

There was a decidedly long pause. "It is well known that family members are the first to affirm the statements of those related to them—true or not."

"That may be true, Uncle, but when I looked further into Lord Majensky, I found he'd been dispatched to the northern front, where he unfortunately died in battle. It is rather…convenient…that you were the one who ordered his transfer. And there's no disputing *that* particular record."

Lord Heathcomille's hands clenched. "Mere coincidence," he spat.

Richard tapped a finger to his lips, smiling faintly. "So you *do* acknowledge that he submitted his proposal."

"Speak clearly, boy," the lord demanded. "What is it you want to say?"

"If you'd read Lord Majensky's proposal, why did you act so disbelieving of Monica's premise?"

The corners of the cunning old man's eyes jerked.

"You knew precisely what she was talking about, yet you feigned ignorance, hm?"

Lord Heathcomille scoffed at Richard, who smiled thinly back at him. "No one in their right mind would lend credence to such a ludicrous theory."

"Ludicrous on the surface perhaps," Richard said slowly, his eyes shining with a cold, eerie light, "but it was fully supported by the local oral tradition passed down from generation to generation." Richard cocked his head in mock thought. "Uncle, as I recall, your daughter's primary attendant was once a resident of Psyend. She worked her way up through the ranks, yes? And having grown up in the south, she would most likely have been well aware of the disaster to befall the region if the sacred tree was cut down. Surely you must have heard something of the sort from her, Uncle? *Especially* while you were in bed."

Just the implication he kept a mistress had Lord Heathcomille's shoulders spasming. But Richard wasn't done.

"You see, Uncle, I could not stop thinking about why a sacred tree, protected for centuries on end, would suddenly be felled. And then, the answer came to me. Because a strange merchant came visiting, making claims that he would pay handsomely for it. Any amount of money would have gone a long way for those souls surviving in the barren south. And, let me see now… Ah, yes, here we go."

Richard spread out a contract that had been discovered in one of the villages on top of the table. He waved at it, piercing his uncle with his flame-colored eyes. "If I'm not mistaken, Uncle, isn't this merchant from *your* domain? The name is an alias, of course, but a representative of the Merchant's Guild was kind enough to verify for us that it's one this particular man uses when conducting business outside of his primary jurisdiction, which just so happens to be an area under your control."

Psyend's residents were poor. It was no wonder then that they had unquestioningly accepted the merchant's offer of an abnormally large sum of money for the sacred tree when he appeared. The old legends of the area that had been passed down through the ages were nothing more than fairy tales to the people living there back then. Such stories could not save them from living on the edge of starvation.

"It all went according to your plan, Uncle. You used the merchant to get the tree felled and sold off in pieces, which resulted in the monster infestation and Psyend's steady destruction over the years. You even made sure that the chivalric order wouldn't dispatch any knights to the regions. You forced the local officials to send reports that drastically underestimated the situation in the first few years, and they caved to your influence because they felt guilty for what they'd done to their sacred tree."

After stewing for a long time in oppressive silence, Lord Heathcomille finally spoke through clenched teeth. "What is it that you want from me?"

Richard smiled. "Why, Uncle, I don't want a thing! This is all just speculation on my part, you know. But…now that I've returned, perhaps you would allow me to manage the Empire's territories once more? Also, if it wouldn't be too

much trouble for you, you might support Their Majesties without subterfuge—Oh, yes, and one more thing." Richard stood up and walked over to his uncle. Placing a hand on the older man's shoulder, he leaned down and whispered into his ear. "I heard that your daughter, the one you tried to marry off first to my brother and then to me, has been in incredibly low spirits as of late. I would *love* to introduce her to someone I think would prove a good match."

Lord Heathcomille ground his teeth in rage. He knew there was nothing he could say, so the only thing left was to consent tacitly.

"Don't worry, Uncle," Richard crooned. "He's a trustworthy young knight under my command in the special forces who always supports me. Let's arrange for the two to meet as soon as possible." Richard released the older man, slinking his way back to his seat. "Well, then, I think that'll be it for us today. I thank you for granting me so much of your precious time."

ONCE Lord Heathcomille stormed out of the parlor, Richard let out a long exhale before finishing off the now cold tea in his cup. His usual gentleness was nowhere to be found in his expression, and his eyes glinted with the razor-sharpness of a lethal sword. He tapped his fingers on his knee, mind carefully deliberating on how this meeting would affect his future plans.

Lord Heathcomille would most likely destroy any and all evidence of his evil deeds, but he would nevertheless be forced to obediently marry off his daughter to Richard's knight from the special forces unit. The marriage would likely be an ideal and welcome development for her, as she was most likely exhausted from being used as a pawn by her own father. It would also effectively tie his uncle's hands, limiting any actions he could take against the imperial brothers moving forward.

Then there was the merchant who had been part of the plot to dispose of the sacred tree. In all likelihood, Lord Heathcomille would cut his ties with him. When that happened, the merchant would need to find a new client for his business. Richard decided to let the man roam free. *I'll watch and wait.* After all, a well-connected, capable tradesman was an indispensable component of Richard's strategy.

“Thanks to the troubadours and newspapers, Miss Monica’s achievements and reputation have started spreading throughout the Empire,” Richard murmured to himself. “If she succeeds in helping my brother and sister-in-law have a child, the people’s esteem for her will rise to even greater heights. Excellent.”

The Ferocious Crown Prince tilted his head back against the sofa, his eyes flickering like firelight. In their depths rested a yearning he had never revealed to anyone.

Chapter 3: Domestic Peace Is the Key to Conception!

“HOW! Am! I! So! Busy?!” I cried, running a hand over my brow.

Ever since the Psyend incident, I’d been so busy I couldn’t find a moment to catch my breath. I was tossed willy-nilly into conferences one after the other. Presenting my opinions on how to deal with monsters and build magical barriers, question and answer sessions on what it meant to be a holy woman, discourses on the most efficient production methods for magical medicines…my work practically never ended.

While performing those jobs as part of my new role in the Empire, I finally started working on the main reason I’d been brought here in the first place—Their Majesties’ fertility issue.

Every night, accompanied by Solarus and Her Majesty’s mistress of the robes—otherwise known as the head lady-in-waiting—I visited Their Majesties’ bedchambers and used my holy powers on the imperial couple. Tonight, like all nights, my first stop was His Majesty’s room.

“You have my thanks,” he told me once I was done. “Though I can’t quite explain it, my body feels warmer and lighter now.”

“That’s wonderful, I’m so glad to hear it,” I replied. “And…um…any changes in your, uh…lower half…Your Majesty?”

At my question, His Majesty fell silent for a few moments in thought. Then he quietly shook his head, expression dismayed. “Unfortunately, still nothing.”

No reaction tonight either, huh? I drooped a bit in defeat. “No, no, Your Majesty, it’s my fault. I apologize for not being strong enough…”

“There’s no point in being impatient,” he said with a sigh. “After all, in my particular case, you didn’t anticipate an immediate effect regardless. Isn’t that right, Monica?”

“In principle, a priestess’s power is designed to elevate an individual’s own

natural ability to recover from wounds, illnesses, and such. Simply speaking, the recovery outcome is most pronounced when a person's life is in danger from injury or sickness. Which is why, ultimately, well, um…any effects related to sexual revitalization are secondary at best."

"In short," His Majesty said, "as long as there isn't anything physically wrong with me, my mental and emotional trauma are the underlying issues that will continue to shackle me…is what you're saying?"

"I'm deeply sorry to say you're correct." To be blunt, it was impossible for me to heal an inability, impotence in his case, alone.

But His Majesty waved away my contrition with a gentle shake of his head. "Please, don't apologize, Monica. Thanks to you, waking up has been a true pleasure recently. Not to mention I've been relying significantly less on my daily doses of magical medicine. I can definitely see the results of your work, so I have but to wait patiently for the final outcome."

"I'm so very obliged by your kind words, Your Majesty…" I replied, but my guilt thickened even more at the sight of His Majesty's kind, understanding smile.

I exited his room and headed toward Her Majesty's through the door adjoining their chambers. The atmosphere in Her Majesty's room was completely different from the emperor's, since it was decorated with furnishings from her birthplace, the province of Sowles.

"Thank you for your efforts," Her Majesty said as she anxiously watched me enter the room. "How is His Majesty's condition?"

"Think nothing of it," I told her. "His overall energies are slowly revitalizing, but—"

"We still can't spend the night together, hm?" Her Majesty sighed softly. She was clad in a scandalous negligee, as she was most nights when I came to her room. It seemed she'd been clinging to hope that her husband might actually be sleeping with her that night.

I wondered how much His Majesty's pride as a man was taking a beating, having such a lovely, sensual woman as his wife, and still suffering from

impotence. *If only my holy powers could heal wounds of the heart as well.*

I inclined my head toward the empress, drawing close to where she sat on the bed. “With your permission then, Your Majesty,” I said softly.

She nodded her permission, and I took a deep breath, pulling myself together. I placed my hands lightly over both sides of her waist as Her Majesty reclined back into the bed, and proceeded to perform a physical examination. As usual, my magic detected a weak response from her womb. The magical physician’s examination had found no ailments with her body, so I had to conclude that her irregular menses were driven by psychological stress, similar to His Majesty’s struggle.

“I’ll now use my power on you,” I told her.

I called to my saintly power and directed it to heal her body, since even the small amount of assistance it offered could go a long way toward improving Their Majesties’ situation. The coldness in her skin dissipated as warmth replaced it. I continued pouring my magic into her, conveying the vision I carried in my head, of overflowing vitality, through my palms.

“That should do it for today…” I said at last.

Since there was no actual wound or illness afflicting her body either, no matter how much rejuvenation I encouraged through my abilities, the only thing I could really do was help her recover from fatigue. And particularly in a woman’s case, even if she was induced into a heat, no amount of holy powers or magical medicine could affect her ovulation and menstrual cycle.

“Thank you,” Her Majesty said sadly, her newly shining hair falling over one shoulder as she slowly raised herself into a sitting position. She gave me a soft smile, but it wasn’t a happy one.

My chest ached at the sight of her. “I’ll treat you again tomorrow night as well, Your Majesty.”

“I’m looking forward to it. Thank you.”

Crushed by my sense of powerlessness as a priestess, I left her bedchamber. A holy woman who aroused lust but couldn’t even heal impotence or infertility? *What a travesty.*

“I’ve never failed like this before in my life…”

THE attending physician had been allotted his own abode within the palace. I was now sitting in his common room along with him and the mistress of robes. We put our heads together as we discussed the results of the treatment I’d performed using my saintly superpower over the past several days, and discussed assignments and challenges coming in the foreseeable future. In the end though, the conclusion we all ultimately agreed upon was that Their Majesties’ psychological burdens were the origin of their infertility problems.

“Well,” I said quietly, taking a sip of tea, during one of my rare breaks. “Many politicians face the same issue for similar reasons, so it’s not a terribly uncommon occurrence…”

The aging family doctor responded with a heavy exhale. “His Majesty is intrinsically unsuited for the role of ruler. His father, the previous emperor, was a battle-hardened warrior. He led many military campaigns domestically and abroad to quell strife. Possessed of a body so frighteningly invulnerable that he refused to die no matter how many wounds he incurred, the man was a fierce juggernaut.”

That description sounded eerily familiar to a certain *someone* I knew well, also related to His Majesty. An image of him fluttered to the surface of my mind.

“Then there was his untimely and shocking demise. The emperor’s father succumbed to an unforeseen end within these very palace walls, before he could even leave behind a stable government for his sons to manage. No one could have guessed such a thing would happen… And though His Majesty may as well be his father’s twin in face and figure alike, inside he’s a gentle man who abhors conflict.” His thin shoulders hunched as usual, the imperial physician spoke with eyes that exuded profound affection for both the previous and current emperors.

“If I may be so bold…” I said slowly, “Hearing your words, I almost feel as if His Highness Richard resembles the previous emperor more.”

“Indeed,” agreed Louise, Her Majesty’s head lady-in-waiting.

She was a plump, middle-aged woman with a sharp face and salt-and-pepper hair that she kept tied up neatly behind her head, not a single strand out of place. She remained transparently dubious of me, but she was also an exceedingly rational person, so she was still respectful and kind while she worked with me. I appreciated both her honesty and integrity.

"Yes, His Highness's temperament is very much akin to his father's," she continued. "Unfortunately, that has led to a radical faction in parliament demanding the current emperor abdicate in favor of installing His Highness Richard to the throne. This faction's existence is the very reason the crown prince formally renounced his place in the line of succession *and* fled abroad."

"I hadn't been aware of the specifics before, but I'm not surprised to learn them now," I admitted.

"The official pretext for His Highness's flight was billed as 'Furthering his education in a foreign country,' you see," Louise said. Her eyes flashed as she scrutinized me. "To think he was living so close, hiding in the neighboring nation of Kophe. And to complete his ostentatious return to the Empire by presenting a holy woman on his arm no less…" she chuckled wryly, but there was little amusement in her tone. "Honestly, His Highness's actions are always so wildly unpredictable."

What she left unsaid was that the crown prince had brought a new catalyst that could very well trigger something ugly in the Empire. That implication in her penetrating gaze made me flinch.

"B-By the way…" I said, trying to steer the conversation back to our primary reason for this meeting. "For my own reference, I'd like to verify something once more. The Department of Magical Medicine recommended against the use of fertility treatment because it has been confirmed that both of Their Majesties' are perfectly healthy. Correct?"

The attending physician nodded. "Yes, we have validated that their respective magical energies are flowing as they should be throughout both of their reproductive organs."

"Thank you," I told him. "Then as far as what I can accomplish with my saintly skills… My first goal should be to resolve as many political problems as possible.

That should go far in reducing a great deal of His Majesty's mental burden. In tandem, I need to focus on Her Majesty's psychological care as well."

"Yes," the physician agreed. "I believe that would be the best course of action for the time being."

"So…it seems we'll have to be diligent and patient," I said, my shoulders drooping wearily.

"Indeed," they both agreed.

The family physician and the mistress of the robes sighed contemplatively. They had both been in the imperial family's employ since the previous emperor's reign, so their bonds with the imperial brothers and Her Majesty were stronger than many of the others'. In this very palace where the former emperor and dowager empress passed away, these two were the only ones who could watch over and protect Their Majesties as substitute parents.

I lowered my eyes to my teacup, my fingers curled around the delicate china. The unusual green tea resting inside it was grown in a territory located in the Empire's eastern end. Imperial citizens were fond of all varieties of tea since they drank it habitually, but this one was prepared differently from other teas, via the tradition of its home territory.

I sank into thought.

The Kingdom of Kophe's stability could be attributed to its system of hereditary succession, as well as its general lack of expansion since its founding. It was essentially quite homogenous in its makeup. The Belktrius Empire, however, was structured quite differently. In contrast to my home country, the current ruler of the Empire had to rule over the many different territories and peoples their nation had annexed over the centuries. Thus, the Empire had developed a unique characteristic to its rule—each of its territories or provinces were afforded a certain degree of autonomy regarding concepts like self-governance and cultural preservation.

This attitude was why I had been able to browse through such a prodigious amount of material in the library over the past few weeks. It was also why I could now drink this tea in the same fashion as those who had first lived in the territory from whence it came. It was vital for the emperor to always act with

an awareness of this concept in mind in order to maintain the harmonious relationship between the throne and its multitude of subjects.

It was even more imperative for His Majesty. On the heels of his father's unexpected death, he had not only acceded to the throne at an incredibly young age, but also had to contend with the power struggle between the six noble families.

"Is your meeting over?" a deep, gentle voice asked, drifting over in our direction.

We all stood and bowed reflexively as we recognized its owner. Wearing informal clothes he reserved for his private time only, His Majesty stepped into the room.

"It is, indeed," the emperor's family doctor replied for all three of us. "We have decided that I will continue to provide my services in a magical-medical capacity while Lady Louise continues to manage your basic lifestyle needs. As for Holy Woman Monica, she will provide the appropriate support for special treatments and any other challenges should they arise."

"Is that right? I realize we've placed a considerable burden on you all, but I'm optimistic about the results. Now then…Holy Woman Monica, raise your head."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

When I did as he bid, he smiled faintly at me. *The resemblance between him and Richard is uncanny,* I thought for the hundredth time. I had felt so the first time we met, and continued to every occasion I saw him thereafter. It was their close resemblance that made their differences so conspicuous.

The emperor had long, brownish-red hair that was a more subdued shade than Richard's. He was tall like Richard, but his body was thinner, more gaunt than his younger brother's. One of the most notable disparities between the two were the dark circles hanging under His Majesty's eyes—though these were most often disguised by magic and makeup, since they had to be hidden during public appearances.

He truly isn't suited to be an emperor, I thought pityingly. Everything about him, from his appearance to his personality, engendered that response with a

single glance.

“Monica, my not-so-little brother is livelier than ever before. Meeting you was a blessing for Richard. So please stay by his side from now on. I do hope the bond between you two strengthens even more.”

I blinked, a little surprised by his statement, but said, “You have my word, Your Majesty. I’ll make sure not to commit any blunders in that endeavor.”

“Thank you,” he said, smiling faintly. “As far as my problem goes, I know it’ll be troublesome for you to fix…but I believe in you.”

Looking into his forlorn eyes, I couldn’t help but see His Majesty as a much younger man than he really was. My heart squeezed painfully.

I couldn’t help but think of Richard then. No matter what he faced, his unyielding strength always blazed from his eyes. Despite his position as the imperial crown prince, he was extremely good-natured and candid. He was a rare nobleman who captured people’s hearts easily. Of course, that side of him was an important part of his personality. But even when he played the role of everyone’s friendly older brother, he couldn’t shake off his imperial heritage and appeal. They seeped through in his vitality and strength.

As for His Majesty, good or ill, his aura was one of a sensitive aristocrat. It must have taken nearly everything he had to project the steely authority expected of an emperor. If he couldn’t maintain such a facade, the inevitable comparisons to his father and younger brother would be unbearable. The fact that the brothers were so close only made the situation more tragic.

I left the parlor after making the appropriate farewells to His Majesty and the others. On the walk back to my room, I thought about what I could do in my capacity as a holy woman to reduce the emperor’s anxieties.

“With Richard’s help, it’s vital that I take care of any and all requests brought to my notice,” I decided.

As a guest saint in the Empire, Monica the holy woman was expected to successfully resolve the myriad of problems impacting the country. If I could manage to live up to those expectations, then my accomplishments would also

increase His Majesty's prestige, since he was the one who had welcomed and accepted me into the country.

Oh, I thought, feeling silly. *Richard must have been anticipating this exact situation all along.* No wonder he'd been making such unreasonable demands of me from the beginning of my tenure here.

This new knowledge only solidified my resolve. *I solemnly swear to dedicate myself to all endeavors that come my way, for both Richard and Their Majesties.*

"The life of a priestess is nothing new to me," I muttered to myself, "so all that's left to do is work through each challenge as it crops up."

I was cast out of my thoughts when the scent of a sweet perfume suddenly wafted to my nose. When I tracked the aroma back to its source with my eyes, I saw several noblewomen in glittering dresses wandering through the garden. Their elegance and beauty brought to mind flowers with large blooms unfurling gloriously under the sun's rays. *How vastly different are the worlds we live in, my ladies.*

I hummed in thought, my head beginning to hurt as I watched them enjoy their stroll. "The most pressing issue at present is the matter of Her Majesty's care…" I murmured, but I was abundantly aware that women's battles were *not* my forte. Particularly those between noblewomen. I was a warrior holy woman before anything else, and that wasn't even mentioning my commoner background. So how could I possibly know the art of fighting a lady…?

AUTUMN was a busy period for the landed gentry. They would return to their primary estates for all sorts of dealings. There were harvest festivals to organize, business plans to draw up for the coming year, and social events with neighboring lords. In short, there was much to do and not enough time to do it.

The start of this fall also signaled the annual revival of balls in the imperial capital. These dances were mainly held for knights employed by the capital and the daughters of landless nobility. Essentially, the lower strata of the social hierarchy gathered for merrymaking at these functions.

Though there were some deviations in the Empire's framework of nobility

compared to Kophe's, it was in large part the same. Which meant even a plebeian saint like me could comprehend the social pyramid here easily. That knowledge would certainly come in handy, because for various reasons, I had been invited to attend one such ball with the knights of the special forces. My feelings on the subject were ambivalent at best.

"I know I decided I should go," I said, "if only to investigate the inner workings and attitudes of high society, but…I really think all this decoration is too much for me."

"Lady Monica," Solarus chided, "you will stand out more if you're *not* on display."

She might be right, but my discomfort with such royal treatment remained strong. I still didn't think myself worthy of goods or services beyond both my means and station. Nevertheless, under Solarus's guidance, the maids continued enveloping me in the gorgeous, flamboyant dress I'd been given.

The measurements had been taken during my rest periods from work. It was made of lace and had a high standing collar. Its design was such that in exchange for a bodice that swathed me completely from neck to chest, it left my arms and back bare.

Under the cinched corset-style bodice was a wide, flaring skirt comprising layers of tulle in a light pink, the fabric's floating arrangement creating a subtle gradation of color. Long formal gloves had been included as well, and I knew just looking at them that they'd be absolutely impossible to put on or even *take off* by myself. Then there were the thin chain accessories; constructed of countless, tiny magic stones in bead form, they glittered like stardust. The entire outfit was so delicate—so delicate that I feared one small misstep would smash it all to pieces.

"You know…" I muttered, "I feel like a mannequin heaped with the Empire's fortunes."

"If you were a real mannequin, you would stand up straight," Solarus said dryly.

At the moment I was standing in my bedroom, facing my dresser. Solarus, my favorite outspoken bodyguard, was kneeling in front of me. She was massaging

my calves as I whined, simultaneously shooting back clever quips. The massage was apparently supposed to prepare me to wear the shoes that came with my outfit more easily, since I wasn't used to them.

Her hands still working steadily, Solarus continued, "As winter approaches, more and more nobles will arrive in the capital for the parliamentary session. In conjunction, dances and other social events will be held more frequently. Functions like these are part of your job as a holy woman, so I recommend that you become accustomed to them rather quickly."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Just the thought makes my stomach hurt."

As I spoke to Solarus, my other maids fluttered about my room, hurrying about their various tasks. One briskly gathered up my long hair and arranged it into a lovely coiffure. I'd forgotten how long it had grown, so I appreciated her diligence on that front. Another maid scurried back and forth, carefully making up my face with fragrant cosmetics.

"Now then, have a look, Lady Monica," Solarus said, leading me in front of my bedroom mirror.

I resisted looking for a moment, afraid of seeing my final form, but when I finally did look at my reflection, I did a double take. The hair, the makeup, the dress, all of it was so over the top that what I saw in the glass was a Monica unknown to me.

Mother and Father in heaven, I wonder what your reactions would be seeing me like this…

"Are…are you sure I won't stand out at the dance?" I said doubtfully. "Doesn't this seem a bit too ostentatious?"

"Your usual mode of dress is much too fashion *unconscious*, milady. You don't even know how to wear makeup, do you?"

"Well, you're not wrong, but…"

Solarus huffed in exasperation. "If this relatively reserved style is enough to shock you, you'll faint when you actually attend the ball. Come, it's time for you to present yourself to His Highness."

“Wait, *what*?! Solarus…!”

She totally ignored my panicked cries, wending an arm through mine. I walked slowly with her to the nearby salon where Richard was apparently awaiting my arrival. I clung onto Solarus for dear life as I adjusted to moving around in my new heels.

When we finally made it, Richard’s whole face lit up with a radiant smile when he saw me. “Miss Monica!” he exclaimed, eyes wide, “what a lovely picture you make!”

“Oh, um… Thank you…” I muttered in response, face tinging red.

Richard was as forthright and effusive in his excessive praise as always, but now I found that I suddenly had a difficult time meeting his eyes. This was mostly because I wanted to return his compliment right back to him. With his hair brushed back, Richard’s handsome face was on full display, making him look even more dashing than usual.

His vivid, ultramarine military uniform was pressed in neat lines, the high collar emphasizing Richard’s broad shoulders and narrow waist. The length of his sleeves matched his gloves exactly, and the amount of skin exposed at the base of his throat was just the right amount. Every aspect of his outfit only served to further enhance his masculine beauty. He was perfection defined. *He’s an objet d’art come to life.*

I stared at Richard in a daze as the specimen himself gave a nod of utmost satisfaction. “I knew my judgment wouldn’t fail me,” he said with a grin. “I was absolutely confident that a pale-colored dress would complement you best, Miss Monica.”

“Richard, *you* chose this for me?” I demanded, head suddenly spinning.

“Of course, I did,” he said, face deadly serious. “As if anyone else has that right.”

He said it so matter-of-factly that my face immediately went up in flames. Richard took advantage of the moment to draw close to my side, holding out an opened hand. He watched me patiently, fully subsumed in his imperial crown prince mode.

I gave a squeak of terror. “I— Wh-What do you want?!”

Richard’s lips quirked. He glanced pointedly at his still-empty hand and back to me. “Let us be off, my saintess.”

“Oh…” I gasped. “Oh, yes, now I see what you mean. Y-Yes, right.”

Yes, I absolutely, positively knew that he only gave me his hand to escort me, I told myself firmly. *Whyever else would he extend his hand to me in such a manner?*

But when I tentatively reached out, placing my fingers on his thickly callused palm, which was so at odds with his boyishly handsome face, my heart went wild. Its heavy, fast beats filled my chest. *Badump. Badump.*

Gah, he’s entirely to blame if I expire from a heart attack! That face… His charm… No one was immune, least of all me. *Vexing man.*

WE took a carriage to a hall located in another part of the castle grounds. Inside the ballroom, people milled around in dazzlingly resplendent attire, dressed to the nines from head to toe. There was so much glitter and flash around us that it felt like a jewelry box had been turned upside down.

Deeper inside the room, Their Majesties sat on thrones raised several steps up from the floor. Everyone in attendance stood in line, waiting for their turn to greet the imperial couple. Nobles chatted with each other jovially as the melody played by the orchestra swelled throughout the room.

When I stepped inside on Richard’s arm, everyone turned at once to look at us, murmuring filling the room.

“Ah, that’s the lady priestess responsible for returning peace to Psyend…” I heard a voice say.

“Indeed?” replied another. “She looks like a normal young woman, so I never would have guessed that was her.”

Most of the gazes directed my way were from men. The women ignored me completely, staring at Richard with great interest instead. This did not surprise me. An escort from the crown prince did not change the fact that I was still a

lowly holy woman of common birth who worked for a living, traveling from place to place to do her job.

For the daughters of the peerage, I wasn't even worthy of their contempt, much less their envy or jealousy. To them, I was simply nothing. I might as well not have existed as far as they were concerned. *Which works out quite nicely for me actually.* I very much appreciated their attitude. If my presence was little more than air to them, then that would make my work a lot easier.

Our conspicuous entrance made, Richard and I strode toward Their Majesties' place on the dais to make greetings of our own. Our conversation was brief and polite, but seeing Their Majesties up close, I didn't like the haggardness in their faces.

The minute this dance is over, I'm treating them with my holy powers, I thought.

Once my turn with the emperor and empress ended, Richard and I parted ways, and I strolled back down the risers and into the main hall. As I walked slowly down the stairs, I watched the people who were heading over to greet Her Majesty, particularly the women. There was a pair of noblewomen consisting of a mother and a daughter, and a young lady accompanied only by an attendant, among other ladies. Some of the women barely even greeted the empress before rushing to a banquet table clustered with seemingly powerful gentlewomen of the ton.

In my capacity as a priestess, I decided to introduce myself courteously to those seated ladies. Just as I suspected, though, they turned out to be members of the six most powerful houses of the Empire. Their oh-so-modest and graceful appearances belied their impudent actions and airs. Their temerity, in front of the empress no less, knew no bounds.

So this is how noblewomen wage war. I shivered thinking about their cutting methods. Once more, this only highlighted how terrible I was when it came to fighting with other women…

Walking away from those sly ladies, I racked my brain on how I could possibly deal with this new battlefront. Once I was back in the main hall, I stood close to a wall and absentmindedly watched everything happening in the room in front

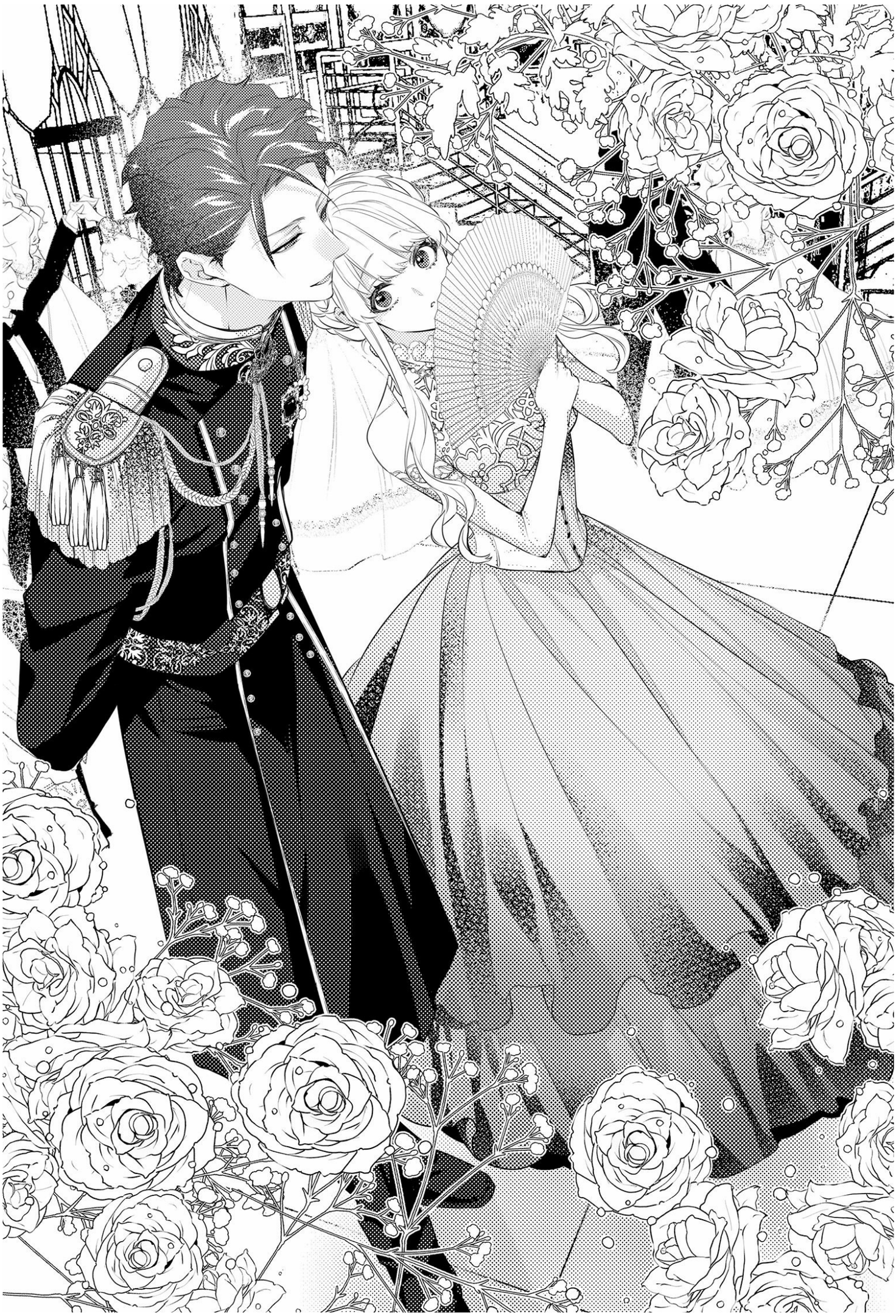
of my eyes. I was deep in concentration when, without warning, my field of vision was obscured by a head of vivid, fluttering red hair. It seemed Richard had snuck up on me, stooping down to peer directly into my face.

“Oh! Oh my goodness!” I cried, pressing a hand to my heart.

“Miss Monica,” he said slowly, “are you doing all right?”

“Y-Yes… I’m all right,” I muttered, covering my mouth with my folding fan to make sure others around us didn’t hear me speaking so informally to him.

Richard leaned in even closer, his clear, crimson eyes boring into me.



“Miss Monica, have you forgotten that we are, in fact, at a ball?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked, blinking at him in confusion.

He straightened back to his full height, then elegantly held his hand out to me. “Miss Monica,” he asked, “won’t you give me the pleasure of this first dance?”

“But I only know the basic steps…”

Richard tilted his head slightly, watching me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “Fear not,” he said, dismissing my fears entirely. “I have you.” He lifted one of my hands into his, then led me over to the dance floor.

When I glanced at the dancers around us, I relaxed a little—the dance floor was full of pairs of young men and women dancing enthusiastically, but with little actual skill. *Oh,* I thought, beginning to smile a little. *I see why he asked me now.* With dancers like that on the floor, my awkward dancing would blend in just fine.

While I surveyed the environment, Richard’s arm had tightened around my waist, drawing me close to him. When I glanced back at him, his face was only centimeters from mine.

I squeaked in shock at his sudden closeness, and his eyes narrowed in amusement. “Miss Monica, are you nervous?”

“Yes,” I replied emphatically. “Yes, I am.”

I stared desperately at Richard’s face, taking in how the chandelier’s dazzling light danced along his long eyelashes and cast shadows under his eyes. It felt surreal to know that right now, I, Monica Regulus, the unholy priestess, was being held in the arms of the imperial crown prince of the Empire, a man as stunning as a sculpture carved from the finest of jewels.

We’re like…chalk and cheese, I thought, admittedly a tad hysterically. *But… which one of us is the chalk, and which one is the cheese…?* The more I considered it, the less I could imagine Richard as either. *Oh, dear, I’ll have to come up with a better analogy then.*

At this point, I was so panicked that rational thought had left me entirely.

Richard seemed to pick up on that, and leaned forward, murmuring soothingly into my ear, “Easy, easy. You’re fine. I’ll lead, so surrender just yourself into my keeping.”

“I…understood…” My mind went blank then. Every time Richard took a step, I naturally did too, and he effortlessly controlled our rhythm.

“I’m going to spin you,” he told me with a grin.

“Ah—”

“Just relax. Give into me.”

Obeying his whisper, I slackened my shoulders, and off my body went. When he whirled me around, I almost felt like I was flying.

“Well done,” Richard purred. His eyelids were half-closed, his flame-colored eyes gleaming from underneath them.

His lead had been so masterful that even I understood how well I’d just danced. It was as if I’d transformed into a well-born lady skilled in the art.

His Imperial Highness is terrifying. The crown prince *is amazing.*

“I sh-should be saying that to you, Richard,” I stammered.

“But, Miss Monica, if you weren’t so used to synchronizing your breathing with mine, our outcome wouldn’t have been nearly as impressive.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean? I’ve never danced like that before in my life.”

“Not dance. I was referring to our usual *bouts*.”

“Oh…!” I finally caught on, then, that he was referring to our regular training regimen. “Hm, I see. So that’s effective for dancing too?”

“Well, I *did* devise my teaching methods to keep rhythm in mind. Just in case you ever needed that particular skill for occasions like this.”

“*What*?!”

After that, we danced a bit longer, chatting back and forth until the song came to an end. I was practically basking in its trailing notes when Richard courteously escorted me back to a chair near the wall where I’d been standing

before. I followed his gentlemanly lead without resistance, my feet practically gliding across the floor.

Nearby, other women were waiting impatiently for their turn to dance with their crown prince, their gazes burning into us. Still, before Richard left me, he brushed his lips across the back of my hand.

Once he'd walked away, a bland feminine voice spoke up from behind my shoulder. "That was quite a number," the voice commented. "You danced well, Lady Monica."

"Solarus!" I gasped, jerking in surprise. "Oh, um…thank you."

I sat there, trying to get a handle on my heart, as she walked away to get me a glass of sparkling water. I watched Richard skillfully play the gallant knight to a number of daughters of the ton while she was gone, that mysterious but wonderful floating sensation still shivering through me.

He truly was an attractive young man, drawing everyone's attention wherever he went. It wasn't just his looks, of course. It was his lustrous, eye-catching auburn hair, his commanding height, and his well-honed physique…all wrapped together with those refined mannerisms that characterized everything he did. Every aspect of him seemed to enhance the beauty of the whole.

There were, of course, other good-looking men in attendance, but they didn't hold a candle to Richard in his splendid military uniform, the one he wore like a second skin. When he danced, when he smiled, when he moved, his intensely captivating presence attracted my eyes like a magnet. I saw no man except him.

Everyone else was reacting exactly the same as me. It didn't matter if they were man, woman, young, or old. The women were a given, but to have even the men spellbound? It was only more proof of his powerful charm. Even the knights stared at him with shining, fervent admiration, their adoration of their beloved commander knowing no bounds.

I let out a long sigh. "We really do live in such different worlds, Richard…"

As I gazed at him, a man who sparkled like the brightest gem, I felt afresh how distant he was from me. The accompanying sting of sadness that followed this knowledge was nothing new to me. Most of the time, I was able to forget the

disparities in our stations because of our closeness. But just because we used each other's names so easily didn't erase the fact that his position as imperial crown prince lifted him far above the realm of normal people, while my feet were still firmly on the ground.

How foolish of me to feel sad when I'm not even worthy of him, I thought, castigating myself.

But before I could descend any further into my self-hatred, a voice broke into my thoughts, offering me a libation. "Lady Monica, would you care for a glass of champagne?"

I looked up to see Darius, also in his formal military uniform, standing at my side. His fringe still covered his forehead, so I guessed that it must have been a personal rule for him to leave his hair like that.

"His Highness Richard is enchanting, isn't he?" he asked giddily, his sharp blue eyes peeking through the layer of black forelocks falling over his brow.

"Y-Yes," I agreed, "he is."

Darius let out a frustrated sigh. "I wish I was a noblewoman too. Then I could twirl around in his arms and shock everyone by giving them the performance of their lives."

I just blinked at him, completely lost on how to reply. He didn't seem to need any feedback from me, though, as he leaned forward and continued, "Do you want to know something interesting, Lady Monica? There aren't many young women of the peerage who can keep up with His Highness when he dances seriously."

"Really?" I asked, puzzled. "But I thought he was so easy to dance with."

"That's because it's *you*, Miss Monica," Darius said, eyes twinkling.

"Me…? What do you mean?"

"Well, with your breaths in sync, the way you two moved was so seamless. I thought you two made the perfect match."

I snorted. "Your first statement may be on the mark, but I'm not so sure about the second…"

“*Except*,” Darius stressed, “I’m the one who said you two look good together and you know very well that I don’t lie. Which means you can trust my word, yes?”

I let out a thoughtful hum. “I guess I don’t have an argument for that.”

The elegant song that had been playing in the background wound to a close, and I could hear the orchestra shuffling around as they began their preparations for the next tune. In that interval, Darius stretched his hand out to me. “Since we’re here, won’t you dance with me too, my lady? I’m technically a bachelor knight as well, you know.”

“Oh, my,” I said, brows raising. “Are you *sure* you want to partner with me?”

He bowed his head, canines flashing. “It would be my honor.”

“Then it would be my pleasure,” I replied, placing my hand on his thick, callused palm as his fingers wrapped around mine.

Darius guided me to the dance floor, where I once more had the chance to swirl around among the rest of the aristocracy. Unlike Richard’s complete lead, Darius’s was gentle and polite, almost like he was wordlessly instructing me on the basics with his touch. All too soon, the song came to an end, and we had no choice but to make our way off the dance floor.

As we neared the edge, I nudged Darius with my elbow. “Thank you, Darius, really,” I told him. “That was quite fun.”

“No, no, I should be thanking *you* for allowing me to dance indirectly with His Highness,” Darius replied, a goofy smile on his face.

“I-Indirect dance…? I…*what*?”

“Ah-ha, speak of the devil. Looks like His Highness is coming over here because he saw that you danced with me.”

When I turned around to look in the direction Darius was facing, I saw Richard striding rapidly toward us. *Fast as the wind, isn’t he?* I thought wryly, watching as he practically teleported across the room.

His feet came to a stop mere inches from Darius’s, and I noticed he was frowning slightly at his knight. “Are you enjoying yourself?” he asked me.

“I am,” I said. “It must be tough for you out there, Richard.”

“More than you can imagine,” he said with a sigh. “There’s nothing I can do about it though, since social etiquette dictates that I can’t dance twice with the same partner.” He glanced over at me, his face lightening a little as he met my eyes. “If not for that blasted rule, I would want to dance only with you, Miss Monica.”

“Oh,” I said softly, startled. “Truly?” I abruptly felt embarrassed for some reason and cast my eyes down to the floor.

“I have one small favor to ask, Miss Monica,” Richard said, his voice serious. “Please don’t dance with anyone else, all right? Your turn around the floor with Darius was more than enough for the sake of appearances.”

I nodded without a second thought, overpowered by the force of Richard’s unusually strong request.

“I…I understand.”

Honestly, if I didn’t have to dance anymore, then all the better for me and my uncoordinated feet. But a thought suddenly struck me. *What do these aristocratic ladies think, seeing us chatting like this? Hm.* In the end, I shrugged my misgivings off. I doubted there was a reason for me to concern myself with that, considering I was just a lowborn priestess and all.

“Miss Monica, are you tired?” Richard asked, staring at me intently with his flame-colored eyes.

Something about the intensity of his gaze made me feel like he could see right through me, all the way down to my heart. It frightened me a little, so I instinctively avoided meeting his eyes.

“No, no, it’s nothing…” I reassured him. “And anyway, Richard, there are more young ladies waiting restlessly for you to ask them for a dance. Go on.” He raised an eyebrow imperiously at my reply, but eventually gave in with a resigned shrug. Even that single movement was graceful.

“I’m only going because I have no choice,” he declared. “Darius, Solarus, I entrust Miss Monica to you two.”

“Understood,” they both instantly replied.

Once Richard had walked away—with me staring at his back in a daze the whole time—I suddenly remembered what he’d said to me earlier. “He…said that…if it wasn’t for that rule…he’d only want to dance…with me…” I mumbled, breath coming fast.

No, no, no, I can’t get carried away, I chastised myself. *He must have just meant that I make an easy dance partner. Yes, that must be it.* For some reason, though, these thoughts provoked a strange mix of both happiness and sadness within me.

In any case, I told myself firmly. *That is neither here nor there.*

The important thing was that I had achieved the night’s goal, despite my exhaustion and the compounding factors of an outfit and shoes I wasn’t used to wearing.

I’d now gotten a good idea of the current social and political situation around Her Majesty.

HER Majesty, Empress Tundica, was the daughter of the Duke of Sowles. The Sowles family didn’t hold nearly as much political power as the three imperial houses, but it was nevertheless an old line with a prestigious history. Dating back to the Empire’s founding, it had originally been established as a branch of the imperial family.

Though the Duchy of Sowles wasn’t very large, over the years its caretakers had worked diligently to improve the domain’s soil. As a result of their efforts, the land produced many high-quality grains for harvest, leading to its renown as a breadbasket region. It was evidently a well-protected, bountiful land with picturesque views and a myriad of different traditions.

Whenever I went to Her Majesty’s bedchamber to perform my holy treatments on her, one particular painting hanging on a wall always caught my eye. It depicted a specific landscape from her homeland in Sowles—a valley that had been transformed into terraced fields, where ears of wheat waved back and forth in merry little rows, and the sun was setting into a shimmering lake. It

honestly took my breath away.

Unfortunately, in the world of nobility, such beauty meant little. Political influence and wealth were everything. No matter how venerable a house was, if it held onto traditions from cultures that'd been gone for centuries, they were, for better or worse, considered antiquated. So being born and raised in such a family would not gain a person any favors from the other elites.

That being said, I could only imagine everyone's amazement when one of the Sowles daughters was chosen as the empress. Nobody had anticipated something like that occurring, not even the family themselves. Since the beginning, Her Majesty had been treated as a provincial bumpkin by the powerful members of the haut monde. They derided her as someone who knew nothing about what the role of empress entailed.

Nonetheless, Their Majesties had now been married for eight years. I was of the opinion that Her Majesty excelled both as an individual and as the empress. But the woman herself felt ashamed and inferior because the peerage's status quo revolved around the noblewomen from the six houses. They dictated the social norms, including what, and more importantly, *who* were acceptable. And those women found Her Majesty lacking.

Frustratingly for the empress, those noblewomen's attitudes and their ties with each other in their lofty little circles exerted a strong influence on the men in the aristocracy as well. Asserting herself and wresting control would be a tremendous opportunity for Her Majesty to prove herself as an empress worthy of the name. But that particular skill was a weak point for her. Naturally, as a saint of low birth, I was even worse at it.

"ARGH… I hate this."

It was just after lunch, and I was in my room going through the rosters of people Her Majesty had invited to the events she hosted, as well as all the records of the various dinner parties that had been held at the castle. The work was so far out of my field of expertise, that I couldn't help but groan in frustration.

Born and raised a commoner, I had always been surrounded by people of my

own so-called class. Even after I'd started working, my daily life still consisted of my peers—whether they be knights, prostitutes, or tavern maids. In such an environment, disputes were easy to resolve—you just marched up to the offending party and made your feelings clear with a few swings of a fist. Having grown up in that sort of world, I couldn't make heads or tails of how noblewomen fought.

It didn't help that I was working while sprawled out on my bed. The data was so boring that I almost found myself falling asleep a few times.

I yawned widely, but was saved from my drowsiness by a knock on the door a beat later. Solarus opened it and peeked her head inside.

"Apologies for the intrusion, Lady Monica," she said, "but I come bearing a message from His Highness. 'If you have reached an impasse with your work, how about a round of the usual?'"

"Oh, yes, that sounds perfect! I'll get ready right now." I jumped off the bed, blood suddenly pumping. *Times like these definitely call for exercise. Working my brain while I worked my body should get me through this roadblock.*

WHACK! *Smack! Smack! Whoosh…thwap!*

The explosive sounds of fists making impact echoed in the practice hall, overlaid by my sharp panting. I leaned into a spinning kick, the blow slicing through the air and slamming into Richard's side.

"Hah! Yah! …Raaar!!!"

Richard let me hit him as much as I wanted for some time. But after taking a particularly vicious series of punches from me, his attitude changed. Though he held back, he started lunging at me using knifehand strikes and forced me into a completely defensive position.

Once I realized I was being pinned down, I felt my whole face wrinkle up in dissatisfaction. "Urk! Grrr…" I snarled. "I'm nowhere near done!"

I reached out and captured one of Richard's hands, and, seizing my chance, let fly a roundhouse kick sure to bring him down.

Slap.

I looked down, realizing only when I saw my foot in Richard's grasp that the light sound of flesh hitting flesh had come from my ankle being caught. I flushed in frustration, but waited for Richard to let me go, like he always did so expediently. But this time…he just didn't. He kept me frozen in place, studying me intently as I started to struggle.

"Um… Richard…? *Hello*…?"

"That was dull," he said firmly.

I blinked up at him in genuine confusion. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He finally released my leg, sending me a stern look. "It means that we're done for the day, Miss Monica. Your fatigue has dulled your movements too much. If we continue, you'll only injure yourself."

I jerked in surprise, then immediately laughed too loudly in my attempt to gloss over his words. "Fatigue?! A holy woman doesn't know the meaning of the word!"

"Miss Monica," Richard sighed disappointedly, his arms held akimbo as he stared moodily at my face. A lecture was definitely forthcoming—he gave off the same aura as a mother hen about to scold her chick.

Oh, no, I moaned internally. *Am I ever going to get an earful now.*

"It does not matter how much you can rejuvenate your body," Richard said sternly. "You know *very well* that healing fatigue that is accumulated over long periods is difficult to effect, even with your saintly abilities. Not to mention that the healing you *do* accomplish will enact an even greater cost on you. Weren't you the one who told me so yourself, Miss Monica?"

"Yes, Richard, you're quite correct…" I mumbled.

"You can't keep overdoing it like this."

"Yes, sir," I replied, voice meek.

"Good," Richard said, relaxing and bestowing me with his usual sunny smile. "That's what I wanted to hear. Now, Solarus is in the next room preparing to massage you. I'm ordering you to go submit your body to her care."

“Thank you…sir,” I said weakly.

I turned and headed to the connecting door he’d indicated, slowly pulling it open. When I peeked inside, I found a dark room with no windows. The walls, floor, and furniture were all made from a fragrant wood that appeared to be designed to create a calming effect in their surroundings, and despite it being midday, the only illumination inside the space seemed to be the flickering of a scattering of candles. A few of them heated shallow metal dishes filled with perfumed oils, the lovely scents adding to the room’s tranquil atmosphere. I took a single breath, and my muscles immediately began to loosen.

“This…is the scent of layla-layla, isn’t it?” I murmured to myself.

Layla-layla was a flower that grew in the south. It was said to elicit an aphrodisiac effect, and its petals were typically scattered in a newlywed couple’s bedchamber on their wedding night. The sweet, gentle scent supposedly relaxed a nervous bride, naturally leading her to accept her groom’s advances boldly. In any case, it smelled wonderful.

Solarus gestured at the bed from her spot further into the room, urging me to lay down now that everything was set up. Her lips tilted up slightly as I excitedly stretched out on top of it.

An evil little giggle snuck out of the corner of her mouth. “Like so many others, it seems your body has also become unable to thrive without my services, hm?” she said in a low, husky voice.

I gave a little laugh. “I don’t like your phrasing since it can be easily misunderstood, and yet…I find that I can’t deny your words either…”

Solarus knelt by the bedside, and with a strong squeeze, began massaging the back of one of my legs. Slowly but steadily, a delightful piercing sensation worked its way throughout my body.

“Thank you as always, Solarus,” I sighed, melting into the bed.

“Remember, if your body stiffens, your mind will cease functioning too,” she reminded me. “So entrust yourself to my care, and please rest in the meantime.”

I closed my eyes, accepting her kind offer. Solarus continued massaging, and

the wonderful pleasure-pain I experienced from her working on my legs spread to the rest of my body, completely relaxing my muscles. I could feel my blood circulation improving too. Her forceful fingers traveled from the backs of my upper thighs to the backs of my knees.

"*Ahhh*… Good…this is so…good…"

Even though I couldn't see her, I could tell Solarus rolled her yes. "Lady Monica, you need to expand your vocabulary."

There was no denying the talent in Solarus's hands—she knew exactly where to push and how much pressure to apply. Not to mention the maid's small, soft hands felt particularly good running over my skin. I let out a long breath, all the air slowly easing from my lungs. Spellbound by the sensations, I allowed Solarus to make putty out of me.

"Mmph… Ahh… Right…there… *Nhhh*…"

Any idle thoughts vanished, buried below the sensation of the strange pleasure-pain coursing through me. As I floated in an almost dream-like state, memories abruptly started popping up inside my mind. The first was one I'd nearly completely forgotten.

Oh, that's right, I thought, dazed. *I'm not disconnected completely from the women's world after all.*

The Holy Woman Learning Academy I had attended had been an all-girls boarding school, and had of course been filled to the brim entirely with women. My experiences there had been both academic *and* social, in a sense. Plus, there was also all the time I'd spent at the palace in Kophe's capital city when I had been engaged to Prince Medaikonar. I had participated in a number of social gatherings with noblewomen as part of my learning and duties.

So why was it that I hadn't worried about my ability to navigate relationships with other women before now? It certainly wasn't because I hadn't experienced unpleasantness or issues in the past—I very much had. There had been the contemptuous attitudes I was subjected to as a lowly priestess during my time living at Kophe's palace, for one. But it wasn't as if I had experienced something so awful and traumatic there that I had forgotten about it until now.

So, setting aside my time in the dormitory, I focused on my time in the royal palace. I had been a complete pariah there. And the question was, *why*?

I let out a little gasp as Solarus turned me over, pressing her fingers down onto my decolletage. *Does that part get stiff too?* I wondered, feeling curious. I reached up and kneaded the area with my own hands, finding quickly that my muscles there were indeed tense.

But, this exploration over, I collapsed back into the softness of the bed. With every push of Solarus's fingers, my mind got clearer and clearer, until all of a sudden, I knew *exactly* why I had never really troubled myself to build relationships with other women.

It was all because of my diverse, alienating sense of self. I was a regular person and a commoner, yes, but I was simultaneously an outsider, a powerful holy woman who lived on the fringes of society. As a commoner, my refinement and etiquette were much too crude for me to interact easily with or feel at home by high-born young ladies. And yet I wasn't meek and retiring as a commoner was expected to be, because I was proud of my achievements as a holy woman, and of all my labors I'd suffered through thus far in my profession. Those things had taught me how to be confident in myself.

No matter how hurtfully others had spoken about me, or how horribly they had treated me, I had never lost my self-respect. I had never allowed myself to be drowned by filthy feelings. I'd always been able to maintain my composure and live my life by my own rules. And *that* was why I had never been all that concerned about my lack of relationships with other women.

So what if we applied that mindset to Her Majesty? What would happen if the empress openly and confidently took charge and showcased her authority?

I grinned. *I think we have a solution.*

The force of Solarus's hands gradually faded, like a tide slowly pulling back into the ocean. Once she was done, she began to politely wipe the aroma oil from my body. I opened my eyes, feeling refreshed, and our gazes met.

"Did you have an epiphany?" she asked, lips twitching just slightly.

"*I did*." I sounded self-assured even to my own ears. "I feel so much lighter

too. Thank you, Solarus.”

Indeed, not only had I had an epiphany—I’d found a solution to one of Her Majesty’s most pressing problems. Though she might have been overpowered by pedigree and cliques, at the end of the day, Her Majesty was still *the empress*.

This revelation crowded out every other thought in my mind, and as soon as I was cleaned up, I went dashing out of the small room and back into the training hall, where Richard was still working through his own training regimen.

“Thank you, Richard!” I called. “My mind is clear and my body is light as a feather!”

“Hm… Good. You look much better now,” he said. But then, a rueful smile worked its way across his lips. “Oh, and Miss Monica? You are hereby prohibited from undergoing massage therapy *anywhere* but here.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you’re much too loud when you’re under Solarus’s influence.”

Oh, I thought, horrified. *Oh dear.*

I had forgotten to control my voice, because the pleasure had completely obliterated any kind of rational thought in my brain. Now I had to wonder how much he had overhead, and what sort of sounds I’d made.

“I…I’ll be careful…moving forward…” I mumbled in a strangled whisper, wanting desperately for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

SEVERAL days later, I was with the empress, watching as wheat was harvested from a plot in the castle gardens. This particular harvest was quite precious as it would be used as an offering in a prayer festival unique to the religion of Chasselé.

“You must be terribly busy, Monica,” Her Majesty said guiltily, “what with my brother-in-law dragging you here, there, and everywhere. And having to deal with our healing treatments too…”

“Oh, it’s not a bother at all,” I reassured her. “Though I very much appreciate

your consideration. You and His Majesty granted me a place to live and the opportunity to continue working. I no longer have a home to return to, so I'm eternally grateful to you both."

"You say that, yet we're the ones being spoiled by your kindness." Her Majesty laughed softly, her eyes crinkling at the corners, before she directed her gaze far off into the distance. "I hope I can fulfill my duty soon and give birth to an heir…"

Even as she narrowed her eyes against a gust of wind that shook the ears of wheat, the empress lowered her anguished gaze toward her stomach. My heart squeezed in pain at the sorrow on her face.

Recently, I had deliberately increased the amount of time I spent with Her Majesty in order to further her treatment. My stress management strategy for her consisted of a few straightforward tactics.

First, I decided that Her Majesty required a moderate amount of exercise. We took walks around the castle grounds in the mornings, bathed in the light of the rising sun. It was lovely to move our bodies while being graced with such beautiful surrounds, and the wind always felt cleansing as it buffeted our sweaty forms. I'd chosen this form of exercise specifically because it was important to make time and consciously distance ourselves from the mental fatigue of daily life.

Second, I thought a conversation partner Her Majesty could speak to honestly would do her good. It was probably strange of me to say this of myself, but in all seriousness, I was most likely the only person in the entire Empire who Her Majesty could talk to without restraint. I had zero ties to any noble families, nor was I burdened with my own family name to safeguard. I was just a stray saint.

And this particular stray saint intended to alleviate the empress's stress at the same time as I built a bond with her. Once I'd accomplished that, I'd be able to move on to the next step in my plan. And so, today I was accompanying Her Majesty on a stroll, which had quickly become a habitual activity for us.

"That reminds me, Your Majesty," I said suddenly. "I tried making that sweet you gave me the recipe for a few days ago."

"Did you now?" Her smile was so bright and open and joyful that she almost

seemed like a young girl to my eyes. “What did you think?”

“It was so easy to make and delicious, too!” I gushed. “Although my sugar designs were terrible since I had a hard time drawing them.”

“I’m so happy to hear you liked them. I really didn’t expect you to try your hand at it so soon.” The empress brushed back her heavy black tresses as her eyes sparkled with delight. “You see, I’m not allowed to putter in the kitchen freely. Plus, I’ve never been able to tell anyone about the foods I love from home because I was afraid to be ridiculed for my ‘country recipes.’ So sometimes in secret, I’ll have the maid I brought along with me from Sowles cook for us. His Majesty and Richard are the only ones I treat to those dishes.”

“Then I’m truly honored that you shared the sweet and the recipe with me as well,” I told her, inclining my head slightly.

Now that I thought about it, I recalled Richard bringing out confections from Her Majesty’s homeland at one of our teatimes. *I wonder if that was a top-secret recipe too…?*

“Think nothing of it,” Her Majesty said firmly. “Now, Monica, you’re the daughter of a farmer, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I agreed.

“How wonderful!” Her Majesty said, her voice thick with longing. “Growing up in my homeland, I spent my life much the same as our vassals’ daughters. I raced through the fields on horseback by myself and baked all sorts of sweet things with my friends using the fruits and nuts we collected. I loved the festivals in our domain in particular. Back when I lived there, my hands had gotten rough from honest work and my skin had tanned from all the time I spent out in the sun.”

“Wow,” I said, my brows raising. “I would never have guessed that about you.”

“I’ll have you know I was quite a hoyden in those days,” Her Majesty said, winking at me. Her expression overflowed with playfulness.

I couldn’t help but dwell on how wonderfully animated Her Majesty was at this very moment. It was a stark contrast to how pale and subdued I’d seen her

look when seated within the palace at official functions.

Reexamining the empress's position with my newfound knowledge, I abruptly felt as if I understood Her Majesty much more intimately. For a young lady like her to be plucked out of her natural environment and thrown headfirst into the role of empress… Of course, she would have incurred a monumental amount of stress. Her infertility issue made even more sense to me now.

"The days when I ran through our wheat fields…they truly feel like they were during another lifetime entirely." As she contemplated the wheat field before us, heartbreak and grief suddenly washed over Her Majesty's face. "Monica…" she said softly, "do you know why I became the empress?"

"No," I admitted. "I don't…"

After a moment, she began murmuring quietly, almost like she was talking to herself. "As I believe you're already aware, my family, the Sowles line, was originally a branch of the Belktrius dynasty. Even so, over the passing of centuries, we've become the smallest of all the branches as well as the most distant in blood to the imperial line. We aren't a lineage that produces empresses in abundance."

She seemed to sink deeply into thought, as if reflecting on her memories. Then, she softly confided in me, "During His Majesty's accession celebration many years ago, he proposed to me… Unofficially, of course."

And with that, she began to relate to me her recollections of the beginning of her and His Majesty's tender love story, which had also marked the start of their tremendous tribulations.

THIRTEEN years ago, His Majesty had only been fifteen years old. Still struggling to recover from the shock of his father's sudden demise, he'd been nevertheless forced to attend a party to celebrate his ascension. He'd found the affair decidedly oppressive, especially considering how much of a nightmare the rest of his life had been at the time. Every moment of the day had been filled with someone else's hounding, someone else's unspoken demands.

Who would become the regent? What of all the other official government

positions? But perhaps the biggest question lingering in the aristocracy's minds had been who the young emperor would choose as his empress.

For the fourteen-year-old Tundica Sowles, trembling with nerves, the party venue had been a terribly frightening place, especially since the accession had doubled as her high society debut. In her bewildered state, she had an audience with His Majesty, then danced with so many partners their faces became a blur. Still, throughout the draining night, she kept her head held high and a smile pasted on her face through sheer force of will.

"I'm exhausted…" she'd muttered.

Thinking to get a breath of fresh air outside, Tundica had slipped out of the hall alone, seeking a terrace. She had left her attendant behind. But as anyone would expect, she quickly became lost in this palace, which she was visiting for the first time in her life. Her steps carried her to a quiet place so far from the festivities that she couldn't even hear the orchestra's music anymore.

And then, from a room with a slightly ajar door, she'd heard the sounds of stifled weeping. Curious, Tundica had snuck a glance inside, and been surprised to find His Majesty staring up at the full moon, tears rolling copiously down his face.

"Your Majesty…" Tundica had said without thinking, "why are you crying?"

The emperor had turned with a jerk, clearly flustered by her question and her general presence. "Um…uh…well…"

His Majesty had looked so young and helpless to Tundica, with his long, loosely plaited red hair and his face stained with tears. He'd reminded her of her younger brother back home. He was a reserved crybaby who refused to let go of their mother, but he was a gentle, thoughtful little boy, nevertheless. She'd found herself wondering if the emperor possessed a similar disposition.

"That was certainly unbecoming of me, hm?" the emperor had said, wiping away his tears and attempting to smooth over the situation. "I just felt so devastated when I realized that my ever-dependable father would never again be able to comfort me in difficult times like these."

As he rambled on at a fast pitch, his words almost blending together, Tundica

drew near him and gently wiped his tears with a handkerchief. Then she'd sat next to him and smiled, just like she would have at her younger brother.

"May I stay here with you?" she'd asked.

"But…"

"Don't worry. I'm nowhere near worthy enough to become the empress, so I very much doubt you'll be rebuked even if anyone sees us together. I'm sure I'll still get an earful, but I don't mind. It's not in my nature to leave someone alone when they're crying."

The emperor's kind eyes had widened in surprise. Moments later, he'd choked out in a tearful voice, "Thank you." His shoulders had slumped. "Aside from my younger brother, I didn't think there would be anyone else now who would worry about me."

"Oh, that's terrible…" Tundica had murmured fitfully.

"It is what it is," the emperor had replied with a sad smile. "That's just what it means to be an emperor… So it is what it is."

"Your Majesty…you should remember that everyone experiences loneliness from time to time. Why do you think that even gods and goddesses seek relationships with each other, creating families and new bonds? You're no exception, emperor or not."

The young emperor had gazed at Tundica in wide-eyed surprise as he took in her words. He'd looked like he'd had a divine revelation after being awoken from a nap by the sun's rays.

"Who…who are you?" he'd asked. "Won't you tell me your name?"

Tundica had bowed her head. "Tundica Sowles, at your service."

"Tundica," the emperor had murmured reverently. "That's the name of the goddess of the winter frost, that beautiful goddess who sparkles beneath the earth, never to be seen by a living soul… It suits your kindness well."

AFTER that, the young emperor and the debutant duke's daughter were engaged in less than a year. Five years later, they had married at the ages of

twenty and nineteen, respectively.

Their marriage had been a bolt from the blue to the six houses as well as the Sowles family. It had been the young emperor's first act of self-assertion. Up until then, he had been obediently adhering to the political course parliament had set for him.

High society had been in an uproar, but it wasn't as if any social conventions had been broken. The Sowles line had existed since the Empire's founding, and moreover, Her Majesty's father was the *Duke* of Sowles, so no formal objections could be raised to the match. Ultimately, both the three imperial houses and the three borderland houses had no choice but to recognize the marriage.

In exchange for their public approval, though, the six houses had secured a secret agreement with His Majesty. If in ten years no child was born, then he would be forced to choose a consort from one of the six families. And because the emperor lacked strong support back then, he couldn't defy their condition. This was before Richard had renounced his claim to the throne, so the six houses at the time could have easily and forcefully replaced the emperor with his younger brother.

Only two years remained of the ten-year deadline.

"I dearly, dearly wish to see my husband hold our child in his arms. But…" Her Majesty pressed her lips together tightly, containing her sorrow.

My chest tightened at the sight of her. *I'll do what I can for her, for them, one thing at a time.* "Your Majesty. Regarding the upcoming official function, might I be so forward to offer a suggestion?"

I knew I wouldn't find a better time to tell her, so I hardened my resolve and broached the subject. The sudden request had the empress blinking her large, dark eyes in confusion.

"Please, do tell," she said, seeming slightly curious.

"It concerns the charitable enterprises you have supported since becoming empress. I believe it is well past time to make it public knowledge throughout the Empire."

Her expression grew even more perplexed as she listened to me. “I… Though the words ‘charitable enterprise’ may have a nice ring to them, I am in fact only doing my part to aid in the imperial obligation of eliminating monsters. When our combat efforts aren’t enough to prevent losses to our citizens, it’s only natural for me as the empress to provide succor however I can for our people in need…”

Her Majesty’s virtuous mindset was made abundantly clear by her words. Though she considered herself a failure for not being able to absorb and execute every facet of her imperial education, I thought she was wrong. Because all I saw before me was a paragon of an empress.

But sadly, sincerity alone wasn’t enough to encourage people to follow a person. I’d decided that I wanted her to use Richard as an example, since he possessed such a powerful appeal. He didn’t hide his deeds behind humility. No, he audaciously made his tremendous exploits as both the imperial crown prince and knight commander of the special forces known far and wide. By doing that, he captured not only his own subordinates’ hearts but the people’s too. His wildly overflowing confidence in himself was exactly what Her Majesty needed as well.

“I applaud your viewpoint that you’re only fulfilling your duties as the empress. But may I point out something? Should your achievements in service of the nation be heard throughout the Empire’s corners, it would strengthen the foundation of His Majesty’s reputation as well. There is no harm in appealing to the people through your good deeds.”

“I’m just not sure…” Her voice trailed off timidly as she turned her attention once more to the wheat field.

When Her Majesty remained silent, she appeared every bit the regal empress. But when she spoke, even now it was clear she remained the obedient duke’s daughter. Those around her took advantage of her nature, so they never gave her the appropriate counsel she needed, and they never bothered to actually engage her in conversation. The unfortunate result of that was Her Majesty’s presence being as invisible as the air itself.

“What if spreading such news brings me *too* much renown? I might incur the

six houses' displeasure. Wouldn't that make more trouble for His Majesty?"

"You bring up a very good point and to that I say, let's discuss this in-depth with others we can trust. I firmly believe that His Majesty would support any effort to celebrate your successes, Your Majesty. I'm sure he wants the world to know what you're capable of."

"Do you truly think so…?" she asked slowly.

The reality was, Her Majesty managed a shockingly large amount of philanthropic work. She financed numerous organizations that took care of children who'd been orphaned by monster attacks. She also provided regular and ongoing supplies of food and other rations to areas that needed them. That wasn't even mentioning the financial backing she provided for rebuilding schools. And those were only a few examples of the projects she was involved in.

It seemed Her Majesty's allotment of the national budget and her dowry comprised the bulk of her capital. Since her marriage, she had only purchased the bare minimum of necessities in terms of clothing, cosmetics, and other such miscellany. She worked so hard to be frugal with her money that she relied almost entirely on magical equipment instead of maids. She even fretted over the expenses incurred by physical examinations and the medications related to her infertility therapy. But I reassured her that those sums were absolutely pocket change compared to the outrageously lavish spending of the queen of Kophe.

And still, the vast majority of the so-called nobility continued to disdain her as just some backwater empress. All because she thought exposing her accomplishments was akin to boasting. That was the very reason she'd decided to stay quiet instead of speaking of all the work she was doing. I thought it depressingly unfortunate that her light had been hidden for so long. *What a waste.*

"We won't leave a single stone unturned when we promote your great deeds!" I cried, my fingers curling into determined fists. "Just trust me. This will benefit His Majesty as well as any future princes and princesses."

"Monica…"

“Both His Highness and I are your allies, Your Majesty, so *please*, I beg of you to agree to this campaign.”

The empress contemplated the wheat field in silence. When she looked up, I glimpsed a newfound determination shining in the depths of her jet-black eyes.

WE struck while the iron was hot. A few days later, the empress and I met with Lady Louise and one other lady-in-waiting. Our purpose for meeting was to discuss Her Majesty’s upcoming event schedule.

There was already a scrumptious spread on the table prepared by some maids. I could smell fragrant black tea as well as fresh, still-warm scones. A variety of multi-colored jams accompanied the scones. *Hmm,* I mused, *I wonder if I have enough time to try them all…*

Early afternoon had fallen in the luxurious imperial palace, and a beautiful garden was visible through the windows of the conference room. The empress and her ladies-in-waiting sat frozen, spines ramrod straight in front of the beautiful spread of food in front of them. On the surface, they presented an eye-catching visual, just like a painting. But unfortunately, this was real life and the charged tension crackling in the air almost hurt.

We march on regardless! I cried internally, pumping my fist. *Huzzah!*

The first of the ladies was Lady Louise, also known as Her Majesty’s mistress of the robes. She was a plump older woman who wore glasses and who also scared me a wee bit, but I knew she had a good heart because she’d watched over the empress as a second mother for many years. She had been with Her Majesty since the empress was a child, having been an attendant to her during their time in Sowles. Not including me, of the four women in attendance, Lady Louise had the lowest rank in the elite’s hierarchy. She was also the one I always consulted with on matters regarding the empress.

The most highly ranked lady at the table—beyond the empress of course—was the first lady of the bedchamber. Her work primarily involved drafting Her Majesty’s schedule of official business. The other court lady who had joined us today was her assistant. Both of them came from distinguished aristocratic families.

Lady Louise gave me a silent prompt, and I then turned to face everyone and began my presentation. “Thank you very much for coming. As I’m sure you’re aware, the main topics on today’s agenda concern Her Majesty’s charitable enterprises as well as her upcoming official visits. Now then let’s get right to it.”

After my introduction, I used a mountain of the complicated language and phrases that noblewomen preferred. In short, I did my best to convince them of my “No stone unturned when advertising Her Majesty’s successes” strategy. They listened carefully to my proposal.

Once I finished talking, the first lady of the bedchamber placed her teacup down with an aggressive *clink* before objecting vociferously, scowling. “I find it absolutely revolting for an empress to flaunt her duties so publicly and audaciously,” she spat.

She was so terrifyingly intimidating that an ordinary person would have run away ages ago, but I expected no less from a woman from the Kaymasheine family, one of the three imperial houses. I also now had a better understanding of how she had kept the empress in check.

But despite her intimidation tactics, Her Majesty kept her silence, her head held high, following my advice to the letter. Earlier today, I’d told her, “Please focus on maintaining your dignity, Your Majesty. Your face should remain impassive, and your posture and attitude regal.”

Thank you for listening, Your Majesty.

Next, I focused my attention on the last woman in the room, the other court lady. She possessed pure white hair cut short, and slender manly features. Appearance-wise, she was the scariest in here.

“What say you, my lady?” I inquired.

“I agree with your plan,” she replied.

The first lady of the bedchamber looked aghast at her subordinate. “What in the world? Have you lost your mind?”

Her expression unperturbed, the assistant continued detachedly, “It has always concerned me that Her Majesty’s contributions have been so tremendously undervalued. Naturally, any sort of vulgar propaganda would only

damage Her Majesty's influence, but carefully crafted publicity and advocacy would in fact be just the medicine to bring peace of mind to the people. Not to mention that those positive feelings for Her Majesty will transfer to their trust in His Majesty's reign."

Beneath the table I made the sign of Faust in triumph, clenching my fist together and pumping it into the air. Incidentally, the sign of Faust originated from a legendary god of war by the same name. The hand motion itself indicates triumph and victory.

The first lady of the bedchamber was certainly not feeling such emotions. She was in an absolute tizzy now, pestering her subordinate tirelessly. "What nonsense is this?" she snarled. "The empress's official duties must be conducted in secret. It would be a serious incident should Her Majesty ever behave in conduct unbefitting of her station outside the palace walls. Do you grasp the potential for public scandal here?"

Unfortunately for the first lady of the bedchamber, her assistant was unfazed. "Which is precisely where we come in," she responded, expression and tone bland. "It is our responsibility to aid Her Majesty with the successful execution of her official duties. Naturally then, crafting a strategy so detailed and thorough that it accounts for the prevention of such *serious incidents* is another part of our jobs. So respectfully, the only nonsense here is your willful misunderstanding of Holy Woman Monica's proposal."

"How *dare* you—?!"

"Her Majesty has been working ceaselessly in her remarkable efforts for almost ten years now, yet hardly a soul knows of what she's accomplished. I can't speak to the situation when she first became empress because I wasn't here then. But I *can* comment on what's been happening since I accepted this role. Frankly, I find this current level of excessive so-called *consideration* for her reputation quite disrespectful."

The first lady's lips trembled in outrage, but her subordinate's unexpected betrayal seemed to have stymied her words. Lady Louise and I exchanged meaningful glances. Though the mistress of the robes still exuded a calm facade, her eyes indicated she secretly jumped for joy. Just like me, she

understood the wind had changed direction, blowing in our favor. *I wouldn't be surprised to see her making the sign of Faust under the table too.*

Enjoying the fruits of my labor in laying the groundwork for this meeting, I turned to look at the ghastly pale face of the first lady of the bedchamber with a brilliant smile. "As an example," I said, "what if Her Majesty wasn't the focal point of one such event? What if, instead, the function was meant to present me, the visiting holy woman, to the people? That way, even on the slim chance something *does* happen, Her Majesty's authority won't be undermined. What do you think? A public discourse like this would also provide the people with concrete details about a holy woman's profession. It would dispel any negative sentiments they harbored about a strange priestess being on friendly terms with the imperial household. I think something like this is necessary for its multifold effect."

But the first lady of the bedchamber refuted my claims with absolute certainty. "*Absolutely not*," she declared, her body shivering with rage. "In that case, there is no point in the empress being there. You can handle that on your own, holy woman. The empress's sole role is to watch over her subjects from on high."

For God's sake. She thought she was being so clever, but I knew exactly what she was trying to do. By coercing Her Majesty into such a hands-off position, it would only reinforce the haut monde's snide comments about her. They'd just keep saying things like, "Her Majesty is just a decoration placed on a pedestal high above us," without repercussion.

It was clear to me that the first lady of the bedchamber wanted the empress to fail, as she always had before. Unfortunately for her, though, today we had her assistant as an ally.

"Assistant lady of the bedchamber, your thoughts," the first lady snapped.

Advance, my lady! I screeched internally. *Bring down the beast!*

The first lady's assistant responded to her superior's imperious order with a cutting glance. "Wouldn't sending the priestess alone to such a gathering only increase the citizens' distrust of the imperial family?" she asked. "To be honest, I find your observation entirely illogical."

“Well, you certainly haven’t been mincing your words today, have you? Perhaps you have a very good reason for wanting Her Majesty to leave the palace?”

“It never ends well for those in glass houses to cast the first stone, first lady. I could ask you the same thing though—pray tell us why *you* are so insistent on confining Her Majesty within the palace? Perhaps there’s something out there you do not wish her to see?”

Fire and ice. Dragon and tiger. The two glared at each other so fiercely that sparks practically materialized. Despite a thin film of cold sweat on her skin, the empress maintained her dignified silence.

That’s the spirit, Your Majesty! Show us your mettle!

I waited a moment, letting the combative silence stretch out, before I cut in with affected cheeriness, “Oh, yes, I just remembered! Regarding the upcoming schedule of visits Their Majesties will be making around the country. During their rounds, if new areas of the Empire require military intervention against monsters, His Majesty himself stated that he would conduct his own reviews of requests for financial and military personnel, specifically the special forces.”

Both ladies gasped in astonishment, turning to face me with eyes wide. I hadn’t informed the assistant lady about this part beforehand either, so she was just as surprised as her superior.

“I would also like to add that Lord Heathcomille has generously contributed to the funds Her Majesty will need for her forthcoming visits to various locations around the empire,” I continued.

“But…why would he do that?” the first lady muttered out loud unconsciously.

“Your guess is as good as mine, my lady. I don’t know the particulars, but His Highness Richard is handling the formalities, so we’re in good hands.”

I had no idea what sort of menacing hold Richard had on his uncle, nor did I particularly care, because the additional funding was *quite* appreciated. The very fact that the Heathcomille family, so blatantly hostile to the emperor, was financially supporting Her Majesty’s endeavors had a far more significant meaning than just the surface value of the money itself. And both court ladies,

especially the first lady of the bedchamber, were well aware of the underlying message.

The two remained silent, one stewing, the other contemplating. Almost in sync, they inhaled and lowered their gazes wordlessly to their respective teacups. As they digested the implications of my announcement, they were calculating how to take advantage of this new information in their own ways.

I signaled to the empress with my eyes. Her Majesty nodded, and then declared in a strong, plucky voice, “Now then, everyone, I’ll thank you to prepare accordingly before my first visit next week. You already have a list of the destinations. First lady of the bedchamber, assistant lady, and…mistress of the robes, I expect each of you to execute your respective obligations. I’m much obliged.”

Her Majesty’s tone brooked no refusal, so the other women quietly assented. Lady Louise’s eyes overflowed with joy, which lit a little sparkle in my own heart.

“Holy Woman Monica,” the empress said, turning to me. Her aura was completely changed—she felt as impressive and regal as was appropriate for her standing. Even the next words out of her mouth were spoken in a suitably assertive voice. “I’m counting on you as well.”

“I will exert myself as you wish, Your Majesty,” I said, curtsying politely as exhilaration flooded through me. “I am yours to command.”

We did it.

IF you were wondering what I meant by “laying the groundwork” earlier, well, wonder no more. I had spent some time before the meeting actually happened to win over the assistant lady of the bedchamber.

As mentioned earlier, the first lady of the bedchamber was from the Kaymasheine family, one of the three imperial houses. In contrast though, the assistant lady was from the Nyshepst family, one of the three borderland houses. So essentially, the two were natural rivals.

“Though we classify the six most powerful houses into two broad categories,

neither designation is a monolith, you see," Solarus had told me before launching into a depth of information on the six houses.

I had quickly learned that currently, the lands under Nyshepst control were fraught with monster invasions from a neighboring country. The creatures were exacting a tremendous toll on the region and its people, so the Nyshepst were in dire straits. Their leaders were at a loss in terms of countermeasures.

"Of the three borderland houses, the assistant lady's family, the Nyshepst, are the most independent, strictly isolating themselves from all other territories as well as the federal government," Solarus had told me. "Though they ostensibly remain powerful, in reality, the family leaders' ability to manage their lands is highly unstable. It's a result of the insect-like monster invasions and the various other problems that arose in concert."

"You know quite a lot about them, don't you, Solarus?"

She gave me a bland look. "Let's just say I have a special friend in their ranks."

"S-Special friend… I see…"

Everyone should have such a well-informed maid.

Armed with that knowledge, I had wasted no time contacting the assistant lady in advance. I'd told her that I would make it a priority to eliminate the monsters in her homeland, as well as build wards to keep them out in the future, if she endorsed my plans for Her Majesty. I had kept it very simple and to the point. As an exceptionally highly ranked holy woman, it had been the strongest trump card I could play against the Nyshepst family. After all, they certainly wouldn't want any of the other nobles to learn of their sinking influence.

Early this morning, I had received a lovely bouquet of flowers sent by the assistant lady. Her unspoken consent to the deal came through crystal clear. In a nutshell, the empress and I had never been on the losing side during the conference. Even when she'd seemed to have the upper hand, the losing side had always contained the first lady of the bedchamber alone.

AFTER everything had been arranged, it was decided that I'd accompany Her

Majesty on her public tour. The Empire was vast, but thanks to the teleportation slate that only the imperial family and their companions were allowed to use, we could return to the palace after just an overnight stay. Regardless of how many sympathy visits and banquets we attended. *Truly, those things are a godsend.*

Today's destination was the southwestern county of Nyera. The imperial teleportation slate was connected to each territory's main castle, so when Her Majesty and I arrived and stepped outside on one of the balconies, the impatiently waiting subjects roared in welcome.

"Your Majesty! Welcome! Welcome to our land!"

A dignified smile on her face, the empress waved to the happy citizens. She had daringly and deliberately chosen to wear one of her favorite dresses with the Sowles family crest for today's working visit. Anything luxuriously imperial would have had a negative impact on the locals here, so clothing characteristic of her homeland would actually raise her popularity.

That was my opinion, at least, as a common holy woman who'd been raised in a rural farming village. I was feeling very confident I was right. *Okay, maybe only slightly confident.*

"It's so heartbreaking…" the empress whispered softly, frowning at the devastation of the region that laid below. "But I'm glad to see that reconstruction is proceeding apace."

It was very clear from our vantage point that this land had been brutally assaulted by monsters, as we could see the destruction that had been wreaked upon the houses and fields. As I too took in the scene, I remembered the day I had lost everything in my own home and my heart bled.

The monster problem was an unabating worry for all nations on our continent. And the Kingdom of Kophe was the only one with a spontaneous, still unexplained existence of holy women to combat that problem.

If I achieved great things as the Empire's first priestess, then my deeds would add to Her Majesty's reputation. I squeezed my hands into tight fists, resolved once more to do my part. For myself, for her, and for the people.

ONCE our luncheon with Count Nyera ended, we headed to the orphanage that was sheltering the children who had lost their families to monster attacks. It was one Her Majesty had been financially supporting for some time now. There were children of all different sorts of dispositions living there, from those who watched us warily from afar, to those who seemed terrified of so many adults they didn't know, to the rare breed who flew at us with jubilant smiles the moment we drew near.

Regardless of their initial reactions, Her Majesty won them all over, even the ones who had initially kept their distance.

When she knelt down to speak to the children eye to eye, a gentle smile on her face, they all slowly began to open up to her. Soon, they were chattering away at her, and shortly after that, she had a passel of children clinging excitedly to her skirts wherever she went.

"Now, now, everyone!" cried one of the staff members, attempting to rein them in, "This is the empress, Her Majesty herself!"

But Her Majesty just shook her head in dismissal, eyes twinkling. "It's fine, really," she said with a smile. "I think of our country's children as my own. Living in the castle as I do, I hardly ever get any chances to play around with any young people, so please, let me spoil them to my heart's content."

Soon, Her Majesty was being peppered with questions from the children. It was only natural—they had never seen the lovely empress before, so they were overflowing with curiosity about her. Her Majesty handled it perfectly, easily welcoming all queries, as well as accepting the children's unreserved hugs.

"Why are you here, Your Majesty?" asked one of the children.

"To see you all," she replied with a smile.

"I'm hungry!" cried a cranky little boy.

"Then I'll make pancakes for you," the empress said with a twinkle in her eye. "Will you all help me?"

"Really? Really, *really*?!"

“I wanna help too!!!”

“Then why don’t we borrow the kitchen then, shall we?” The empress stood up and walked over to the kitchen, tying her hair back as she went. The children followed behind her, clustered around her skirts. As she effortlessly corralled them, I helped the staff carry in the foodstuffs and other cooking materials.

“I want to cook with Her Majesty, too…”

“Me too, meee too!” the children fussed, dancing and shuffling around her excitedly.

I focused my attention on the few children who looked like they had more interest in gamboling around than cooking with Her Majesty. *A bunch of cheeky troublemakers, eh?* I thought with a grin. I shuffled up to them, whispering dramatically, “All right, you lot! While Her Majesty cooks, I’ll be your partner in crime!”

“Ohhh, really? Can you do anything special, miss?” one of them whispered back.

“I’ll have you know a holy woman can do anything,” I told them firmly. “Tag, hide and seek, pick your game!”

“Aaare yooou *suuure*?”

“She said it and she can’t unsay it!”

“I’ll show you how fast I am!” I cried, rolling up my sleeves. “Ready, set, *go*!”

I bolted out into the courtyard, and the children chased after me, shrieking in delight.

A short while later, all the children—whether they’d been cooking with Her Majesty or playing in the yard with me—were back inside the orphanage once again.

All the children were quite ready to have a taste of Her Majesty’s homemade pancakes. As they took their first bites, the sparkle in their eyes transformed, becoming brighter and brighter. That most likely had to do with the light infusion of magical medicine mixed into the water Her Majesty had used for the

pancake batter. The medication's effect was such that it would heal any chronic malnutrition and minor illnesses.

After the impromptu repast, Her Majesty decided to visit the ward hosting the children with injuries. She sat with each one, holding their hands, listening attentively as they talked to her. As I followed her, I frankly couldn't help feeling surprised at how good she was at providing comfort. The way she fit right in so naturally revealed to me she had quite a bit of experience with these sympathy calls.

The noblewomen in the Kingdom of Kophe engaged in various charitable efforts too, but their attitudes were worlds apart from hers. The ladies there always maintained a strict distance with commoners because of their status-obsessed mindsets, and Kophe's social conventions dictated a clear line of separation between classes. I'd assumed that was very much the case for the aristocratic ladies of the Empire as well, but perhaps that was not the case for *all* of them.

Her Majesty was nothing like the nobility that kept themselves distant from the subjects of her charity. Instead, she crouched on the floor, lowering herself so that it was easier to talk to the children face to face. With her big sister aura, she cuddled them close while listening seriously to everything they said. And never once did I glimpse any artifice in her actions.

"The empress truly is such a wonderful individual," I murmured to Lady Louise.

The mistress of the robes puffed up in pride watching the young woman she had raised since their days in the Sowles family home. "All the children born into the Sowles family are taught from an early age that they are only nobles *because* of the vassals who support them. So they must always keep in mind their obligations to their people. Which is why, without fail, the sons and daughters of the Sowles line always make time to visit all citizens whenever their official duties take them far from home. As a result of this teaching, the Sowles household's support from its subjects is quite strong."

"That makes sense…" I said, nodding.

"Lady Monica," Lady Louise said suddenly, her eyes serious and her posture

abruptly straight. “The only thing Her Majesty lacks is confidence in herself. So… until she accepts herself in all of her magnificent glory, as a woman deserving of and right for her station as sovereign, I beg of you to continue lending her your strength.” Lady Louise’s jet-black eyes blazed powerfully from behind her round-framed glasses.

I could only incline my head to her in response and say, “I will do everything I can for Her Majesty.”

AFTER that, I left the state visit in the empress’s hands. I headed out with the knights from the local chivalric order instead, and they gave me a rundown of the region on horseback. The destruction from the monster attacks was tremendous.

From what I knew, monsters came from both land and sea, and only existed to menace people. Researchers were making steady progress in trying to determine the difference between lands prone to monster invasions and lands without any outbreaks whatsoever, but a complete understanding of the problem still eluded them.

In places like Mayga Cieux, where monster outbreaks were a constant occurrence, it was much easier to implement counterstrikes and evacuations. Unfortunately, it was practically impossible to defend against unpredictable monster attacks elsewhere, because they were as common an occurrence as a so-called natural disaster.

My first rule of thumb when aiding in monster subjugation efforts was to first suss out points where they were likely to appear. And so, I did the same thing in this region that I did in all the others. Once I figured out those sites, I set up magical barriers there and offered prayers for divine protection at each house in the vicinity. At the same time, researchers accompanying me collected any and all relevant data. We planned to perform a comprehensive analysis once we returned to the imperial capital.

A holy woman’s protection prayer also enhanced a house’s durability, which meant that not only did it reduce monster damage but was also effective against more minor nuisances, such as pest infestations and roof leaks. If touch

and care were necessary for a child's peace of mind, then realistic countermeasures against monsters were necessary for their adult caregivers' peace of mind. So I tried my best to institute practical defensive methods like these.

As part of that strategy, the next place I went to was an emergency shelter that had been set up in the region. First, I used a preservation spell on their stockpiles of supplies so they wouldn't degrade. Next, I visited the infirmary to double-check the status of the magical medicines.

"It'll be a bit of a rush job, but I'm going to increase the quality of these medicinal reserves with my holy powers," I told the nurses running the infirmary.

"That would be wonderful," they said in return. "Thank you so very much."

With permission thus granted to me, I started off by activating my holy powers and enhancing my own magic. With those preparations done, I went ahead and improved the quality of the medicines. I also provided an explanation to those clustered around me once I finished.

"There are new products being manufactured in Psyend as we speak. Once they're put into circulation around the Empire, they'll have a positive impact on both magical medicines as well as the arcane medical field. Which means medical care in the nation will improve overall as a result."

Everyone buzzed in astonishment. "You're incredible, lady priestess, to remain so unaffected even after activating your special abilities!"

"Do you have an inexhaustible supply of magic?"

They're praising me far too much, I thought, feeling a bit overwhelmed. The thought was so heavy in my mind that when I stood up, I almost ended up collapsing. I quickly grabbed the table to steady myself, then sighed at my foolishness. I'd been so distracted I hadn't kept an eye on my condition.

That being said, now that I was steady on my feet, I found that a jar sitting on top of the table had grabbed my attention.

The clinic doctor, who was standing nearby, looked puzzled as I stared at the cylindrical bottle of medicine in a daze. "Is there something concerning you

about the medicine?" he asked.

"Oh, uh, no!" I cried, face flushing beet red. "Not at all! I-I was just thinking… that, um…it looks…easy to grip."

"I see, so it was the bottle's shape that caught your eye. Do containers like this not exist in the Kingdom of Kophe?"

"Th-They do, they do," I stammered. "There are similar ones, certainly. They're long and thick enough for a woman's hand to just barely envelop, with a slight dip between the…cap and body where you can hook a finger around."

"Lady *Monica.*" Solarus said harshly, moving quickly to my side and snatching the bottle from my hand. Confronted by her cold gaze, I jolted back to reality.

I looked around—*everyone* was looking at me. Cold sweat ran down my skin.

"I expected no less from you, lady priestess," the clinic doctor said, impressed. "To think that your knowledge even extends to things like this."

The others in the room all rubbed their chins in thought, as if thinking quite gravely about my depth of knowledge.

"O-Oh, i-it's nothing. Now then, if you'll excuse me." I forced a smile and beat a hasty retreat out of the infirmary.

Thank goodness for the mechanism blocking my lust, I thought thankfully. If it hadn't been for that, I definitely would have revealed to all and sundry an *appalling* expression.

"Lady Monica, you were aroused, weren't you?" Solarus demanded.

I wilted under her gaze. "Was it that obvious?"

"No. If I wasn't aware of the side effects of your powers, you would have just seemed like an exceedingly serious holy woman."

"Oof. Thank *goodness*…"

My steps were unsteady as that infernal heat continued to bubble up from deep within my body. I shuddered with every sensation, overwhelmed with the feeling of my clothes sliding and whispering against my skin, and the way the breeze wound its way through my legs under my skirt. Even the pill bugs

crawling on the ground around my feet gave me indecent ideas.

One of the staff women had followed me outside, her face creased in concern over me. “Lady priestess, aren’t you tired?”

“I’m fine,” I said firmly. “Please don’t worry. I just used my powers overmuch is all.”

“I don’t understand magic, but even *I* realized that you pushed yourself too much back there. I mean, you look so pale…”

I felt awful for making her worry. Thanks to the special defense mechanism, I apparently only seemed pale to her. In reality though, my face was beet red from sexual arousal.

“I believe you still have a few more places to visit, yes?” she asked gently. “So please make sure not to overdo it.”

I bowed my head in thanks. “Thank you very much for your concern, but I’ll be fine. I enjoy my work, after all.”

I stopped moving for a moment after the other woman left, inspecting the wooden houses around us that had clearly been recently built.

“Solarus, did you know that I lost my entire village to a monster attack? My grandparents, parents, siblings, all of my relatives, are gone. I don’t even have any keepsakes to remember them by. So for everyone in my family that I couldn’t save, I want to help as many as I can now. Because in the end, mother nature herself blessed me with the power of a holy woman.”

“My lady…” Solarus said softly.

But in the next moment we were interrupted, for a group of children who’d been playing nearby came rushing over to us.

“Look! Lady priestess, look! I made a rod out of soil!”

“And I made a round ball! Two of them!”

“Oh, me, oh, my, isn’t that…something else…”

This is bad.

The lust I had managed to tamp down erupted again with a hard and fast

vengeance at the sight of the dirt pole and spheres. I couldn't believe I was losing my sanity over clay toys children had innocently made. Even I had to admit something was seriously wrong with me at this point. *For pity's sake, woman, pull yourself together.*

"Lady Monica, I believe you'll hit your limit soon," Solarus said under her breath.

I agreed with her evaluation, and anyway, the sun had already begun its descent in the sky, so perhaps it was time to call it a day.

"You're right…" I agreed. "Let's go back to Her Majesty, then."

Solarus nodded, then flattened her hand, shaping it into the right shape to use for a knifehand strike. "Understood," she said. "In the worst-case scenario, I'll use this, so be at ease."

"Thank you."

Truly, my gratitude knew no bounds. It was a relief to know that if I was about to do something unconscionable, Solarus would knock me unconscious with a well-placed *thwap* to the jugular.

Soon after that, I mounted a horse and rejoined Her Majesty. She looked positively radiant when I saw her again. It seemed her visits with the children had done a world of good. And no wonder—this sort of contact with the outside world was a necessary and enjoyable change of pace for her, especially because she'd been cooped up in the palace for so long.

And we're going to keep the momentum going.

TWO months had passed since I became Her Majesty's companion on her official state tours within the nation. The leaves turned honey yellow as the harvest season came to a close, and my priestess attire changed as well, shifting into a winter version that included a plush woolen cloak. And so the days continued to go by, until I found myself sitting in one of the palace lounges with Richard, a newspaper open on the table in front of us.

Richard's military uniform had changed for the winter season as well—he now

sported a thicker cloak than he did during the rest of the year. “Miss Monica,” he said, interrupting my perusal. “The results speak for themselves, hm?”

He indicated a piece in the paper concerning my efforts. The front-page article contained a detailed account of the empress’s many sympathy visits and other duties during her working tour. Along with a picture of Her Majesty chatting with beaming children, it listed her numerous accomplishments up until the current day. The article took up quite a bit of frontage in the newspaper.

“What a beautiful portrait of Her Majesty. Don’t you think so too?” I asked, taking the newspaper from him and focusing on the image. “Even the illiterate will be able to understand Her Majesty’s awesomeness from this picture alone.”

Details of the empress’s state tour hadn’t been limited to just announcements from the imperial public relations department. No, newspapers all across the country reported on her visits every day. I learned some time ago that Richard had connections with the newspapers, so he had made the appropriate arrangements with them to produce well-written coverage. Our publicity plan had been a smashing success so far.

With Her Majesty’s works summarized in the newspapers, bards and minstrels used their tales to spread the news of her good deeds through song and story. This way, those who didn’t know how to read would know of her too. And so, word of Her Majesty’s accomplishments continued to spread like wildfire throughout the population.

The transformation of opinion toward Her Majesty by the common people wasn’t the only change that had occurred in the past few months—high society seemed to have changed their minds as well.

Lord Heathcomille’s hefty financial support had sent a shockwave through the nobility, since his line was that of one of the three borderland houses. Speculation ran rampant amongst the aristocrats. To go from constantly antagonizing the current emperor to supporting his empress as well as the holy woman in residence? They suspected he had started to increase his influence via reconciliation instead of antagonism.

There had been a second development as well, this one concerning another

borderland family—the Nyshepst this time. Like Heathcomille, they had also started donating to Her Majesty's official budget. The unvoiced insinuation of their financial support was that they expected my continued assistance regarding their monster problem. And since two of the three borderland houses had contributed financial capital, the remaining third had no choice but to follow suit quickly thereafter.

The race had then begun amongst the haut monde. They scrambled all over themselves and each other, vying to donate enough to Her Majesty's budget for charitable enterprises that they got the title of "head benefactor." Before our very eyes, the tides of sentiment changed notably among society's elites, leading to a dramatic strengthening of the empress's authority.

Naturally, the newspapers covered all that court intrigue as well. In detail, no less. The Empire allowed freedom of speech to a moderate extent, but any articles about Her Majesty had to be reviewed first by the public relations department. However, the actual articles themselves didn't contain a single hint of exaggeration. They were objectively written pieces about Her Majesty's accomplishments.

Flipping through the newspaper, I stopped at one of the articles and grinned. "'The Empress's Benevolence Shakes the Nobility's Foundations.' Hmm?"

There were plenty more where that came from: "The Citizens Raise Their Voices in a Joyous Chorus over the Reconstruction Measures Supported by Her Majesty"; "Her Majesty has Released a Proposal to Build Academies and Vocational Training Schools for Children Orphaned by Monster Attacks. Will Parliament Discuss It at the Year-End Legislative Assembly?"; and finally, "The Empress and the Six Houses Are Unanimous in Their Praise for the Holy Woman's Skills in the Field."

As I read through all the newspaper articles spread out on the table, I felt a chill skate down my spine. "The power of the news media is terrifying, isn't it…?"

"Why would you say that?" Richard asked. "They've only printed the truth."

"I mean, you're right, but…It wasn't too long ago that Her Majesty's standing was quite weak. And now everyone is treating her like a goddess of salvation… I

can't decide if our plan was just deftly executed or if it's because of the terrifying power of your information networks. You not only wrangled Lord Heathcomille's backing but perfectly set up the public relations agenda."

Richard chuckled. "I can't do much beyond making those sorts of moves. And one of my schemes will only succeed if there's already a precedent in place for me to take advantage of. So I don't see the point in taking unnecessary risks. Besides, we succeeded in this particular venture *because* of you."

"Hmm, I wonder."

"Don't, because I'm right," Richard said firmly. "Your efforts made all this possible. The newspaper companies couldn't be happier either—they've been selling through their prints like hotcakes thanks to you."

I scoffed. "Oh, *please.* That has nothing to do with me."

"I beg to differ. Since everyone has become immensely curious about our new holy woman, even the minstrels have changed their—excuse my jest—tune. Those artists love to weave their tales about heroes and romances, but all of a sudden, it's become much easier for them to sing about you, Miss Monica. Especially because they need to tread warily when it comes to Her Majesty. They can't chance disrespecting her in their songs, so you seem to be the easier subject in their eyes."

After that, Richard continued flipping through the paper, commenting on anything that caught his interest. He seemed to be quite enjoying himself. I was, too, until Richard flipped yet another page and I caught sight of an image that raised my brows. It was me—I was constructing a holy ward, sitting hands folded and tucked over my knees as I offered up a pious prayer. I was the very picture of what someone would imagine a holy woman to be.

"Wh-What is *this*…?"

"Why, all you have to do is read the title to figure that out," Richard said with a grin. "I think 'Expelled from the Kingdom of Kophe, the Holy Woman Dedicates Her Efforts to Saving Many People in Our Great Empire' sums it up rather well. See?"

"But…isn't that too much glorification?" I said, feeling a bit dismayed.

Looking at that image, I felt like I was deceiving everyone. I suddenly wanted to run away from it all. And who could blame me? I was no perfect holy woman —I was a priestess who roused ruts!

“I’m absolutely over the moon that you were drawn so beautifully, Miss Monica,” Richard continued, completely ignoring my grumbling. “The angle from behind is a nice touch, in my opinion. It displays your appeal in a subtle, tasteful manner.”

“Well, it would definitely ruin the image if they drew me from the front,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Considering there’s nothing special to see here.”

“Do you really think so?” Richard asked, leaning close to me. “I must disagree with you on that one. I think you’re quite lovely, Miss Monica.” A realization burst over his face. “Ah=ha! So that’s why they drew you from behind. They knew they couldn’t do your face justice.”

My lips twitched. “Flattery will get you nothing, you foolish man…”

“All right, now let’s see what the citizens of Kophe…have to say about the royal family banishing a holy woman…” Richard murmured casually as he continued to turn the pages of the newspaper.

“Honestly, when are you going to get tired of using them as fodder to vent your spleen?” I demanded in an exasperated tone. “I think it’s past time you forgive and forget. After all, *I’m* the one who is the infamous lascivious priestess.”

“Why, Miss Monica, whatever are you talking about?” he asked, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Do enlighten me, won’t you?” There was a pause, and something darker flickered through Richard’s amused face. “Ah, well… I just hope there aren’t any negative consequences on the citizens of Kophe, what with the loss of such an important holy woman…”

“I’m sure they’re fine,” I said firmly. “There are many more holy women in Kophe besides me.”

Hearing this, Richard tacitly decided to drop the subject. I didn’t think much of it anyway…at least, I didn’t at the time.

Interlude: When They Knew Each Other as Mr. Redhead and Saintess

IN the three months since I had started working for Her Majesty, winter had arrived. There were quite a few days when I woke up to the sight of a thin layer of snow piled up on the grounds outside my window. Still, because the climate in the Belktrius Empire was temperate, even on the days when snow fell heavily, it never piled up higher than ankle height.

I'd been told that during winter, banquets and balls were held all over the imperial capital. Starting this year, the empress had decided to hold social functions to raise money for the imperial territories that had been affected by monster outbreaks as well.

I still couldn't help being amazed by all six houses' support of the empress. Their change in attitude had been so dramatic that sometimes I still had a hard time believing it. And who wouldn't?

Only a few months ago, the noblewomen had looked upon Her Majesty with disdain. But now she was surrounded by people saying things like, "Because of Your Majesty's many compassionate and charitable acts, our citizens can welcome winter with joy and peace," and "Your Majesty, if it would please you, the Meyers family would also like to donate to your charitable budget, though the amount is meager on this particular occasion…" It was like their nastiness toward her had never existed.

If I was being honest, I found their new allegiance to the empress disgustingly blatant, especially when they went overboard and praised her for even the smallest things. It seemed to me that they'd realized getting in Her Majesty's good graces was a better long-term strategy for themselves than driving her into a corner. And though I despised their two-faced behavior, I was at least glad that Her Majesty was now being treated with some level of kindness and respect.

I'd noticed that the change in the way people treated Her Majesty had triggered a transformation in her as well. Now that her efforts had been acknowledged, her self-esteem was building. Now when I looked upon Her Majesty as she sat on the throne, I saw a radiant woman brimming with more majesty—pun not intended—than she ever had before. To my eyes, her bearing was now equal to what you'd expect of an empress. I could tell His Majesty was proud of her—he gazed at his empress with adoring eyes from his seat on the throne next to hers.

I waited until the rush of well-wishers and greeters had subsided, then I swished across the floor to make greetings of my own. I felt self-conscious as I approached them, due to the rather sumptuous outfit I'd been dressed in for the occasion. It felt entirely too ill-suited for me, but I'd given up and worn it anyway.

"Your Majesties," I said politely once I'd arrived at the area beneath their thrones, lowering myself into a curtsy. "I thank you both sincerely for inviting me to tonight's party."

"I'm in your debt, Holy Woman Monica," the emperor replied, smiling at me.

He might not have stated it out loud, but I knew he'd said that not as an emperor but as a husband who loved his wife dearly. Warmth frothed up in my chest at his words, and the tender expression that came over his face when he looked at Her Majesty. His condition was truly incredibly improved compared to how he had been when I first arrived.

At this rate, other parts of their lives should be on the upswing, too, I thought, little bubbles of optimism filling my stomach.

I gave Their Majesties another curtsy, ending our audience, and headed off the dais to make my other rounds. Primarily this involved thanking the various aristocrats for their financial support.

Once that chore was finished, I sat down on a sofa tucked away in a corner of the dance hall, seeking a little privacy to recover. As I surveyed the nobles' movements absentmindedly, Darius suddenly appeared next to me, looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Did something good happen?" I asked, smiling at him.

“Ah! Could you tell?!” he exclaimed, voice raised in excitement. Joy radiated off his face, visible even behind his long bangs. “Well, you see, His Highness bestowed me with a tie pin in recognition of my service for keeping the pests away from you, Lady Monica!”

“My, my, isn’t that nice?” I said, doing my best to hide my amusement.

Darius held out a hand, happily displaying the tie pin to me. It was relatively simple, with a vermillion augite gem inlaid into the middle.

“That color is rather similar to Richard’s eyes, don’t you think?” I asked him.

“It totally is!” he crowed.

I flushed, absolutely certain that people had to be staring at us. “D-Darius, hush, you’re too loud,” I chided him.

I leaned forward, staring more intently at the beautiful sparkling stone on the pin. It almost seemed to contain a blaze within it. I ran a finger over it, and a zap of magic went through me.

“Oh!” I said in surprise. “Is this a magic stone?”

“Indeed it is,” Darius said with a grin. “In case of an emergency, it can use my magic and life force to create a massive explosion. One so huge that not a trace of flesh would be left behind.”

I felt my face blanch. “Good lord! What kind of gift is that?!”

A mischievous look came over Darius’s face, his eyes focusing on something far away. “Heh heh… Should the time ever come for me to pass into the next life on the battlefield, I will give you a spectacular show, Your Highness Richard.”

Darius started to pace by my chair, continuing to mutter things under his breath. His face was so ecstatic that it reminded me of how he’d looked out on the battlefield, showered in monster entrails. I had always thought it was a shame that his long fringe hid so much of his adorable face, but now I realized that if anyone ever got to see his expressions close up in this sort of mood, things would become very awkward, very quickly.

As far as the whole tie-pin situation…I didn’t think I was qualified to judge, but

at the very least, I could say the ethics seemed complicated.

I sighed, passing a hand over my face. “I’m amazed you can say such disturbing things so easily, Darius… But setting aside the matter of your proclivities, I want you to know that I would very much like you *not* to die. I would be devastated to lose you. Especially after we’ve gotten so close.”

Darius’s eyes widened in delight, his large black pupils swallowing up his blue irises. “Lady Monica!” he cried, grinning so wide his canines flashed. “I certainly don’t wish to leave you in another knight’s care either. I shall try my best to live as long as I can.”

“Thank you,” I told him, smiling softly.

“That reminds me, my lady, you have yet to tell me everything about my lord’s heroic deeds during his time in the Kingdom of Kophe.”

“We’ve talked so much about that already, though…” I complained. “How much do you actually want to know?”

There was a brief pause as our eyes met. Then we both burst out laughing.

Darius and I were close in age, so in all the time he’d been serving as one of my bodyguards, there were many opportunities for us to chat about all sorts of things. Before I knew it, he had become something like a dear friend to me. The fact that I could even build a bond like this with others was thanks to the special holy attire Richard had gifted me. My relationship with Darius was so close now that even when I couldn’t hide my adverse reactions from overworking despite the defense mechanism, he would quip with a smile, “Looks like you’re having a hard time, hm?” and not pursue the subject more, in consideration of my feelings.

Darius had proved such a refreshing presence to me, after being threatened so many times by both men and women in the past. He was so special to me, not just because of all the things he’d done for me, but because of just who he was.

“Darius…”

Both of us jerked back, turning to where the dignified whisper had come from. Solarus was watching us both, a studiously blank look on her face.

“If you keep this up,” she muttered to Darius, “you’ll find yourself on death’s door without a chance to even use that tie pin.”

Darius paled slightly, turning to look off to the side. “Well, I’ve done it now,” he said, sounding like he was waiting for death.

I turned to look at where they were staring, and saw a beautiful peril striding straight toward us, a frightening smile on his face. The chandelier’s dazzling light brought out the sheen in his hair and the silver embroidery on his formalwear. The oncoming disaster was His Imperial Highness, Crown Prince Richard, and he was bearing down on us like a typhoon.

“Hello, hello, Miss Monica!” he crooned once he’d grown close enough. “Are you having fun?”

“I am indeed,” I replied, smiling warily at him. “I’m having absolute buckets of it. What about you, Richard?”

“I must admit I’ve been a tad worried, Miss Monica, that some strange *insects* might swarm you. Your loveliness is visible from near and far tonight, and could very possibly lure them in.”

“St-Strange insects?”

Richard cleared his throat. “Bad men.”

“Oh, pish posh, as if those types would ever come near *me*, a lowly holy woman.” The mere thought had me gasping with laughter, my hands clutching my waist.

It was truly a ridiculous thought. Honestly, the more I conversed with true daughters of nobility at functions like these, the more I realized that I was nothing but a commoner, down to my bones. It wasn’t just a matter of personality either—our outward appearances might as well have been night and day. Aristocratic young women gleamed right down to their pampered fingernails, smooth palms, and slender figures. Their elegant mannerisms evidenced their refined, moneyed upbringing. I might have been a young lady, just like them, but I could never compare to their beauty. They were entirely out of my league.

I glanced up at Richard thoughtfully. There had been many moments before

where it would hit me that the world he lived in was vastly different from my own, but the more I interacted with the young women of the haut monde, the more keenly I felt that distance. And the more I felt that distance, the more painfully I understood that he truly existed on another plane entirely. In light of that realization, it felt even more bizarre to me that I could even call him "Richard."

Richard turned from me, his eyes locking on Darius. "Now, Darius, you've been protecting Miss Monica properly, yes? You haven't turned into…a *bad* insect?"

"If you will allow me to answer in order, yes and absolutely not, Your Highness!" Darius shook his head so violently I wouldn't have been surprised if it flew off. "If I ever laid a hand on Lady Monica and forced you to kill me, at that point, I might as well just do myself in! I would never coerce you into such a position!"

"What are you two even blathering on about?" I asked, baffled.

"The same as usual, of course," Solarus said in a droll tone.

"Right," Darius agreed. "The same as usual…"

I just sighed.

Richard seemed to have gotten the answers he wanted from Darius, though, for he turned to me, straightened his posture once more, and held out a hand. "Now then, Miss Monica. Won't you give me the pleasure of a dance tonight?"

"I would be honored," I replied. I placed my hand in his, a smile on my face.

Richard led me to the center of the dance floor, where the air had grown rather warm. Ladies and gentlemen accustomed to dancing clustered around on the floor. They moved freely, enjoying themselves in their huddles.

When the first notes of a new song sounded, I began stepping to its rhythm. Richard's eyes widened slightly in surprise, and I responded with a cheeky grin.

In response, his eyes darkened, and he lowered his face close to mine. "Miss Monica, don't tell me you've been practicing?" His voice was a liquid murmur in my ear, the flow of it rousing a tickling, fluttering sensation through my body.

Wanting to retaliate, I pressed my own lips near *his* ear. “Her Majesty was kind enough to give me lessons a few times once I’d asked her to train me. I decided I didn’t want to be an embarrassment to you whenever we danced together.”

“Is that right?” Richard murmured, our heads still close. He chuckled softly, his breath puffing over the side of my face.

He pulled back to look into my eyes, and I saw a few strands of his gorgeous red hair had fallen over his brow, brushing his long eyelashes. I felt a little shocked when I saw myself in the shine of his jewel-like eyes, my reflection illuminated twice over by the chandelier’s light and its crystals.

Am I…dreaming?

The melody changed, and when a violin solo began, Richard slicked his tongue over his lips and narrowed his eyes in challenge. My body heated all over from his blazing stare.

“Well, then, Miss Monica,” he murmured. “That means I don’t have to hold back anymore, hm? You had best keep up.”

“A-As you wish. See if I don’t!”

With the gauntlet thus thrown, Richard picked up his pace and led me into the dance. Though his vigor was almost overpowering, I managed to keep up with him using the basic steps Her Majesty had taught me. There was something familiar about the rhythm, too, that made it easier for me to follow his lead.

“Oh!” I realized. “Is this musical arrangement based on the song we danced to at our outpost?”

“Indeed it is,” he said, eyes twinkling.

“How wonderful! I didn’t expect to hear it again.”

Smiling at each other, we continued dancing, our enjoyment plain on our faces. The orchestra’s style changed to a lighter, more lively sound, as if the conductor had been inspired by the joy underlying our dance. I could feel everyone’s eyes on us. Their Majesties watched, too, their faces beaming.

I'm…happy, I realized. I suddenly wished that this moment would last for eternity, and that I could remain forever dancing in Richard's arms, our hands joined together, our laughter threaded with joy. But as with all things, that wasn't meant to be. The song ended and I reluctantly released Richard's hand.

"Thank you very much, Miss Monica," Richard said, inclining his head slightly.

"I hope you have a pleasant evening, Your Highness Richard," I replied, curtsying back.

Loneliness overcame me, but I kept it locked deep inside myself as Richard escorted me to one of the chairs scattered around the edges of the dance floor. From there, he headed off toward a line of young ladies waiting impatiently for him to ask them to dance. He proffered one an invitation, and off they went.

Solarus brought me a glass of water while I sat and watched.

"Thank you," I murmured, taking it from her and sipping delicately at the liquid.

Even though some time had passed, the effects of our dance lingered inside of me. My body was burning, and I could feel the heat of Richard's hands lingering around my waist. The throbbing just wouldn't cease.

"Richard…" I whispered to myself.

I stared at him as he escorted one resplendent young lady after another.

FROM her seat on her throne up on the platform, Empress Tundica watched the brilliant picture her brother-in-law and the holy woman made as they danced. She remembered his tired visage from the years before, when a portion of their people had been so belligerent about installing him as their emperor. Back then, Richard had hardly ever smiled, and his eyes had been cold as ice, sharper than a well-honed blade.

The dazzling smile on his face now was so far removed from how he'd looked then that she could hardly believe those memories were real. Witnessing his astounding transformation, Tundica felt as overjoyed as if he was her own flesh-and-blood brother.

In order to show his unwavering support for his older brother's reign as the legitimate emperor, her brother-in-law had formed a special forces division of the knights and left the imperial capital. Richard had traveled all over the Empire, staking his life in battle as he fought off the monsters besieging the various imperial territories. On occasion, he had also handled domestic rebellions and even invasions by neighboring countries. From what the empress had heard, during this time, numerous assassins had tried to kill Richard by taking advantage of his position on the battlefield. He had, of course, routed all of them.

When he had finally been forced to leave the Empire under the guise of "studying abroad," Richard's personality had been so dark that it made the empress shiver even now as she recalled it. His eyes had been those of a feral beast, despairing at the world. Coupled with his flaming red hair, she'd thought Richard had quite lived up to the appellation he'd been given: the Ferocious Crown Prince.

And yet, there he was on the dance floor now, smiling gently at Monica as he twirled her around the hall in his arms.

Tundica's heart overflowed with joy, seeing her brother-in-law so happy. She turned to her husband, who sat on the throne next to her, wanting to share her sentiments.

"Your Majesty," she whispered softly, "Don't you think that Richard has finally recovered from his time as the Ferocious Crown Prince? Just look at him! He seems so happy, with Monica in his arms…"

"You're right," Emperor Christopher agreed. "I haven't seen him smile like that since…since our parents were still alive."

But despite the fact that he'd agreed with his wife, there was no corresponding joy in the emperor's gaze. His expression was grim, serious, as he looked upon his younger brother. Richard's bright red hair, so like their father's, shone under the chandelier.

"I do believe he has learned to control his ferocity much better than before," His Majesty said slowly, "However…"

A sliver of ice entered the empress's heart. "Your Majesty…?"

The emperor's lips pursed tight. "I don't think he was telling us the whole truth about simply accompanying an exiled holy woman from the Kingdom of Kophe… I think he's hiding something."

"HELP me! Somebody! Anybody, please… Please help!"

I raced down one of the hallways in the barracks, my legs trembling. I was Monica Regulus, born in the Kingdom of Kophe, a holy woman who served at the front-line base of the designated disaster zone, the monstrous forest of Mayga Cieux.

Not even a month had passed since I'd been provisioned with my holy attire and now it hung on my body, torn to shreds. I desperately held on to the few pieces that remained, clutching them to my skin as I ran frantically.

Behind me, a few knights shuffled after me, snarling and dragging themselves down the hall in their bloodstained clothes. They'd been on the verge of death up until a short while ago, but now they roared like crazed beasts, their bloodshot eyes fixed on me as they grasped for my clothes.

"Urgh! Aaahhhh!!!"

"Raaaghh!!!"

Tears filled my eyes. *I've never seen any human being act like this!*

They'd dragged me to the floor the moment I'd healed them, suddenly filling their hands with the fabric of my clothes and ripping them apart. I'd instinctively blasted them away with a magical attack and had been running ever since.

"Please!" I screamed, tears pouring down my face. "Somebody! Anybody! *Save me!"*

But no one answered.

And I knew, I knew why that was. *It's because…there's no one here to save me.*

The rest of the knights were busy battling a swarm of monsters just inside the forest of Mayga Cieux. The woman on the medical team and the reserve units

were gone as well, performing their various duties on the battlefield.

"*Nooo!"* I cried, slamming into the stone floor of the hallway when one of the men grabbed at my ankle.

They caught up to me too quickly, I thought, my heart filling with despair.

"Help me! Stop, *please,* stop!"

I wept and flailed hysterically as they grabbed my hands and pinned them to the floor, their wild eyes glaring down at me from terrifying, emotionless faces. Hands slid over my body, stripping away the few bits of fabric that were left. Drool dripped down, *plop, plop, plopping* on my naked chest.

I wanted to vomit. *I'm scared. I'm so scared.*

Their hands held my arms and legs in a vice grip as I fought, and then…I felt their tongues begin to slither over my body, leaving disgusting trails of saliva.

"N-No…" I moaned, the taste of bile filling my mouth.

I didn't know what to do. If I miscalculated and discharged too much magic trying to repel them in my panicked state, I'd wind up killing them all. The fear filled me up, sinking down into my bones. It swallowed me up, until all I could do was close my eyes and sink into it in despair.

OH, I thought dazedly. *This is that incident that happened back during my early days at the outpost. The one where I first learned the cost of using my powers as a holy woman.*

I hadn't been accustomed to men back then, and I'd known nothing about sex. After all, my status as a holy woman had been discovered when I was only ten years old, and after that, I'd been sent to live as a cadet priestess at the Holy Woman's Learning Academy. I knew nothing of lust, and how could I have? I'd spent most of my life surrounded by women—both at home, and at school.

It had only been once I'd been dispatched to the front lines, soon after my graduation, that I'd learned how terrifying a man's desire could be.

I blinked in confusion. *Where…am I?*

I heard the sound of glass breaking, and then suddenly, the brutal hands of the knights clinging onto my body were blasted away.

“Saintess!” a voice shouted.

A body leaped through the broken window; the person used the momentum of their leap to roll across the floor and dive at my attackers. The man—for I could tell it was a man, now—beat the other knights mercilessly with his sheathed sword. The sounds of bones breaking and flesh tearing reverberated in the narrow space. Before long, he’d pummeled the rabid men into submission—they lay against the floor, completely unmoving.

“Saintess, we’re leaving!” he cried, sweeping me up from the ground and wrapping me gently in his cloak. Then he took off, tucking me under his arm as he sprinted out of the barracks.

His hair…is disheveled, I thought inanely. *And…red…*

I couldn’t seem to speak any words aloud. Both the attack and the man’s unexpected arrival had been so sudden and shocking that the adrenaline left me feeling distant from myself. My mind was utterly blank as he carried me off.

“You must be terrified, hm?” the man said kindly. “It’s okay, little saintess, it’s okay. I’ll protect you.”

His words might have been reassuring, but his voice was filled with a violent rage. It scared me so much that I couldn’t respond to him at all. I just laid motionless in his arms as he sprinted at full speed toward the village outside of the barracks. Once there, he took a few turns until we arrived at an inn run by a nice older woman.

He asked the innkeeper if he could borrow one of her rooms, and she gladly agreed. He carried me there, then carefully set me down on the bed.

“It’s all right,” he told me softly, dropping to a knee beside the bed. “You’re all right.”

Now that we were at the same eye level, he used a warm towel to wipe my tear-stained face. I’d seen the proprietress provide it to him when we first

arrived. And finally, through blurry eyes, I saw the face of the man who saved me.

“Mr. Redhead…” I mumbled numbly.

The tall knight with unkempt auburn hair and mysterious, flame-colored eyes had always left a strong impression on me. He was always kind to me, and made sure to look after me whenever I was around.

“You were very brave,” he told me, giving me a gentle smile.

Something about that soft, kind expression on his face made something snap inside me. Tears gushed from my eyes once more, and I could do nothing to stop them as sobs wracked my body.

The knight reached out and gently, wordlessly stroked my hair. The huge hands that had been pawing at me earlier had scared me mute, but for some reason, his hand wasn’t frightening at all.

I…I need to thank him, I thought. *And…I need to get back to the barracks. I need to get back to work.* My emotions were all over the place. The tears wouldn’t stop falling, and I was shaking so hard I didn’t think I could even move.

The redheaded knight seemed to sense I needed his calmness, because his voice stayed low, gentle, and kind. “I asked the mistress of the inn to prepare you a new set of clothes,” he told me. “And some clean water for bathing too. Is there anything else you’d like?”

My eyes darted to the redheaded knight’s hands, and that’s when I noticed he was bleeding. Red liquid oozed from one of his fists. I settled a little into my skin, the fresh, bright scarlet of his blood somehow returning me to my senses.

Oh, I realized, *he must have hurt himself breaking the window.*

“I h-have to heal that wound!” I cried. I reached out, grabbing at his hand in a hurry, but the knight pushed me away with a strained smile.

“This isn’t the time for you to be worrying about my wounds,” he told me, voice soft but firm.

“B-But…it’s my fault you were hurt,” I said, voice rasping as my throat constricted with tears.

His expression clouded instantly at my words. His eyes filled with a myriad of emotions—sympathy, sadness, even suffering. “To be concerned for me even after you experienced something so horrendous…you truly are a saint, little saintess.”

He brooded for some time, before finally seeming to reach a decision. His face set, he presented his bloodied fist to me.

“Saintess, I changed my mind. Will you heal me?” the redheaded knight’s eyes gazed directly into mine, unflinching and trustworthy. “I promise I won’t assault you, no matter how much holy power you use on me.”

“Mr…Redhead…”

“Don’t worry. I’ll prove it to you right now.” He smiled at me in encouragement.

I placed my hand on top of his fist, gathering my resolve. Then I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and began chanting. “H-Heed the voice of my saintly power. Gentle, n-noble warrior, I will heal th-thy flesh at once.”

Because my voice had shaken as I chanted the spell, the redheaded knight’s wounds healed bit by bit, each gash melding together one by one. It was like an invisible person slid the tip of a brush over them, gluing them shut.

Now that my eyes were open, I saw that he had closed his. I stared at him as the rest of his wounds closed, until he slowly lifted his eyelids and gazed serenely up at me from his kneeling position by the bed.

Part of me had been expecting him to lose his mind, just like the other men, but there wasn’t an iota of that terrifying lust in his eyes.

“I promised you, didn’t I?” he asked softly.

I nodded. “Yes…you did.”

“Thank you, saintess,” he said, taking both my hands in one of his and clasping them tightly. “Thank you for trusting me.”

Some strong emotion rose in his eyes, though I couldn’t read him. And then he made me a declaration. “From now on and ever more, I’ll be the one to protect you,” he swore. “You and I can work together and determine a way for

you to work as a holy woman safely."

***THAT'S** right,* I thought, drifting again. *Ever since that day, Richard's been protecting me.*

I'd known him as Mr. Redhead back then, but the name I called him didn't make any difference. Both versions of him had always unfailingly protected me, regardless of the time or place. When we'd been at the front line together, he'd helped me think of ways to strengthen the defense mechanism in my holy attire, taught me martial arts, and even acted as my partner so that I could practice using simple defensive magic.

And eventually, without me realizing it, the number of knights going berserk from my powers decreased. On the few occasions they still went on libidinous rampages, I knew how to keep myself safe. With every negative experience, my repertoire of countermeasures had grown.

Richard's the main reason I could live a happy life on the front line. And even now, he's still protecting me.

I jerked up in bed, gasping myself awake.

"Goodness," I said, wrapping my arms tight across my chest in a bid to ground myself. "When was the last time I had a nightmare like *that*?"

I took deep, even breaths, my hand running over the fabric of my nightgown and the bedsheets that were still pulled up past my chest. Outside my window, a beautiful blue and white magpie chirped.

Dawn must have just broken, I thought, sitting up slowly in the bed.

Every day in the capital my life was packed full of work, and every night I typically fell into a deep, dreamless sleep subsumed in a pleasant sense of exhaustion. This had been my first nightmare in a long time.

I thought of Richard's smiling face in the dream, and out of nowhere, a suffocating pain pressed against my chest. *A nightmare's a nightmare, but I was still glad to see him, even if it was just in a dream.*

“That reminds me,” I murmured. “Richard’s never been disturbed by feelings of lust. That’s just the kind of man he is.”

I slipped out of my bed and wrapped a stole around myself, watching the sky outside the window lighten. My room in the castle had a sweeping view of the entire imperial capital, and as I looked out over it, the morning light dyeing the cityscape crimson, I thought of Richard’s glorious scarlet hair and fiery, sunset-red eyes.

Now that I had the luxury of hindsight, I knew those days on the front line had been hell personified. Day after day after day we’d toiled, drenched in sweat, blood, and mud, working ceaselessly amidst monster roars and human screams alike. During the brief moments of rest from that perdition, we all sang and drank and reveled in what little bits of joy we could make to push back against the daily terrors.

Life felt so fleeting back then.

That wasn’t to say that I’d never had any fun. Of course I had, a lot of it, actually. I learned quite a bit about life while I’d been living in that base, and among the folk of the town inside. I didn’t have any regrets.

Still…I couldn’t forget all the nights where I had lain awake, shaking in terror, or when I’d cried endlessly, overcome with disappointment and frustration. The front lines had been so dangerous, I hadn’t had any choice but to use my saintly powers on many people, exposing them to the depths of their sexual desires. The first few years, when I still didn’t have strong defensive strategies against their heats, I had most certainly placed myself in dangerous situations. I couldn’t count how many times my chastity had been in danger.

Despite Prince Medaikonar’s vile accusations, though, there had never been any “indulging in fetes of the flesh.” Not in battle and *certainly* not at the outpost. Thankfully, my bouts of weeping after being attacked had mainly been confined to my first few days there. Most of the knights had considered me a lifesaver, so they’d done their best to look after me and protect me by not crossing perilous unspoken lines. Yet sometimes…someone’s best just wasn’t enough. Because when a person’s base instincts were stimulated, they would unleash the savage within.

But Richard…he'd never been like that. Even amongst all those people at the base, he'd been marked different by his very nature. Thinking back on that time now, I could see clearly that he had always been in a league of his own. I had healed him many times after he had incurred particularly deep and horrific wounds from his battles against the monsters. No matter how deeply I dug through my recollections of the past, I couldn't recall a single instance when I had seen him shaken by the effects of sexual desire.

"It seems those without carnal urges do exist in this world, hm?" I whispered to myself, ignoring the pang that thought raised in my heart.

I sighed, sitting down on the windowsill and staring at the brightening sky outside.

I was almost positive that Richard was fundamentally devoid of sexual desire. *That has to be it,* I thought. *Anything else would be too strange.* And truly, what else could explain his complete lack of reaction to my unfortunate side effect over the many years I'd known him? I should know—I'd seen more people affected by lust than most would in a single lifetime.

I knew there were those who felt attraction for the opposite gender, and some who felt attraction for the same gender. There were even those for whom gender didn't factor at all into whether they'd be attracted to someone or not. Perhaps there were even a few people out there whose lust could only be satisfied if they were tied up by a noodle artisan and forced to watch said artisan make noodles.

Maybe there was a single person out there who could only be satisfied by scenarios featuring their favorite characters created by their favorite author. For pity's sake, even Darius and Solarus had their own extremely unique inclinations! With so many different kinds of people in the world, it would only be natural for those lacking sexual desire to exist too.

"I'm glad Richard's one of them," I declared. "I wouldn't have survived without him by my side."

Richard had always been there for me, a strong affable man who'd protect me no matter when or where I needed him. He'd even gone as far as offering me a new life when my old one had summarily ended. The word "savior" wasn't even

enough to describe everything he had done for me. He could be a *bit* high-handed at times, but even so, I couldn't bear to be apart from him. And when he relied on me? It made me so, *so* happy.

Overall, as the supposedly unholy priestess, I could have never asked for a better guardian angel. I wasn't even putting him up on a pedestal—the plain, simple truth of the matter was he was just that decent of a human being. Whether crown prince or lowly pauper, handsome or homely, I knew that I would always trust him with all my heart. No matter what. Because what mattered was his noble character, and that would always be constant.

"I wonder how things would change if he wasn't the crown prince," I muttered to myself. "What would our relationship have been like, if he was just a normal knight?"

I dwelled on that thought a moment, then sighed. "In that case…we probably would have never even met."

Richard wouldn't have even come to the Kingdom of Kophe if he hadn't been the crown prince. His position was what had allowed us to meet in the first place. *Thank you, fate,* I thought, smiling slightly, *for arranging that encounter.*

In the end, I came back to something I had already realized.

I want to stay with Richard forever. I never want to have to leave his side.

A yawn came out of nowhere, and suddenly I could feel how tired I still was.

"Goodness, I'm *exhausted*," I mumbled. I got up from the window, deciding right then and there that it was time for my monologue to end. I slid right back into bed, and closed my eyes, slowly starting to slip back into sleep.

"I want to stay with Richard forever," huh? I'm such a dolt. After all, I was just a common holy woman, and he…well, he was the Empire's crown prince.

ASIDE from accompanying Her Majesty on her working visits and charitable works, I had a mountain of other duties to attend to as well. I made full use of the teleportation slate, traveling all around the Empire to battle monsters and build wards. I made sure to take advantage of each of those trips to help the

empress make progress on her official responsibilities as well.

On top of all that, there was the factory we'd set up in Psyend to manufacture magical medicines. I still had to supervise the equipment and facilities there. And that was *still* going without mentioning the whole host of other official functions I needed to participate in as the Empire's resident holy woman. There were newspaper interviews, wine and spirit-tasting events hosted by various noblewomen's associations, the new year's candy toss festival where I had to act as candy-throwing ambassador, literary events with children that focused on reading passages out loud from a picture book about holy women… It never ended. My brain was constantly filled with the thoughts, *Argh! It's all too much! I have so much to do!*

And of course, every night, I tackled the most important task as the visiting priestess—healing Their Majesties' in their bedchambers with my holy powers. Over the past few months, they had steadily remembered what it was like to have their *special alone time together.* And so, at long last, the past few weeks had been filled with nights where they'd slept in the same bedroom. His or hers, it made no difference.

I left creating the right mood for the couple entirely to the mistress of the robes and the other ladies-in-waiting. They knew exactly how to set the stage. Whether it was scattering layla-layla petals everywhere, heating perfumed oils, or serving dinners designed to stimulate *all* their appetites, the women devoted themselves to the task. Because we were united under a single banner, the one where we rallied for Their Majesties' nightly success!

Sometimes, like tonight, I found my physical reserves entirely depleted, and I had trouble keeping up with all my work. This problem was quickly fixed, though, with a little bit of healing from Solarus.

"Eeep! Ah… *Ohhh*!!! N-No! N-No, not there!"

"Lady Monica," she chided, "your hips, right hand, and your entire back are in the worst condition I've ever seen."

"R-Really?! Ah—Ahh! Oh! Ow, ow…*ahhh*!!!"

"Excuse me while I fix this… Now this part right here…"

“*Nghhhh*!!!”

“Heh heh. How adorable you are, Lady Monica.”

“Haa…haa… Ah—Ohhh…!”

As I gazed up at Solarus’s face, my mind spinning, I had to wonder, *Am I hallucinating, or has Solarus stopped hiding the sadistic side of her lately?!*

The expression that came over her face as I screamed and twisted in pleasure-pain was one of a triumphant, arrogant queen. It felt especially out of place on her lovely, doll-like features.

Well, at least she’s enjoying herself, I thought, mind drifting. *I guess…I don’t really mind…*

“By the way, milady, you’re quite flexible despite the stiffness of your body. If you let me bind you here, I think you’ll be quite pleased with the final results.”

“B-Bind?!”

“Heh heh,” a gleam lit up Solarus’s eyes. “Since your hair is light pink, I believe a rope dyed in some shade of red would suit you well…”

Hold on a darn second! Th-That has nothing whatsoever to do with actual medical treatment, does it?!

The next hour passed in a blur of confusion, fear, and ecstasy. She made me scream as she cracked and twisted and massaged various parts of my body with her deft hands. But, once she was done…

“*Ahhh*… I feel alive again…” I stretched, my entire body feeling refreshed and light. “Thank you, Solarus,” I told her as she wiped the sweat off my body and cleaned up her supplies. “I can’t heal this sort of muscle stiffness with my powers or magical medicine, so your treatments are a blessing to me.”

“Think nothing of it, Lady Monica. When I think of how I have awakened—I mean *healed* you, I feel thankful as well for my good fortune.”

“*Awakened*?! Good fortune?! What do you mean?!”

Perhaps it’s best not to pursue that line of thought…

And so, my life in the Empire went on. I dedicated every last ounce of my

energy to my work as the Empire’s sole holy woman, supported by all the lovely people by my side.

Chapter 4: A Ruined Country's Avenger, Strategy, and Richard's Responsibility

"THANK you for coming, Your Imperial Highness," said a robustly built middle-aged man with bristly, combed-over brown hair. He looked every inch a man from snow country, with his formal woolen clothes—characteristic of the north—and the long beard stretching down past his chest. This was Margrave Hetzside, the man Richard and I had come to meet.

He inclined his head and continued, "Please rest and recuperate in the castle for today. After all the preparations have been made, I humbly request that you depart tomorrow to the locations where the snow beasts were last sighted. I myself will be traveling between them today to make sure that everything is ready for your arrival."

That simple, straightforward greeting finished, Margrave Hetzside left the castle immediately. It seemed that he had only returned here to receive us.

Richard and I were currently in one of Hetzside's main citadels, which we'd teleported to since we'd planned to use it as our base of operations for our oncoming mission. This citadel was located in one of the northern border provinces under Margrave Hetzside's control. The snow fell heavily here, piling up in deep drifts, and once winter arrived, the spiritual powers of snow and earth combined to summon forth enormous monsters the people called legendary snow beasts.

From what Richard had told me, monster battles were rarely fought in winter. In this particular case, however, we had no other choice. The legendary snow beasts only came out during this time of year.

As one of the castle servants guided me forward to my room via the skybridge connecting this part of the fortress to its main hub, I caught my breath at the scenery outside. Snow blanketed everything. "It must be freezing here," I whispered, looking out over the scenery with awe.

Richard narrowed his eyes. “You’re not cold in your winter holy attire?”

“Not at all,” I said cheerfully. “This luxuriously soft white fur is keeping me very warm.” I poked him in the side, a small smile on my face. “You had the tailors sew even more magical stones into this outfit, *didn’t you*? Well, thanks to you and them, I’m shockingly toasty.”

Richard chuckled. “Well, I certainly couldn’t risk you catching a cold, Miss Monica.”

As he spoke, I couldn’t help but admire him. He looked even more striking than usual in his thick long coat.

We walked together for a short while, then separated ways as we were shown to our individual bedrooms. As the servant showed me around, my mind wandered, going over all the information I’d acquired so far on the Hetzside domain. Hetzside was one of the border territories of the Empire, and was managed by margraves—lords who’d been given greater discretion and autonomy to manage their realms, but *particularly* their border defenses.

This sort of additional power was relatively normal to give the lords who ruled over the northern domains, since the frontier regions of the northern Empire consisted of vast holdings of mostly uninhabited land. Coupled with the location of the northern territories, which were located directly next to neighboring countries, the lords of the area needed the additional discretion to keep things under control. Lord Hetzside’s family wasn’t one of the three borderland houses, but they were powerful enough to be considered number four, right behind them in the ranking.

“Lady Monica,” Solarus said softly, “I’ve brought you a cup of hot milk.”

I gave her a slight smile, taking it from her hands. “Thank you, Solarus.”

No sooner had I gotten my hands on the mug than Richard entered my room.

I guess his meeting with the knights is over?

He sat down on the sofa facing mine, his expression unusually serious when he began talking. “Miss Monica, there are…special circumstances involved with this particular request for military aid. So make sure that you never stray far from my or Darius’s side, whether within the castle grounds or out on the

battlefield.”

This request was very much out of character for Richard, since he typically made unreasonable demands all the time with little to no restraint. That was precisely why I acknowledged his unspoken warning with complete obedience.

“Understood,” I told him. “I’ll do my best so that I’m not a hindrance to either of you.”

“I’m sorry for getting you involved in this,” he apologized, his well-defined eyebrows lowering into a slight frown, “but you’re the reason I even managed to trespass successfully, so to speak, so I thank you, Miss Monica.”

“Trespass? That sounds dangerous.”

“Well, truthfully, up until now, Margrave Hetzside always came up with some reason or another not to allow my knights to enter his domain.” Richard’s fiery, crimson eyes slitted thoughtfully.

“Then that means this isn’t just a monster-elimination campaign, hm?” I deduced.

Richard inclined his head in silent agreement.

THE next day, the special forces unit and I departed for the legendary snow beasts’ location on dogsleds. It wasn’t exactly the most auspicious journey, as we were heading straight into battle, but the scenery was still unexpectedly tranquil. The snow had stopped falling and the sky was a clear, bright blue.

“Miss Monica, you’re not used to snow, are you?” Richard’s face was back to its usual smile, a complete reversal from his grim countenance the day before.

I nodded in response. “That’s right. It never snowed in my village or at Mayga Cieux.”

Even watching the spirit dogs’ silver hindquarters shimmer in the light as they enthusiastically pulled the sleds along added to my sense of peace. Possessed of a rounded tail and fluffy, shining silver fur, I found the creatures quite adorable. Spirit dogs were a special breed of canine specific to this region. They were all female pups born from the union of a dog and spirit, in what was essentially a

virgin birth. Dogs that gave birth to spirit dog pups were revered as Holy Virgin Dogs, which were even featured as a part of the Hetzside family crest.

“I’m glad it’s sunny today, Miss Monica,” came a sweet, husky murmur from above my head. Richard hugged me close, holding me securely in his arms. As I looked up in his direction, my gaze met his soft one. “When I hold you like this, I’m reminded anew of how small you really are. You fit perfectly within the cradle of my arms.”

“Well…compared to you, I guess I am small…”

We were sitting together on the bench of a dogsled, with me nestled into Richard’s lap and my fur robe wrapped thickly around me. Darius stood behind us, steering the vehicle. Yesterday, Darius had accompanied Margrave Hetzside and his men to the potential battle sites, helping with the preparations along with an advance guard of special forces knights. He had also woken up early today to get the dogsleds ready for our journey.

Oh, wait! I thought, straightening up abruptly in Richard’s arms. *I totally forgot that Darius grew up in the north! I’ll have to ask him about that later.*

I squinted against the dual assault of the cold wind and blinding snow-covered landscape. My body unconsciously sought greater warmth and snuggled into the heat of Richard's body, which was cocooning me from behind. When I realized what I was doing, my heartbeat sped up. I couldn't help blushing—this wasn't the time or place for such inappropriate feelings.

Every once in a while, Richard had been breaking our comfortable silence with conversation. This time he leaned forward, breath brushing my ear, and said lightly, "Miss Monica, you're basically functioning as my windbreak right now. Are you sure you aren't cold?"

"I'm fine," I reassured him. "I'm using my priestess abilities to increase my body temperature, plus you're quite warm too, Richard."

"Indeed? Well, I find *you* exceedingly warm as well, Miss Monica."

Despite the fact that I couldn't see him, I knew Richard was grinning shamelessly behind me. Struck speechless, I just buried my face into my scarf. I forced myself to think of Margrave Hetzside's face, attempting to use the image to steel myself against the overpowering desire to melt into Richard's arms.

All right, unsuitable urge banished, I thought moments later, lips twitching.

Freed of my inappropriate thoughts, I steered my mind back to the margrave himself. He had conversed with Richard like any normal lord would, and he also had involved himself directly in any and all battle campaigns within his territory. On the surface, he seemed to be a serious aristocrat, so I couldn't find any anomalies in him. He'd even stayed in his domain during the winter session of parliament instead of journeying to the imperial capital, just because he knew the snow beasts were going to be a problem.

This was apparently typical for Margrave Hetzside, as he felt managing his border defenses and subduing the monsters that appeared during the winter season was more important than his presence in the capital. Typically, he sent his eldest son and heir to the winter sessions to serve as his proxy.

From what I could tell, Richard had two objectives for undertaking this military campaign: to observe Lord Hetzside and to gain an understanding of the movements in the border territories as a whole. This was easy even for me

to grasp, as it was rather obvious that any hint of disquiet near the borders would have to be nipped quickly in the bud.

Which reminded me of something else Darius had told me about Richard. Before heading to Mayga Cieux in Kophe, he had been responsible for quelling small-scale rebellions in the border regions and skirmishes with neighboring nations. From what Darius had said, Richard's military feats were considered quite notable.

Hmm, I thought, *I wonder if Richard and his men have encountered Lord Hetzside in the past?*

"Miss Monica…?" Richard asked in a puzzled tone.

I gasped in mortification. I had been unconsciously clinging tightly to his arm around my waist. "I'm sorry," I said, affecting a bright, unbothered tone, "I was cold, so I just…wanted to hold on to you." It wasn't untrue, as I found his body heat quite soothing.

I turned back to my thoughts. Whether it was in the halls of the imperial palace or out on the battlefields, Richard had been fighting without rest for a long time now. I could admit that his moniker of Ferocious Crown Prince had been a natural result of his determined efforts. If he hadn't been ferocious, he wouldn't have survived— I knew that much.

I sighed, reflecting on the harsh path he had been forced on as I surrendered myself to his body's warmth.

THE attack force's base was located near the main road. It was a small fortress built on the plains just before the boundary of a forest. Local knights welcomed us as we arrived on our dogsled. Their appearances differed markedly from the special forces knights. They all sported bushy beards and vividly checkered cloaks wrapped around their armor.

I bet the brightly colored patterns are purposeful, I thought, *so it's easy to spot them in the snow.*

"Your Highness, lady priestess, thank you for coming," they said in unison, giving us sharp salutes. We inclined our heads in return, and they quickly led us

into the small castle.

“I apologize that I cannot give you more time to rest,” one of the knights told Richard, “but we are on our way to the conference room. We must discuss tactics because we’ve already received numerous reports confirming the snow beasts’ sighting.”

I ended up leading our trio, with Richard sandwiched between me and Darius, who was bringing up the rear. The rest of the knights in the special forces unit followed behind us.

Although the stone castle was warmed by torches and fireplaces, a cold chill still hung throughout. I had to squint my eyes as I walked down the corridors, which were dark as night, despite the fact that it was actually midday. But the minute we entered the conference room, it was suddenly bright again.

Heated by numerous torch flames and a central hearth, the conference room already hosted a gathering of people. About half consisted of familiar faces—those being knights from our advance unit—with the other half consisting of Hetzside’s knights. The room was relatively small—with as many people as were already there, it looked like our arrival would fill it to capacity.

When the special forces knights saw Richard, they all stood in unison and saluted, shouting, “Welcome, Your Highness, Prince Richard!”

I flinched from the overwhelming volume of their greetings, but next to me, Richard was his usual calm self. His warm smile could have melted snow.

“Thank you, everyone,” he replied regally. “Be at ease.”

We settled in at the conference table, and I glanced back at Richard, curious about what he was going to do next. I froze at the sight of his smile, which hadn’t changed, but still somehow made ice congeal along the line of my spine.

“I’d like a full report of the situation immediately,” he said, voice ringing through the room. “I want to eradicate any disturbances of the peace as quickly as possible.” His voice projected all the might one would expect of the Ferocious Crown Prince.

“Today, we observed the snow beasts here, at point A,” Margrave Hetzside replied, taking the explanation over personally. “This spot is located within the

forest at the foot of the Sibri Mountains. The mountain range stretches across this border here. Avalanches occur frequently in this area, and it's very easy for the spiritual powers of snow and earth to mix. On average, approximately two snow monsters originate from this location every year."

As Margrave Hetzside spoke, I paid close attention to where he pointed to on the map spread across the conference room table. I had a compass in my hand too, which I used to try and establish my directional bearings in accordance with the lord's descriptions of the area.

In addition to spatial knowledge, Margrave Hetzside gave us a general run-down of the forest. It was apparently a remote place far from human settlements, and the snow beasts that were born from the area mostly remained docile since their territory was never encroached upon. The beasts apparently didn't mate at all, instead returning to the earth when the snow started to melt, heralding spring's arrival.

"In the past, there was a period when these snow beasts were worshiped as mountain gods that protected this portion of the border region which is kept quite isolated due to the surrounding Sibri mountains. The reason men of the Hetzside domain continue to grow their beards long actually stems from a tradition born in that age. However…our relationship with the legendary snow beasts began deteriorating around a year ago. It all started with the international border dispute."

Lord Hetzside raised his face up from the map with a pensive expression.

"Not only does the Principality of Dulles insist on invading our borders, but they have also started employing mage knights to attack the snow beasts. Its leaders contend that 'The snow beasts are crossing imperial borders and attacking our people,' so they're also demanding reparations from me. Instead of paying them, though, we negotiated a deal that we would eliminate the snow beasts ourselves every year to prevent them from existing at all. *Except*…"

"Hold on a moment," Richard interjected sharply. "I wasn't informed of that *at all*. In the correspondence we received requesting military aid, we were only told that snow monsters were wreaking havoc in your territory. So what is the meaning of this?"

Though his initial comment had been pointed, Richard's words had calmed by the end of his speech. His words now were carefully polite, and deceptively mild. His gaze, though, was intent on the lord's face.

"I deemed it prudent not to disclose the details in my missive," replied Margrave Hetzside, with an almost impudent brazenness. "That is why I chose not to tell you. The truth is, ever since we commenced our first offensive against the snow beasts some years ago, they started attacking our towns and villages too. Recently, we have begun to see casualties as well, so a rapid response to the situation is necessary."

Richard remained silent, so Lord Hetzside continued. "Unfortunately for us though, we do not possess enough military might in our territory to fend off the snow monsters every winter. The task has become increasingly difficult with each passing year." As his lordship spoke, he focused his attention on me. "But at last," he said, voice hopeful, "the Empire has its very own holy woman."

Gooseflesh erupted on my flesh as I felt an instinctive, sickening jolt of revulsion. I couldn't describe it, but there was something very off about the lord's piercing stare. The smile on his lips, a clear attempt to curry favor with me, almost made me retch.

"I heard that she has the power to build barriers to confine monsters and quarantine them from human settlements. Therefore, Your Highness, won't you lend us your *prize* holy woman's tremendous might?"

His emphasis on the word "prize" raised alarms in my head, and I finally realized something else too.

This was the very first time Margrave Hetzside had ever looked at me. Since our arrival in his territory, I had always been standing next to Richard, but he had treated me as if I were invisible. Now that I could finally notice what sort of man he *truly* was, I saw something else I couldn't ignore in his eyes as they appraised me blatantly—hunger and contempt.

Richard stepped in front of me nonchalantly, obstructing the other man's view of me. "I see," he said calmly. "The margravial provinces *do indeed* have the lawful jurisdiction under the Empire's rule to negotiate independently with neighboring nations." Richard's attitude remained pointedly polite as he studied

the map on the table, murmuring, “Taking into account the snow beasts’ natures, I would agree that sealing them within a barrier created by the priestess would be a better policy than dispatching troops every year to eliminate them.”

“I am exceedingly grateful for your understanding, Your Highness.”

“Think nothing of it. Since we’re here, we might as well kill them and build the wards in one go.”

Lord Hetzside’s lips curled in a triumphant sneer. After returning that sham of a smile with an insincere one of his own, Richard immediately turned to me. “Well, then, Holy Woman Monica,” he said, “I would like your assistance in building the barrier, but there is a bit of an issue. It seems the legendary snow beasts are sensitive to a woman’s presence. From past experience, we know that once a ward is in place, we will immediately have to fight any monsters within.”

“Indeed,” I replied, “I remember our past missions quite well, but considering that there are no other holy women here, the duty falls to me.”

Suddenly I realized that I was the only woman involved in the expedition. There were several female knights in the special forces, but they’d all been ordered to stay behind at headquarters and keep an eye on things there. Apparently, the snow beast’s reaction to women had been why. But then I realized something else.

“One moment, please,” I said. “At what distance can the beasts sense a woman’s presence? Is it possible that they’re already aware of my existence?”

“Perhaps,” Margrave Hetzside said casually. “Today’s sighting could have been because they perceived that you were relatively near.”

I startled, finding the statement quite frightening, but calmed when I noticed Richard didn’t seem particularly agitated.

“Your Highness,” Margrave Hetzside said, pointing at the map, “traps have already been laid in these locations. Knights, archers, and mages from my domain’s chivalric order have been stationed from the location of the beasts’ last known sighting to this point here, close to this base.”

“Right,” Richard said, “we might as well be on our way then.”

In that moment, a tremendous tremor shattered the air around us, sending shockwaves throughout the room. Just about anyone could have recognized the source of the sound. The sound of snow crashing down from the trees surrounding the castle only added to the cacophony of noise. Everyone in the conference room exchanged meaningful glances.

“It’s the snow beasts!” one of the knights in the conference room cried. Outside, other knights were mirroring that same call.

Richard acted quickly, giving his troops their orders, before he turned to face me again. “Miss Monica, as planned, you will go build the barrier using Darius’s sled. I’ll be accompanying you.”

I couldn’t believe my ears.

“But wait! I’m their target, aren’t I? So it would be dangerous for you to be with me, Your Highness.”

“I won’t let you go without me,” Richard said, staring me down with his overpowering gaze. “You *will* stay by my side.” His words were stubborn and unmovable, just like his uncharacteristically assertive attitude.

“I…understand.”

It seemed he had no intention of leaving me on my own in this dangerous place. That being settled, I clapped my hands together, shifting gears into battle mode. “Seethe, my holy powers,” I chanted, “Stir, my life force. The torrent of my magic knows no bounds as it rushes toward the heavens.”

My saintly superpower activated, immediately beginning to enhance my magic. Heat bloomed from deep within my body, and the additional magic came soaring up from the depths of my stomach, filling me until I thought I would burst with my new First Class power.

“Knights of the special forces,” I cried, “please line up over there! I’ll be strengthening your bodies like usual!”

“Yes, ma’am!” Used to the ritual, the men lined up presenting me with their backs.

“With my power, I offer this strong, noble warrior divine protection. With my power, I grant him a shield against all enemies,” I murmured as I slapped my hand on each of the men’s backs, rallying them. “Divine protection, shield against all enemies!”

With each man I touched, I received a different response. “Thank you very much!” called one. “Much obliged!” called another. One even said, “Appreciate it, my lady!”

As I slapped my hand on the last man’s back, I called out, “Right, you’re the last one! I wish you all a safe return free of harm!”

“Thank you, my lady!” they all cried in unison, and then they were gone, all racing from the room at once.

Next, I placed my hands on one of the fortress’s walls to create a defensive perimeter. “Heed the voice of my saintly power,” I cried, “Grant the warriors’ citadel the power to crush evil.”

With a sound like ice cracking, a simple barrier protecting the castle was established. It would hold for a day, barring monsters from entering. And finally—I twisted toward Richard, who had been waiting patiently next to me.

“Your turn, Richard,” I said with a smile.

“Thank you,” he said solemnly, bending down toward my outstretched hands. He closed his eyes.

I hesitated for a moment, then cradled his cheeks in my hands, quietly putting the strengthening spell on him. Once again, I murmured, “With my power, I offer this strong, noble warrior divine protection. With my power, I grant him a shield against all enemies.”

A faint shimmering light enveloped his body and disappeared just as quickly. “Thank you, Miss Monica,” Richard said, opening his flame-colored eyes and smiling gently at me. He straightened in a powerful rush and then held out his large, gauntlet-covered hand. “Let’s go!” he yelled.

“Yes,” I replied, “let’s.”

The violent rumbling on the ground was growing steadily closer to us. When

we stepped outside the castle, we saw clouds of snow dancing in the air, coming from the direction of the coniferous forest. *That must be where the snow beasts are rampaging*, I thought.

They were mowing down trees as they approached, the crashing sound booming through the air. Interspersed in the din were the explosive noises made by the mage knights' magical attacks.

"As expected, their might is even more tremendous when there's a woman nearby," Margrave Hetzside muttered, clearly nervous. I hadn't noticed it, but apparently, he'd been following right behind Richard and me.

I was displeased by his words, so I cursed the bloody man in my mind. *Foul, useless troll,* I swore.

Then, the sounds of barking filled the air. The spirit dogs sounded close. As they drew closer, I saw it was Darius steering them, skillfully handling his sled. When he got close enough, I touched the magic stone attached to the bottom of the dogsled and released my magic.

"Spirit stone," I called, "I infuse my saintly power unto thee and draw a barrier against evil. Through it, I offer this strong, noble warrior divine protection, and grant him a shield against all enemies."

The mechanism of that spell worked in such a way that the more we traveled on the sled, the more the magic stone would absorb my magic to build a dynamic barrier as we moved. In essence, the dogsled's tracks would create a magic circle.

"Your Highness!" Darius shouted, "Our preparations are complete! We're ready to depart on your command!"

"Understood," Richard replied. "We're out of time, so we go now."

It was then that I noticed that Darius's sled was different from the one we had arrived on. It was longer and had two seats. I sat in front while Richard seated himself directly behind me. Darius stood up in the pilot's seat, located at the tail end of the sled, and called out "Mush," the order for the spirit dogs to move forward.

We flew toward our goal at lightning speed. We probably couldn't have even

kept our eyes open against the tremendous speed of the buffeting wind without the strengthening spell I'd placed on our bodies.

"Turn right!" Darius yelled. "Run straight ahead!"

The spirit hounds galloped gallantly through the forest's narrow trails; our sled tugged along behind them as they responded to Darius's clear, encouraging shouts. I clamped down desperately onto the bar in front of me. I didn't want to be thrown off by the jolting of the sled as we traveled along the designated trajectory we'd decided on for the barrier.

The snow beasts' monstrous stomps drew ever closer to us, every heavy thud growing louder and louder. *That's much faster than we anticipated,* I thought, worried. They weren't that far from us now. The knights should have stopped them or *at least* slowed them down, so what in the world were they doing?

I didn't have any more time to think it through, though. Because from the front, a shrill shriek came from a bat-like monster as it came charging toward us.

I realized suddenly that I had to protect the dogs. I took a deep, deep breath of the bitingly cold air and recited my strengthening spell. "With my power, I offer these strong, noble animals divine protection," I yelled. "With my power, I grant them a shield against all enemies!"

There was a sound like ice cracking under someone's footsteps, and then a pale, shimmering barrier wound around the spirit dogs before slowly disappearing.

The bat monsters swarmed us in even greater numbers, so I began repelling them with my fire magic. I used short, sharp blasts in rapid succession, calling out "Ye bringers of woe, let the might of the fire goddess consume thee!" with every burst of flame.

The snow beasts were still savaging trees on their destructive path in our direction. Snaps and thuds filled the air as they drew even closer.

"Both of you, hold on tight!" Darius screamed in warning. "This next part is going to be rough!"

Richard immediately leaned forward from his seat and wrapped himself

around me. With one hand, he held on tightly to the handrail, and with the other, he drew his sword. Once he'd taken stock of the situation, he started hacking away at the bat monsters flying at us. I continued chanting my fire spell over and over again. Richard was the sword, while I was the magic. But even as we drove off the monsters, I felt a coldness come over me.

Why aren't the other knights coming to help us? Why are the snow beasts still chasing us?

"Your Highness! Lady Monica! Change of plans!" Darius yelled. "I'm going to lure the snow beasts into the pitfall up ahead! We have to forget about constructing the barrier for the time being!"

"All right, Darius!" Richard agreed.

I knew it, I thought. *Something's wrong.* My heart beat hard and fast at the ominous premonition filling my mind.

Richard tightened his hold on me and murmured directly into my ear, "Miss Monica, hunch down."

"Oh!" I gasped, the sound escaping my lips unbidden as his low voice vibrated against my earlobe. I snapped my mouth shut on a sharp inhale, holding in my words for fear that I'd start babbling incoherently. My unfortunate side effect was making itself known after continuously enhancing my magic with my saintly superpower *and* using my enhanced strength to attack the monsters. I felt disgraceful. To think that I would be so crass as to feel arousal during a life-or-death battle.

I'm pathetic, I thought. *I'm the worst!*

But there was no time for self-loathing either.

"Here we go!" Darius yelled, and the spirit dogs began sprinting forward at an even higher level of speed. As they continued their frantic race to escape the monsters at our heels, their powerful legs pounded the ground, and they skillfully navigated us around the trees in our way.

As we were tossed around by the force of their twists and turns, Richard hugged me tightly with one arm while his other hand gripped hard at the sled's handrail. We were going so fast at this point that the whole apparatus was

letting out ominous creaks. But even as it carved tracks into the ground, the spirit dogs, under Darius's guidance, managed to turn the sled around successfully.

In the next instant, an explosive sound came from behind us, followed by terrifyingly monstrous roars.

"Grrrraaaarrrr!!!" the snow beasts cried, clearly in the middle of their death throes.

Our sled came to a gentle stop.

"Did it work?" Richard asked, his voice hushed.

We left the sled in Darius's extremely capable hands, and rushed to the site where the roars had come from. Once we got there, we found a massive hole in the ground that hadn't been there until just a few moments ago. From within, we could hear violent bellows.

"It seems the legendary snow beasts fell in the pit…" I said, sighing in relief. I hadn't even gotten the chance to sneak a glimpse of what they looked like. Glimpsing inside the hole was a no-go, judging by the plumes of steam billowing upward.

From what Margrave Hetzside had told us about the traps he'd laid, there should have been a number of magic swords specifically reserved for monster elimination planted in the bottom of the hole like needles.

"Miss Monica, you wait here," Richard said softly. "I'll go and make sure."

"Be careful, Richard," I murmured in reply.

His sword drawn, Richard warily approached the pitfall. But while I watched him walk slowly toward the hole, I became troubled by the strange silence around us. *Something's wrong,* I thought, then the next instant, I saw a light flying toward Richard from within the woods.

"Richard, look out!!!" I screamed.

Clang!

Richard let out a grunt as he reflexively dodged the flying light and countered it with his sword. It made a metallic sound as his blade flicked it away, and then

thudded to the ground, where it pierced deeply into the snow.

It was an arrow.

"*Your Highness*!"

Darius came rushing past my side, screaming like a man possessed. He jumped in front of Richard, but a whooshing sound came from a new direction as another arrow was fired. It pierced right through his armor.

That must be a magic arrowhead!

"*Ugh*… Shite!!!" Darius cried, crumpling on top of the snow. Despite the agony he must be feeling, he gritted his teeth against the pain, raised himself on one knee, and pulled out a dagger.

"Grant us divine protection and a shield!" I cried, abbreviating the spell in order to quickly build a barrier around us.

Dizziness induced by the release of too much magic had me swaying, but Richard reacted quickly. His eyes sharp, he wordlessly wrapped his arms around me, giving me the support I needed so I wouldn't fall. He pressed me tightly against his armored chest with one arm and held his sword at the ready with his other hand.

Drip. Drip. Darius snarled, his blood painting the snow red. "Your Highness… this is the moment they were waiting for."

"Do we know the enemy's position?"

"I've pinpointed them all. I'll handle it." Sweat running down his face, Darius pushed himself back up. If all one had to go on was the intensity of spirit emanating from him, no one would think him injured at all. From the gaps between the long black locks covering his face, I glimpsed his blazing eyes, practically sparking. Fierce rage and murderous menace rose from his body like steam.

Darius bent down low and then—disappeared instantly. A second later, I heard the sound of his footsteps racing through the forest. From the direction he bolted, I heard the metallic sound of a dagger and arrow coming into contact.

“I am Darius Sye, the knight of wrath, and my power resounds through the air!” he snarled. “May that death knell be the last sound my enemy hears as he bursts apart and passes on into the beyond!”

It was the first time I had heard Darius’s spell. On its heels came an explosive noise, echoing through the forest. The blast was so hot it even brushed our faces.

“He’s so strong…” I murmured.

In general, when fighting on the front lines, any knights capable of using magic tried to avoid finding themselves in vulnerable positions should their magic run out. They did that by saving their magic for use at critical junctions during battle. Specialized offensive magic was so powerful that it could even blast through trees should it be used without restraint. I was seeing Darius’s demonstration of that power live, and the sound alone drowned out the enemy’s screams even as they perished.

“Darius is all right, Miss Monica,” Richard reassured me. My apprehension must have been clear on my face. “So please, stay here.” He tightened his arms even more around me as he spoke. “It seems the snow beasts were just a pretext for an assassination attempt on us.”

“Wh-What…?!” I stammered.

“I’d suspected as much, but to do it so blatantly is really something else.”

Before Richard could explain any further, a shadow fell over us. We turned around at the same time and froze. One of the legendary snow monsters was creeping up out of the pit.

It huffed and growled as it frantically crawled toward us, panting heavily and glaring at us with an ominous malevolence. Its body was so massive that we had to look up a long way just to see its face. Blood stained its pure-white pelt.

We watched in horror as it ruthlessly broke off the magic swords piercing its body like icicles. *Krak. Krak.* The unpleasant smell of seared flesh wafted toward us as the blades burned the monster’s flesh at each point of entry.

The snow beast raised its arms up high, its savagely sharp claws sparkling in the light as it lunged straight at us. Richard scooped me up and tried to run

from it as fast as he could, but one of its attacks landed anyway. There was a dry, rupturing sound as the barrier deflected the first attack, signaling its imminent collapse.

“Grant him divine protection and a shield!” I screamed again, restrengthening Richard’s weakening barrier, but then I abruptly noticed where the snow beast’s attention was focused. *On me.* Its target was me, the only woman here.

“Richard, get away from me!”

“Mngh… *Miss Monica*?!”

I jumped quickly from his arms and ran away alone. *I need to get as far from him as I can.* The more distance I put between us, the less likely the snow beast would attack Richard. Even if he was assailed by arrows from his enemies, I was sure he could handle them on his own. I would just be a hindrance to him in our present situation.

As for me…well, I was a holy woman, after all, so I could manage a few arrows myself! Darius was fighting too, which meant I had to pull my own weight. This was the best decision I could make to protect the imperial crown prince.

Or so I thought.

Unfortunately for me, the snow beast was much, much faster than I could have ever imagined. It wasn’t long before a dark, massive shadow fell over me.

I flinched, choking on a scream, and the very second I hesitated, a group of bat monsters flew at me, instantly halting my forward momentum.

I cried out as I stumbled, and that incredibly brief span of time was more than enough for the legendary snow beast to unleash a slash meant to slaughter me.

A dark shadow swallowed my sight, perfectly in tandem with the beast’s fiendish howl. An enormous paw covered in snow-white fur with a jet-black palm, was swinging my way, the sharp claws attached to the fingers as big as my head.

This…this is it.

But just as I prepared myself for the end…

Fwoosh!

The next thing I felt was pain as I fell backward to the ground, while a warm body covered my front.

I'm…not dead? I thought rather hysterically. My head was just fine. The only thing I'd lost was my wimple, which had flown away violently. When I fully regained my senses a few beats later, I realized I had been pushed down on top of the layer of snow covering the forest floor.

Richard had held on to me tightly while pushing me down to safety. But then…

"Hngh…!" His brow creased, and a horrific ripping sound came from my magical barrier as it was torn apart. Richard's armor was destroyed moments after, and blood dripped down like rain, plastering over my face.

Plip. Plip.

"*No*," I said in the tiniest, softest voice.

I couldn't say anything else as the snow beast, over three times as large as a normal human, brandished its claws once more. It flew forward, attacking Richard once again. Tears filled my eyes when I realized that despite everything, he was still managing to protect me, his body curled over mine like a shield.

I closed my eyes, unable to watch those claws striking his back again, but then I felt Richard move. When I opened my eyes, he'd driven his sword through the beast's arm, rendering it useless.

"Grar! Graar! GRAAAR!!!" The snow monster screamed, flailing as it desperately tried to dislodge the blade.

But Richard refused to budge, holding fast. Blood spilled profusely from his mouth. No sound came out, but I thought his lips moved as if he was saying, "Now! Now's your chance!"

"God of lightning! Hear my voice!" I held both hands up toward the sky and activated my holy powers. I poured every last drop of my magic into my palms—creating a simple but incredibly lethal blast. "Lightning, explode! Lightning, consume! *Explode*!!!"

Boom! Boom! Boom, boom, boom, boom, BOOM!

Lightning shot out of my hands in a successive series of blasts, scorching the snow beast. The explosive attacks bent and twisted the trees around us, the heat and wind pressure causing them to collapse in upon themselves. The forest was filled with the cracking and crunching of falling trees, as my magic continued to destroy everything outside of the blast zone, upon whose center we were laying.

I hardly ever used this magic because it was my most powerful spell. It was the ace up my sleeve, my last resort when I didn't have time to think about the consequences of my actions.

The snow beast's roars echoed, but the echoes were all that was left. I'd fully incinerated the upper half of its body. The lower half stood upright for a few moments, then it too crumbled to ash, vanishing into thin air.

"It's…over…" I moaned.

The second I caught my breath, Richard toppled down once more on top of me. Crumbling under his heavy armor-plated weight, I collapsed back to the ground with him. Our faces practically touched, we were so close.

"Richard! Richard, *hold on*!" I cried, but there was no response. I smacked at his cheeks, but that didn't stop the strength from seeping away from those beautiful, shining eyes. His lips, always ready with a sunny smile, lay unmoving, stained with blood. He was hanging on to life by a single, tiny thread.

"Hold on, Richard, just hold on," I told him frantically. "I'll heal you right away." I had no choice but to do it myself, as magical medicine wouldn't work in this situation—it took too long to have an effect.

Still pinned on the ground underneath him, I started ripping off the buttons of my holy attire, uncovering my chest. For my holy powers to be optimized and delivered to their fullest, I needed him to hear my heartbeat. With one arm, I hugged his head to my chest, right above my heart. I used my free hand to stroke his red hair, which was splotched with fresh blood, then extended it down toward his blood-soaked back.

I closed my eyes, breathing in as I focused on his entire body. I touched his head, the cornerstone of the human body, then the massive gaping wound in his back that stole away his life second by second. And as I pressed my bare skin

against those two points, I activated my holy powers.

“My holy powers, I bid thee to seethe, to stir. Let not this strong, noble warrior’s blood leave his body. Awaken the fierce power of his life force.”

Richard didn’t even twitch, he just continued to lay still, resting on top of me. Hot blood splashed on my chest and over my holy garb. Closing my eyes, I visualized the anatomy of the human body, as well as the magical meridians crisscrossing throughout it. Then I used my saintly abilities to rebuild his missing flesh, blood, and magic.

“To Richard Il Belktrius, I bestow the sunlight of love on his life. So that his body may once more burn hot enough to melt snow, like his flaming hair. So that his torn flesh may once more be whole again. So that it may protect the blood, bone, and muscles that still remain. So that it may bless him with the breath of the earth.”

Only a few minutes had passed since he had been wounded. I poured every bit of my holy powers into him. *Because my breaths and my pulse are for his sake.* I devoted all of my soul and body to make sure he lived.

“I am Monica Regulus, a heavensent child of this ancient continent. I give to him freely of my holy power. And now, as the daughter of benevolent mother nature herself, I grant him the miracle of life once more.”

The blood stopped oozing from his wounds. That was the first thing. Next, flesh and bone steadily reformed in his gouged back until I could feel skin inching back together again. I could feel his pulse beating in his neck much more strongly and clearly than it had moments before.

I continued holding his head on my chest with one arm, I amplified my healing ability further. From that point, his wounds healed at an accelerated pace. Hugging him tightly, I gave him even more of my vitality.

“Richard,” I said softly. “Live. Show me your beautiful smile again, like you always do…” The words weren’t a holy woman’s spell—they were my own personal prayer.

At some point throughout all this, the snow around us had melted and vegetation had burst from the surface of the earth. Flowers had bloomed. The

rejuvenation aspect of my holy powers had run wild, exerting its influence on our environment.

Richard's eyelids fluttered slightly.

"Richard!" I gasped, head spinning in relief.

By all appearances, he was completely healed. He sluggishly lifted his head from my chest, his eyes dazed and distant, like he had just woken from a deep slumber. The expression on his face seemed almost stupefied as he slowly surfaced from his horrific ordeal.

"Richard… Are you all right? Answer me."

"Miss…Monica…?" he mumbled, my name spilling from his lips instead of the river of blood that had come before.

Relief rushed through my entire being. "Oh, I'm so glad you're okay. Does it hurt anywhere?"

"Hm…? No… No pain, but…" He slowly braced an elbow on the ground, levering his upper body up and away from my chest. And then, eyes still blank, he stared at me.

"Richard…?"

When I saw myself reflected in his pupils, I gasped with realization. I had lost my wimple with its special defense mechanism. On top of that, there was the fact that I had bared my chest to heal him. *Not all of it, though, so thank goodness for small favors.* The joy of his recovery was short-lived, as a cold sweat began to trickle down my back.

"Um, uh…Richard…?"

Out-of-season wildflowers waved in the breeze around us, their glorious blooms peeking through the stalks of fresh green grass sprouting out of the ground. That was how much power I had unleashed.

When was the last time I went overboard like this? I had used so much of my saintly abilities that a sacred bear would have rutted itself to death from the heat-inducing side effect. With my mind, body, and soul, I had used every last drop of my power to resuscitate Richard. Richard who—

“Miss Monica.”

I shuddered convulsively, hearing my name spoken in his husky voice. Despite being in an insane emergency situation, my heartbeat sped up wildly.

Leaves rustled as the wind wound its way through the trees. The clanging of the knights’ armor as metal screeched against metal came from further in the distance. It all seemed so far away, like a thin film separated us and the rest of the world.

“Richard…” I murmured.

He gently tucked the dew-sprinkled tuft of hair covering my face behind my ear. Then he lightly glided his fingertips over my cheek, taking care not to tangle my hair in his gauntlet. From within the depths of his long eyelashes, his scarlet eyes, which seemed to burn with a bright inner flame, reflected an image of me.

Unmoving, I held my breath. I could feel my nerves rising to the surface. At this rate, Richard would…he would— *What’s going to happen between us?*

He continued stroking my cheek. And then…he slipped his fingers into my hair, pressing at various points on my uncovered, wimple-less head. There wasn’t a hint of seduction in the way he used his hand. His flame-colored eyes gazed seriously at me, not a drop of lust present.

“Miss Monica, are you hurt?” he asked gently.

“Are you hurt?” his words echoed in my mind. He was…worried, about whether or not I was injured. *Oh, so that’s what that expression was about just now.*

“I…no, I’m not.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

That was the moment that my exhaustion started making itself known. I relaxed fully against the ground, as Richard laughed in relief, releasing his own tension. The moment I saw his usual, wonderful smile, the feelings I’d been desperately suppressing burst forth like water rushing from a broken dam.

“F-Forget about me! Richard, your situation is much more urgent!” For goodness’ sake, I was still covered in his blood! I ran my hands all over his body,

demanding, “Richard, are you sure you’re all right? You’re positive there’s no pain?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” he reassured me. “I’m just a bit cold since my armor was destroyed and my back is exposed.”

“Truly?”

Richard suddenly pulled back, shifting away from me. He ripped his already torn cloak even more, wrapping one length around me. “It’s, ah, probably best if you stop touching me, Miss Monica. You’ll get dirty. And let’s cover up your front, hm? You must be cold as well.”

“I…yes, thank you.” I gratefully pulled the cape tighter around myself, arranging it so that it covered the gap in my holy attire, which bared the top of my chest. My vision blurred. My cheeks felt hot. Tears rushed uncontrollably down my face; the relief of saving Richard had apparently unstoppered my tear ducts.

“Miss Monica…you’re crying.” He sounded so surprised. “Were you really that worried about me?”

“Of course I was! You’re the Empire’s crown prince. But more than that… more than that…you’re *precious* to me!”

“Well…you have no idea how happy that makes me.” A delighted smile spread briefly on his face before his eyes turned serious as he surveyed the area. “But we can’t drop our guards just yet. Our fight still isn’t over.”

I gasped in shock. *That’s right.* Darius was still somewhere out there, pursuing the enemy.

“First, let’s check on the dogsled,” Richard decided.

I pulled myself up using Richard’s outstretched hand and then we both went to inspect the sled. The spirit dogs, completely unafraid of the snow beasts, had waited bravely for us in all their fluffy glory. *Good girls.* They were so adorable.

Just as we’d drawn up by the sled, Darius came trudging out of the forest, covered in blood. “Your Highness,” he said respectfully, staggering our way. Despite the arrows sticking from his body, he looked absolutely magnificent to

my eyes.

“I need to heal you!” I cried, instinctively running toward him, but he gently held me back with his hands, his face unsmiling.

“Please don’t worry, Lady Monica. Most of the blood isn’t mine. Now then, Your Highness, if it pleases you.” His armor clanking, Darius kneeled before Richard on one leg, presenting him with the head he carried.

I was speechless. It was one of Hetzside’s knights. We had met him only a few hours ago at their base.

“It is just as we suspected when we first placed him and the others under surveillance. He was part of the secessionist faction seeking independence from the Empire.”

“Indeed? Interesting.” Richard’s voice was cold now, frigid enough to freeze water. The gentle tone he’d spoken to me mere moments before had been entirely eradicated.

As I watched, master and servant exchanged meaningful glances, seemingly communicating with their eyes alone.

No, wait… I thought, noticing their lips moving ever so slightly. *Ah, they’re using silent magic.*

Once their private conversation ended, Darius dissolved the magic and spoke normally again, eyes landing on me as he spoke. “My wounds are minor and as I mentioned, most of the blood belongs to our enemies. Thanks to your physical-strengthening spell, the poisoned arrows were ineffective as well. So you can save the treatment for after we return to headquarters. You must be at your limit as well, yes, Lady Monica?”

Before I had the chance to answer, I heard barks heading our way. I glanced behind me, catching sight of Richard’s special forces knights racing toward us on sleds being pulled by more spirit hounds.

“Commander, many apologies!” one of them yelled. “We were unavoidably detained.”

It looked like they had fought their own battles, if the blood spatters on their

armor were any indication. But not with monsters. No, their battles had been against other humans.

Though I was used to holding my own against monsters, this was my first experience with battles against people. I shivered, from more than just the biting cold this time.

Richard pulled my fear-wracked body close while matter-of-factly giving his men instructions on how to handle the aftermath. I sensed from the air around them and their general attitudes that they had all suspected something like this was going to happen.

Today, I thought wryly, *I learned what an imperial crown prince's normal life is like. Namely, how he's always, always in danger.*

AFTER that, we rode back to Hetzside's castle on the dogsleds. My energy reserves were completely depleted from utilizing my holy powers at maximum capacity. I could barely stand up, much less walk straight—which was why I left any residual healing to the medical unit. We'd given them a healthy stock of magical medicines, so I felt reassured they could handle it.

I stumbled my way to my assigned room with Solarus's help, feeling desperate to lie down so I could convalesce. Solarus had already been waiting by the time we arrived back at Hetzside's citadel, and she wasted no time thereafter in taking care of me. Thanks to her, my condition improved in leaps and bounds.

In addition to her high-quality care, Solarus also gave me an unvarnished explanation of what was going on back inside the castle. Margrave Hetzside and his subordinates had been taken to the imperial capital on the suspicion of the attempted assassination of the imperial crown prince and Holy Woman Monica Regulus. Court ladies, maids, manservants…any and all under his command were included in the arrest. That meant the entire staff within the castle would have to be replaced.

And replaced they were—during the period I laid in bed resting, the fortress came completely under Richard's control.

"It has been decided that His Highness, Prince Richard, will be the temporary

administrator of the territory of Hetzside," Solarus explained. "It's likely that one of the minor Belktrius branch families will become the new masters of this domain, though that is still pending until the house of lords in parliament has given their approval."

"I see…" I murmured.

"It seems that this all came about because Lord Hetzside schemed to become independent from the Empire, and accepted support from a neighboring nation."

"What?!" I cried, jerking in shock as I stared at Solarus's face. She wrung the towel in her hands, her eyes dark with emotion.

"B-But he said that the other country had invaded *his* lands… I don't understand."

"That story was just a tool in his larger plan. He most assuredly negotiated another pact *entirely* with them. For instance…in exchange for the other state's aid in his aim for independence, Hetzside may have agreed to hand over the holy woman and His Highness Richard."

I was at a loss for words.

Solarus continued dispassionately, "Hetzside intended to hide this from the Empire, but lying dormant within the Sibri Mountains on the country's borders are numerous deposits of crystals of superior quality. During his interrogation, he confessed to a secret set of accounts that contained profits solely gained from those crystal mines. Eventually, His Highness will reveal all the details publicly."

"He must have squirreled those funds away for his territory's independence…" I whispered, shuddering involuntarily.

Solarus laughed at my reaction, which was rare for her. I smiled up at her, time seeming to stop as her usual stoic expression crumbled, leaving behind a girl who seemed many years younger than her true age.

The phenomenon didn't last long, though—Solarus straightened, pulling herself together before continuing her unusually loquacious explanation. "The region located in the Empire's northwest is one that has suffered conflict for

many, many years," she told me. "The crystal mines themselves actually belonged to a small duchy that no longer exists. It was situated in one of the valleys of the Sibri Mountain range right between the territory of Hetzside and the adjacent country. Unfortunately, it was annihilated by both of its neighbors."

She's…acting odd, I thought. And it wasn't just that she'd become much more talkative than her usual self—there was something more going on beneath the surface, like she was stifling some secret excitement.

That's when I remembered what Darius had told me about his birthplace.

"I was born in a small principality that used to exist in the northern region of the Empire. But when a neighboring duchy drove monsters into our lands, we were overrun, and my homeland was annihilated…"

"His Highness rescued me…"

"…And sent me to the frontlines to exorcize my rage and regain my sense of self."

Once the first part of the conversation came back to me, so did another, and another. As all I'd learned of Darius over the past few months came together, an understanding formed in my mind.

Darius Sye and Solarus Nova. The similar sounds at the ends of their first names, the fact that they were both familiar with snow country, Darius's drive when he fought the enemy, his blood dripping into the snow, and lastly, Solarus's expression today as she sat next to my bedside.

"Solarus, are you and Darius from—"

"Indeed," she replied. "We are both citizens of that ruined country. We lived modest lives in our mountain homes, selling crystals for sustenance. We were a small nation. But…that story ended a long time ago." Though her voice remained emotionless, her eyes were like shards of ice. It was the coldest I had ever seen them. "In the deepest depths of my heart, my grudge against our enemies still smolders, *festers*."

Her lips curled upward, but there was no joy on her face. Instead, a violent storm of emotions, chief amongst them howling rage, dwelled in her eyes. I

shivered unconsciously. “Even knowing our origins, His Highness still chose to take us in. Moreover, he gave us the positions and opportunities we needed to exact our vengeance.”

“Solarus…”

“I apologize for nattering on like this. It seems I’ve made you uncomfortable, hm?” The normally quiet Solarus cleared her throat as if to regain her composure. Once she was calm again, she stood up and started clearing away the tray next to us, which was loaded with a tea set.

“After losing my homeland, I was *favored* by numerous *patrons* amongst the aristocracy who regarded me as their *mistress*. That was how I survived for many years before His Highness selected me for his staff. To me, he is more than just a benefactor. He’s my savior.”

Some of the things she said most definitely piqued my interest, but I decided it was best to cut off that train of thought, for my sake and hers.

“Oh, by the way,” Solarus said dryly, “I’ve had my particular *inclinations* since well before my country was destroyed, so please don’t worry about me on that front. After all, there’s a great deal of truth to the proverb, ‘Art brings bread.’”

“I-I see… That’s a relief then…”

She grinned wickedly.

Should I smile back…? Conflicted about how I should respond, I remained silent instead.

IT was several days before Richard had the time to come visit me. I’d been laid up in bed this whole time, recovering.

When he came into my room, I saw he was dressed casually in a shirt and sweater, looking just like the redhead knight I had known on the front lines in Kophe.

“How do you feel, Miss Monica?” he asked.

“Even walking short distances tires me out,” I told him, “so I’m still not fully recovered.”

“Noted,” he replied, nodding. “Make sure you don’t push yourself too much, all right?”

“I’m sorry…” I said softly. “I know we have to return to the capital soon, but here I still am.”

I tried to get up, but Richard just gently pushed me back down on the bed. “Now, now, just rest,” he said, shaking a finger at me. “Miss Monica, you must realize that you have nothing to apologize for. There’s still much work to be done here, so if anything, your recuperation gives me the perfect reason to stay where I am needed. It also means that I can protect you and be productive at the same time.”

“Oh, well…then, if you’re certain I’m not a burden…”

“I am absolutely, *positively* sure. And besides, I’ve been wanting to see you.”

There was something about those words that made me suspect that a good chunk of his usual vigor was missing. “You’re not feeling well, hm?” I asked.

“You know me too well,” Richard said, smiling slightly. “You’re right, I’m feeling a bit blue.”

Richard had always chatted to me about everything and anything, but today he was uncharacteristically taciturn. He sat there, silent as the grave, as a maid entered my room and poured hot tea for us both. I waited patiently, not rushing him. It was only when our tea had completely cooled that he finally summoned the wherewithal to speak.

“Miss Monica…” he said softly. “I’m deeply sorry for getting you caught up in this incident. I said I would protect you, but instead, my actions put you in such grave danger.”

Is that *what he was worried about?* I immediately shook my head, smiling at him. “Let me sling your words right back at you. There’s no need to apologize, Richard, especially because *you* were the one who was so seriously wounded. My thoughtless attempt to get away from you led to you being injured in the first place, so *I’m* the one who should be sorry.”

“Bah, that was nothing. I experienced the same and worse at Mayga Cieux often.”

“I know, but…that’s all the more reason that you shouldn’t apologize. After all, I’m now known as the strongest holy woman alive because I defended the imperial crown prince. So thank *you* for allowing me to fulfill my long-held ambition, Your Highness.”

Richard sighed, but his expression brightened as he gazed at me. “You really are strong, Miss Monica.”

From there, he seemed to be much more cheerful, like apologizing had unburdened and refreshed him. Before long, he was telling me the particulars of our latest ordeal.

“Since the period of intense conflict a few years ago, many suspicious rumors have abounded regarding the territory of Hetzside. But we’ve had a hard time determining the source of the trouble.” He stared at me seriously. “Thanks to you, Miss Monica, we were finally able to hunt down our prey. By dint of your existence as a holy woman, I was able to use the elimination of the legendary snow beasts as a pretense to infiltrate the region with my own troops.”

“And the reason you chose not to inform me about your suspicions beforehand was because you thought it best to keep me as far from danger as possible, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” he agreed. “I made a gamble that even Margrave Hetzside and the neighboring nation would treat you respectfully, due to your exalted position as a holy woman. I thought they’d be wary, regardless of any political tensions. But…I misjudged them.” He flung himself backward on the bed with an aggravated groan.

“Instead…they colluded with each other and attacked at once,” I finished for him.

“You could *not* have imagined my shock when I realized what they were willing to do,” he said, smiling a little. Still staring at the ceiling in self-recrimination, Richard continued, “I suspect that they planned to frighten and corner you so that they could abduct you to their country.”

I gave a choked noise at that, thoroughly happy that eventuality hadn’t come to pass.

“In any case, I’m really, deeply sorry.” Expression serious once more, Richard turned his head to look at me from his prone position on the bed.

“You had a good reason for staying quiet, so there’s no need to apologize,” I told him. “More than that, I want to know how *you* are feeling.”

“Me? I’m already healed.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s not what I mean. You look positively haggard. I bet you’ve been working nonstop without rest. Am I right?”

Richard chuckled, the stern lines of his face easing as he gave me a half-smile. “I guess I should know better than to pretend to act tough in front of you, Miss Monica.”

“*Exactly,*” I agreed. “There’s no need for it, not with me. You know that you can be just yourself when it’s just the two of us.”

“Miss Monica.”

“What is it?”

“In the near or distant future, there may come a time when you fear me. Perhaps even when you feel you can’t trust me.”

“Richard…” I said softly, heart aching.

“But even then…I want you and you alone to believe in me. I don’t care if no one else does, as long as you do. Because my respect for you and my desire to protect you are the absolute most important things to me.”

He rubbed his forehand with one hand while staring at me entreatingly. I pressed my fingers against that hand, silently reassuring him. His eyes widened.

“Miss Monica.”

“Don’t worry, Richard,” I said, attempting to cheer him up with a brilliant smile. “I trust you with all my heart, and I think of you as someone dear too.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.” I nodded emphatically. I would tell him the same thing over and over, no matter how many times he asked me. Just like I would reassure any child who feared they were to be abandoned.

“Richard, I believe in you,” I told him softly, taking his hand off his forehead and gripping it tightly with my own. “Please, be at ease and do what you must. Even if others around us call you the Ferocious Crown Prince, *I* will continue to put my faith in you. Because I know that you’re a strong, kind individual.”

“Thank you, Miss Monica…”

That soft murmur was the last thing he said before suddenly falling into a deep slumber. I couldn’t imagine how exhausted he must be, but I was glad that he felt safe enough with me to let his guard down so easily.

“Of course you’re tired, after everything you’ve been through…” I murmured, watching Richard while he slept.

In his position, he often had to keep his own counsel in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people, and make difficult decisions when circumstances called for them. On that point, I was just a plebeian holy woman who had no home to return to and no relatives to care for me. I could claim no pedigree or lofty lineage. I was nobody. But perhaps this nobody could become somebody to *him*, whether it was chance or destiny that had schemed for us to cross paths.

I unthinkingly stretched my hand toward his hair, stroking the strands back into place. “You have always protected me,” I whispered in his ear, “against monsters and men and whatever else. So there’s nothing in the world that could stop me from believing in you. No matter what happens, I will *always* be your ally, Richard.”

I laid there, watching his defenseless, sleeping face.

To be honest, there was a lot about him I still didn’t understand. *And yet*. And yet the truth remained that he continued to protect me, without lies, without subterfuge. So, grateful for the blessing of his presence, I had only one thought: *I want nothing more than to be his strength.*

Chapter 5: Are You Ready for Your Triumphant Return, My Dear Miss Monica?

THE end of the winter season was a very busy period of time for the aristocracy, as they had to prepare for the new year. Those who made the journey to the imperial capital from their home territories attended many events throughout this season. For the house of lords, the main event was the winter parliamentary session, but there were military parades and rallies held to raise the morale of the chivalric orders, and an endless, successive series of balls and dances for young people making their debuts in high society. The never-ending carousel of activities kept everyone busy from dawn till dusk.

It was also the perfect season for commoners to profit off this large gathering of the upper crust. A myriad of exhibitions and attractions took place every day within the confines of the city. Even when the sun set and darkness fell, the imperial capital sparkled with thousands of bright lights, rivaling even the starry night sky.

This was because of the hard-won results achieved by the Empire's famous Institute for Magical Research, which had developed lights to keep the capital shining at all hours. Their inventions, the fruit of their advances in magical research and development, kept the capital streets brighter by magnitudes than the capital of the Kingdom of Kophe. Truly, the Empire's capital was a nightless city.

As for me, my primary responsibility in treating Their Majesties remained unchanged. I still continued to heal them every night in their chambers. Tonight was no different.

Lady Louise and a maid kindly accompanied me to His Majesty's bedroom. When I entered, I smiled at his bright expression, which told me quite clearly that he had been eagerly waiting for my arrival.

He quickly stretched out on top of the bed and I walked over to him. Placing

my hands on his back, I immediately noticed a change in his body. He was much more muscular now than when I had first begun his care.

“What’s the matter?” His Majesty asked, feeling me hesitate.

“Your Majesty…correct me if I’m wrong, but have you been exercising more lately?”

His head was turned in my direction and I saw his expression light up at my reaction. “You are indeed correct. Recently, I’ve deliberately made time for physical training. You could tell so easily?”

“Yes,” I replied. “The muscles in your back are considerably firmer and thicker. Also, your body temperature is higher and my magic is flowing quite smoothly, much more so than usual.”

His Majesty nodded happily. “Well, I was determined to do what I could. I didn’t want to rely on your powers alone, Monica. Especially…especially because you’re so competent in many different areas. So as the emperor, you inspired me to do better for myself.”

“Your Majesty…” I murmured, touched. My hands stopped moving as I suddenly began to tear up.

His Majesty gave me a gentle smile. “Now then, the night won’t last forever, so kindly reenergize me, would you? I’m raring to see Tundica.”

“Of course,” I told him. “I’ll give it my all to heal you!”

While I resumed my treatment and moved my hands down His Majesty’s back, Lady Louise beamed and nodded enthusiastically behind me.

Soon I had finished caring for His Majesty, and I headed into Her Majesty’s bedchamber. When I stepped through the door connecting their rooms, I found her lying in wait for me with much the same expression on her face as His Majesty had. Makeup had been applied to her face to match the night’s seductive mood, so she presented a beguiling image.

Her Majesty let out a wicked giggle, her eyes sparkling. “I’ve been waiting for you, Monica.”

I flushed. Her Majesty’s sultry aura was so thick in the room I almost felt like *I*

was the one who would be sleeping with her tonight. Her personality had undergone such a dramatic change from what it had been before. Her burgeoning confidence in herself made her other charms shine as well, making her looks even more sensual and attractive and her beauty even more breathtaking.

“All right, Your Majesty,” I warned her as I prepared to begin. “Here I go.”

She had already stretched herself out face down on the bed. When I touched her back, I instantly felt how soft and pliant her body had become over these past few months. It wasn’t just the fact that she had gained some much-needed weight. The tension that had used to stretch her taut and brittle had loosened considerably. My magic flowed through her cleanly, unimpeded, like a rushing torrent of pure spring water.

“Monica,” Her Majesty asked softly while I worked. “How was His Majesty?”

When I glanced over at her face, I found her eyes rapt on mine. “He was in extremely high spirits, saying he couldn’t wait to see you, Your Majesty,” I said with a grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll finish up here quickly so that you two can have your alone time.”

“Indeed…? I’m much obliged then,” she murmured thoughtfully. She giggled softly again under her breath.

As I continued to pulse my magic through her, I felt her fatigue melting away, and a rush of emotions stirring within both her heart and mind.

I let out a sigh of exertion, then pulled back. “That should do it,” I told Her Majesty with a smile. She stayed reclined in the bed, her eyes dreamy, a light, lovely flush spreading over her face and limbs.

“You’re a sight to behold, Your Majesty,” I told her, feeling a bit flustered myself. “His Majesty will be stunned speechless.”

“It’s all thanks to you, Monica,” she said thankfully. She levered herself up into a sitting position and hugged me tightly with her supple arms.

Happiness flared warmly in my heart. Despite being branded an unholy saint, I was overjoyed that my powers could bring such happiness to Their Majesties.

Our embrace over, I turned around and cleaned up all of my supplies. But before I could leave, Her Majesty gently beckoned me back to her side.

"Monica," she whispered in my ear. "I think *that* time of the month might return again."

"Really?!"

Seeing my eyes widen in surprise, the empress smiled shyly. "The attending physician told me today. Both my magical energy and weight are within the normal range now, and holding steady to boot. So he said that I should be seeing a return of my menses soon enough, on a regular schedule. I wanted to tell you the news myself, Monica."

"Goodness… Congratulations, Your Majesty!"

"I can't believe I'm this happy to experience cramps again," Her Majesty said, laughing. "Strange, isn't it?" Though she joked, the empress looked delighted by this turn of events.

Lady Louise beckoned to me, signaling it was time for us to go, and I bowed to Her Majesty before leaving the room. Lady Louise and the maid who'd been helping us followed close behind.

We'd barely even shut Her Majesty's door before I heard His Majesty enter her room.

Ahhh, I thought with a grin. *The night will truly burn hot now.*

"Lady Monica," Lady Louise said suddenly.

I stopped, turning to look at her inquiringly. The first thing I noticed was that there was a magnificent maternal beauty about her that shone under the bright gleam of the moon's light, but then I saw that behind her black-framed glasses, her eyes were red from crying. Behind her, I saw the maid who had accompanied us, sniffing back her own tears.

Lady Louise smiled faintly at me as she bowed her head. "Thank you very much… Because of you, Her Majesty has finally become a true empress."

"And I thank you as well, Lady Louise," I said with the utmost seriousness. I straightened my spine, bent one knee, and gave her a deep, formal curtsy. "It

cannot have been easy to put your trust into a common holy woman exiled from her own homeland. I look forward to our continued collaboration in supporting Their Majesties."

After all, our work has only just begun.

I said my farewells to the chief lady-in-waiting and her maid a few moments later, and then strode through the passageway that connected the palace to where my own quarters were located.

The enchanting winter moon reflected magically off the pond in the inner courtyard. Annual plants bloomed charmingly in the flowerbeds situated around the water, and from a distance, I could hear birds chirping.

Even on winter nights, the cycle of life continued. And I had a feeling that spring would soon come for Their Majesties as well.

AFTER that, Their Majesties began to behave toward each other with incredible intimacy. They flirted constantly, as if they were a lively newlywed couple. They even had begun approaching me periodically to invite me to private meals and teatimes with them. Today was one of those days.

They'd both twinkled at me, hearts in their eyes, and asked sweetly:

"Why don't you join us for lunch, Monica?"

"Yes, please do come along."

I had gladly accepted their gracious, cheerful invitations and now we sat together at a table in the exclusively private wing that acted as their de facto second home within the palace. The emperor had various residences throughout the palatial portion of the capital. Each served a specific purpose depending on who he was meeting with and what the purpose of the meeting was.

This particular villa was made primarily from brick, and the dining room was smaller and narrower than the one used for official luncheons. The residence's exceedingly cozy atmosphere felt as if it had been made exclusively so a newlywed couple could enjoy some private meals together.

Currently though, the couple was focused on me. His Majesty in particular seemed immensely absorbed with my tales of growing up as a commoner in the Kingdom of Kophe.

“I see,” he said. “So Kophe’s people seldom consume sheep as part of their diets.”

“That’s right,” I replied. “We only use sheep for wool and milk. Although the nobility does eat newly born lambs as a delicacy.”

“Ahhh, yes, yes, I do recall having had such a dish when I visited Kophe. It was quite tasty, indeed. So why don’t the rest of the citizens partake?”

“In Kophe’s agrarian communities,” I explained, “horned monsters resembling sheep sometimes appear. Because of that history, there’s a superstition amongst us commoners that if we eat sheep, then monsters will appear bearing grudges against us. I used to believe that too.”

“Different places mean different beliefs, hm?” Her Majesty murmured from next to her husband.

I’d learned after a few luncheons with Their Majesties that they were both intelligent people brimming with curiosity about all manner of things.

In my case, they were keen on learning more about my experiences as a commoner in the Kingdom of Kophe, as well as my life as a holy woman. They threw questions at me left and right to satisfy their endlessly inquisitive natures. I found myself enjoying answering them.

“Monica, in the Belktrius Empire, particularly in the north, sheep meat is essentially a staple food. There’s this one dish where mutton is minced, shaped into a ball, covered in wheat flour, then cooked. It’s very delicious. Because of its resemblance to the embellishment on our military caps, the dish is named ‘sheep pom-pom.’”

In that moment, with bizarrely fortuitous timing, a wonderfully cheesy aroma permeated the dining room.

The chef personally brought a plate to the table, on which rested a small quantity of round bite-sized balls covered in a thick, bubbling cheese sauce and accented with cilantro leaves.

“I present to you: sheep pom-poms.”

“Wow! A cheese sauce mixed with chopped herbs…” I said, mouth watering. “It looks so appealing!”

“Quick, try a bite. It’s most delicious when you eat it piping hot.”

With His Majesty’s encouragement, I picked up a morsel of my own, and, following their lead, popped it into my mouth. When I bit into the circular delicacy, the meat’s juices flowed out and over my tastebuds. The fresh herbs softened the gamey taste unique to mutton, filling the inside of my mouth with a symphony of flavors. The breading was beautifully textured, too—it broke apart under my teeth in hot, tasty chunks. Witnessing my ecstatic expression, Their Majesties exchanged meaningful glances with each other, then grinned at me.

“Unique food cultures flourish within each of our Empire’s territories,” Her Majesty said, unabashedly delighted by my reaction. “I’m so excited for you to learn about them all, Monica. It makes me really happy to see you enjoy our variety of cuisines.”

“I look forward to expanding my culinary horizons, Your Majesty.”

“Now then, Monica,” His Majesty jumped back in. “Tell us more about Kophe’s culture. It’s a simple enough matter for us to learn about the nobles there, but what I’m much more interested in is the nation’s people, particularly the proletariat. You’re the perfect medium for us to increase our own knowledge about their lives.”

IT wasn’t just these luncheons that Their Majesties invited me to either. Before I knew it, they started asking me to visit them individually for one-on-one conversations. Whenever each of them had a bit of free time in their respective schedules, we would chat in parlors and tea rooms within the palace. While we drank tea and nibbled on snacks, they would talk to me about all sorts of private things.

I was thankful. Truly, I *was*. There was no mistaking the depths of my gratitude for their warmth and consideration. *But.* But there was one thing

about them both that made me feel incredibly awkward.

They were both far, far too open about their lust for each other.

As an example, the other day His Majesty had extolled on and on about Her Majesty's beauty. His speech had gone something like: "Monica, Tundica and I have been married for many years now, but every day she grows more and more bewitching. The other day she accompanied me on a horse ride. She had her hair arranged in an artless updo, and from behind, she looked like an innocent young maiden. Her beauty in that moment captivated me even more than usual… I can't help but obsess with the nape of her neck, even at night while we're in bed together."

Her Majesty was no better. Just a few days later, she'd gone on this rant: "Monica, did you know that His Majesty actually has terrible eyesight? Though he looks quite stern and unapproachable whenever he's sitting on his throne, that's actually because he's trying his best to focus on his subjects' faces. But that intensely scrutinizing stare of his is so utterly, *superbly* masculine that it makes me shiver… Especially at night, when the lamplight reflects off those gorgeous eyes… Just looking at them makes me melt…"

I'd soon caught on to the pattern that was forming. Whenever each of them asked to chat with me privately, the main reason was to go on and on and on about their other half. They were completely besotted with each other. What made things worse were the contents of their tales as they grew more and more explicit and indecent. So our chats, combined with my nightly treatments were, for better or worse, contributing a *lot* to my sexual education.

I didn't mind that they gushed effusively about each other. But for pity's sake, I was a holy woman with an unfortunate side effect to her powers. All of this sexual knowledge would only make things a thousand times worse for me when I inevitably fell into a heat.

"Aaarrrghhhh! This is most definitely going to end poorly for me…" I moaned.

Unfortunately, I couldn't just ignore Their Majesties' discussions with me. In fact, I was happy to have played my part in helping them rediscover the love they had toward each other, as well as the happiness they found when they were together. But. *But!* I had my own peculiar situation to consider too.

And sure enough, my worst fears were soon realized when our private chats had a profoundly acute influence on me.

WHEN I opened my eyes the next morning it was to the sight of Richard laying next to me. *In my bed*.

I let out a squealing scream, babbling a line of unintelligibly horrified nonsense.

Richard let out a low laugh. "Morning, Miss Monica," he murmured lowly, resting his upper body on one elbow as he stared at me.

Richard's position made it extremely clear to me that he was *naked*. My face flushed violently as I took in the way the pristine white sheets that were wrapped around his body reflected the sunlight, draping his figure in shimmering light. His flame-colored eyes, partially hidden by his lids at half-mast, glinted paler than usual as the morning sunlight glinted off them like prisms. His normally neat red hair was a disheveled mess that fell over his face, casting shadows on his cheeks and under his eyes.

Gasping, I tore my eyes away for a moment to look down at myself. *I'm naked too!* I shrieked in internal horror. I grabbed the sheets and jerked them over me, reflexively covering myself up.

Richard chuckled in delight, as he watched me. "Now, Miss Monica, don't you think it's much too late to act so shy?"

"M-M-Much too…too late?! I-I…um, I… What? Wh-Wh-What in th-the world d-did I even…?!

Did I become so immersed in my work that my libido exploded off the charts?! Did I attack him in a fit of crazed lust?!

While I gawped at him, my mind in turmoil, His Highness, Crown Prince

Richard himself pulled me into his arms and pressed his lips to my forehead. I inadvertently shrieked at the soft, moist sound his kiss made against my skin.

"Miss Monica, you're so adorable," Richard crooned.

"N-No, I, um, Richard, stop that. Wait a second."

"You don't like being held by me?"

I let out another squeak as he moved even closer. "W-W-W-Well, I…I m-m-mean…"

"Even though we spent such a sweet, sweet night together?" he crooned, voice meltingly warm against my ear.

I felt my whole body flash hot as Richard leaned forward, causing our naked chests to press against each other. He let out a long rumble, like the purr of a contented wildcat, clearly pleased with the feeling of us touching bare skin to bare skin.

"Richard, I…"

My words cut off as I made a choked noise. Richard had gently pushed his fingers into my hair, combing them gently through the strands. He leaned forward and dropped a kiss on each of my eyelids even as I did my best to express my consternation. The truth was, my protests had become rather feeble and half-hearted. He was steadily weakening my resolve with each touch.

"R-Richard," I gasped, "N-No, we…we *can't.* I-I'm an…unholy priestess…and y-you're the imperial c-crown prince!"

"I'll have you know there's nothing wrong whatsoever with us being like this. After all, those titles don't matter when we're together. I much prefer our other titles. You know, 'husband' and 'wife?' Don't you feel the same, Miss Monica?"

I found myself rendered thoroughly mute by this assertion. My mouth gaped open as I struggled to find a response, and then…I smelled…*bread*?

I sniffed Richard's neck in bewilderment, but the scent hadn't left—the rich, yeasty aroma of freshly baked bread seemed ingrained in his pores.

That is definitely the smell of sweet bread basted with melted butter, I

thought, aghast. *What on earth is going on?*

“I-Is that…bread? Richard, why do you smell like bread?”

Richard let out a sensual hum. “How would I know? Just ignore it. It doesn’t matter.”

“I-It most certainly is not a trivial issue,” I began, but then Richard started…*doing* things. “O-Oh, my, *stop it*, will you? Where do you think you’re touching?!”

“Why, the places you enjoy being touched of course, Miss Monica,” he crooned. “I know each spot *very well*. Such as…here. Hm?”

“Eeep! Ah—No! O-Ohhh…th-that’s a weak spot for me… Wh-Why do you know about it?!”

“Because you scream so sweetly every time I press it,” Richard replied, breath puffing over my ear.

“N-No, I…I…! Th-Those weren’t l-lewd mewls! I j-just happen to be s-sensitive whenever th-that particular pressure point is—*Aaah!*—massaged…”

“Here, now, just relax. Surrender yourself to me…”

“Ah—Aahh…*ohhhh*! Richard! Th-This is too much…exercise…for meee!”

MY eyes snapped open. I was awake. In the *real* world this time.

My arms were squeezing the life out of a pillow as I laid in bed, facedown. Alone this time, thank God.

I tilted my head to the side, taking in a tray that sat next to the bed. It was piled with freshly baked bread. I was still processing this when something pressed down firmly on the pressure points in my lower back, shaking me slightly.

“Are you awake now, Lady Monica?” asked a refreshingly cool, dignified voice.

My face blanched as a face appeared in my line of sight. The owner of the face peered at me, her cat-like purple eyes gleaming through a handful of stray, silky gray hairs.

“S-Solarus?”

“Indeed, Lady Monica, that is my name. Good morning.”

I couldn’t choke out a single word.

“There is no point in shutting your mouth at this stage, milady, I’ve already heard everything. Do you have any idea how loudly and clearly you talk in your sleep? Lucky for you that this room is sound-proofed with magic, hm?”

“Ohhhh. My. Goooooodness!!!”

“Fear not, for I take your secrets to the grave with me,” Solarus said blandly. She excused herself politely then and left the room.

I clutched my head in my hands, still in bed. “I knew this would happen. I *knew* this would happen and that’s exactly why I *didn’t* want to know more about…sex…”

I was a lust-inducing holy woman, one who roused heats in the ones I healed, and who roused lust in myself whenever I enhanced my powers. I was never able to escape laboring under the double-edged travesty of my saintly powers. Which was *precisely* the reason I had avoided absorbing any knowledge related to “bedroom activities.”

I may have been a woman of eighteen now, but I knew next to nothing about such…*intimate matters.* Or at least I *had* known nothing, until Their Majesties subjected me to their endless rounds of equally lovestruck and lurid soliloquies.

“Good grief… How could I have dreamed about Richard…like *that*…?”

Evidently, my subconscious had based the version of Richard in my dream on the things Their Majesties had told me during their fawning conversations. I could hear them so clearly in my head.

His Majesty: “Even though we’ve been married for so long, our relationship still feels so invigorating and new, Monica.”

Her Majesty: “I know *exactly* what His Majesty likes me to do to him.”

I couldn’t deny that the dream was incomplete since I still didn’t know *everything* there was to know about intimacy. But, regardless…my sense of guilt and self-loathing were extreme.

“And to think I’d have such a dream today of all days…”

My face rapidly cycled between ghostly paleness and the deep red of mortification, but my self-recriminating thoughts were interrupted when Solarus reentered the room. She helped me get ready, and in no time at all, I was walking out into the hallway, dressed in my holy attire.

My destination was the Institute of Magical Research, where Richard was waiting for me.

When I arrived, Richard was standing out front, awash in the dazzling morning light. He waved at me in greeting, his radiant smile a refreshing sight. *I defiled this lovely man,* I thought in despair. *I had an obscene dream about him…*

But these thoughts were cut off when Richard walked up to my side. “Morning, Miss Monica,” he said, eyes twinkling.

“G-Good m-morning, Richard.”

His brow furrowed, his cheeriness abruptly vanishing. “Miss Monica, what’s wrong? Why won’t you look at me?”

“U-Um, well…” I stammered. “Your Highness, your smile is so bright, I just can’t stare directly at you.”

His face cleared a little, and he laughed. “You’re ever the jester, Miss Monica.”

I flushed. I really, *truly* couldn’t make myself look at his face. It felt like every day that passed, my feelings toward Richard were becoming increasingly perplexingly complicated.

I’m doomed, I moaned internally.

EVER since Richard had met Monica outside of the Institute for Magical Research that morning, he’d known something was off. The entire day they’d been working together, and her behavior had been consistently odd the whole time. He couldn’t help but let it weigh on his mind.

That said, when there had finally been a lull in their activities, Richard had taken advantage of the moment to head over to her, a lunch invitation in mind.

It had been some time since they had last shared a meal together, so he thought this would be a good opportunity to rectify that. But before he could even call out her name, she had disappeared. It was almost like she was running away from him.

Almost as if…she's avoiding me.

"She's acting so odd," he grumbled to himself, agitated.

Ordinarily, the only times when she behaved strangely were after she'd overtaxed herself using her holy powers and was suffering under the influence of her libido. Except as far as he could discern, that wasn't the case at all today. So something else must be the underlying cause

"Hm. I wonder if something happened," Richard muttered, his head tilting in puzzlement.

He glanced casually over at Solarus, but his expression wasn't casual at all. There was a subtle demand there, a desire for a hint. Unfortunately for him, Solarus shook her head, expression cool.

"Mum's the word," she said firmly.

"Then something *did* happen."

"My lips are sealed. For the sake of her dignity."

"Huh. The fact that you won't report to me even though you're still *my* subordinate means it truly must be a personal matter for her. Am I right on that front, at least?"

Solarus nodded silently, affirmatively.

Richard considered the situation with this new information in mind. If it was something he most definitely needed to know, Solarus would have told him, no matter how insignificant. Which meant that whatever was bothering Monica, Solarus had judged it better for him *not* to know.

"Thank you," Richard told her with a soft laugh. He decided it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.

After that, he and Solarus left the institute together, passing through the courtyard in front of the palace. Their destination was a gazebo a bit further off,

which had been cleared of people ahead of their arrival. Richard quickly found himself a seat on one of the long benches, and settled in for a brief wait.

The gardens were chilly in winter, but the view was unbeatable. Beyond that, it was an advantageous spot to have a secretive conversation, as it was difficult to travel through the area without making a great deal of noise. Whether it was the sound of footsteps crunching on fallen leaves, or some other sound carried by the wind, Richard and his loyal servants would be quickly alerted to the presence of anyone nearby. It made the gazebo the perfect place to meet in order to deter any would-be spies.

Richard only had to wait for a short period of time before he heard the sound of brisk feet striding through the withered grass. Darius had finally arrived.

Now that both his servants were present, Richard sat up, directing his first question to Solarus. “How fares Miss Monica’s reputation amongst the nobles and the other residents of the capital?”

“Superbly,” she replied. “The nobles consider her ‘an indispensable asset for defeating monsters and furthering magical research.’ Their estimation of her is well-established at this point. Quite a few noblewomen are foaming at the mouth to invite her to the salons they host, so they’re essentially keeping each other in check as they compete to gain her favor.”

“Interesting,” Richard said, thoughtful. “I think the strongest contender will be the McKent family. Among the three borderland houses, they have the fewest ladies-in-waiting at court, which means they have more at stake in a power struggle. Huh. Right, then, continue please.”

“Her reputation amongst the city’s other residents is also excellent. Our publicity efforts through mass media—that is the newspapers and minstrels—have borne fruit. The people hold her in high esteem as a holy woman who has blessed the Empire with both tranquility and rejuvenation. In fact, her popularity is so high that it has effectively destroyed any chance of the ‘lewd priestess’ scandal in Kophe causing waves here. We haven’t even had to perform any information control as a result. If anything, even in Kophe there has been blowback against the Great Church and the monarchy for their actions. The sentiment seems to be that all of the fuss being raised is just ‘the

bitter howling of a kingdom that has been abandoned by its holy woman.'"

Richard clapped his hands together in praise. "As expected of Miss Monica. She has the people making all the right judgments of her." Satisfied with this portion of the conversation, Richard then turned to Darius. "How has it been going on your end?"

"In relation to the Hetzside incident, the three borderland houses are preparing to submit a formal pledge of allegiance and obedience with all their signatures to His Majesty."

"Very good."

"They would also like an audience with you as well, Your Highness."

"I don't think that's necessary. If anything, it would be a nuisance," Richard said, uncrossing and recrossing his legs before letting out a deep sigh. "Having already removed myself from the line of succession, I am nothing more than the knight commander of the special forces. I only wish that instead of toadying to me they would justly support His Majesty's authority. But beggars can't be choosers, so I'll accept their gestures, political and artificial as they are."

"There are also some influential aristocrats who come to you with marriage proposals, Your Highness."

"Again with that nonsense?" Richard scowled in disgust.

He had anticipated that once he returned to the Empire, he would have to face the same difficulties again. But he was becoming fed up with these constant requests. Short of making an explicit announcement, he couldn't have been more transparent about his intentions through his attitude toward his holy woman. *Are they blind or just that dumb?*

Since he was old enough to understand how the world worked, only two types of aristocratic young ladies had ever approached him. One was the sort that seemed to think of herself as some brave but tragic sacrifice. The other was an ambitious shark, hungry for the power and money that came with the imperial family name. As the man besieged by these young women and their families, he saw them as both troublesome and annoying. Then there were the old fossils who mistakenly thought they could win over a young buck by offering

him their daughters. Their vulgar sensibilities aggravated him just as much.

“In the end, those families only intend to use their daughters as substitute listening devices. I can’t fault the young ladies themselves for their parents’ ambitions, but I also have no obligation to take any of them as a wife. Ah, but Darius, if *you* are seeking a bride, shall I put in a good word for you?”

“Very funny, Your Highness. You’re perfectly aware that I have dedicated my life entirely to the devotion of you.”

Richard winked at Darius with a wry laugh. “Indeed, forgive me. And, in any case, go ahead and seed the rumor that I’m on the marriage mart.”

“Are you certain, Your Highness? Never say you’re serious.”

“Of course not. But how can I in good conscience introduce young ladies to my precious knights without ascertaining their true personalities?”

“Ah. Ah-ha…I see. I see, I see. So that’s your plan.”

Solarus rolled her eyes. “Darius. You should know well enough that if His Highness had actually wanted to marry some aristocrat’s daughter, he would have already done so by now.”

“I-I know you’re not wrong, but even so! His order still made me uneasy!”

Solarus slapped her hand over Darius’s mouth. “Lower your voice,” she snapped, eyes narrowing. “I swear, Darius, anytime it concerns His Highness, you lose *any* semblance of intelligence.”

Unable to reply, Darius just made a choked noise.

Richard’s face eased a bit as he listened to what he thought of as their usual rapid-fire, humorous exchange. Their shared history as citizens of the same destroyed homeland added an important layer to their bond.

“I’d rather have the three borderland houses offer me the beloved children they’re more reluctant to part with than their cherished daughters. Those dazzling, shining, *gold* children that blind men and women of all ages when presented before their eyes. Now that they’ve finally started wagging their tails for us, we might as well take this opportunity to suss out any fortunes they may have hidden. Ah…by the way.” The cynicism twisting his face disappeared,

replaced once more by a sharp, impassive expression. “Have there been any changes in the Kingdom of Kophe’s situation?”

“Yes,” Darius responded, having been freed from Solarus’s grip. “Based on merchants’ reports, holy women all across the country were dismissed all at once. The ongoing military campaign against monsters is now centered around priests affiliated with the Great Church.”

“Faaascinating. What a daring reformation. And its results?”

“More and more of their lands are falling under the monsters’ control.”

Richard chuckled evilly. “I wonder if that means the Great Church of Kophe has allied itself with the monsters? A bold policy indeed.” He smirked at his own sarcastic remark, then nodded at Darius to prompt him to proceed.

“Accurate information of damage throughout the country isn’t being conveyed to the royal family. They’re accepting the Great Church’s exaggerated reports of its successes without question. As far as the holy women who were terminated, a number of them are working privately, summoned by the elites and administrators of certain regions. Others are working without pay to fight against the monsters under the proud banner of charity.”

“Hmm… Well, because of the nature of their work, holy women have always been exploited. Manipulated into sacrificing wages for so-called intangible rewards of charity and glory.”

Richard’s eyes turned toward the sky as he gazed far off into the distance. He recounted his own experience in the Kingdom of Kophe with the elite’s “peace no matter the cost” mentality and its disastrous results. The country’s tranquility had been secured by the desperate battles of its knights and priestesses on the battlefield. But its royalty, titled nobility, and the Great Church’s ministers had apparently completely forgotten that simple fact.

“Additionally, just as Your Highness predicted, some regions in Kophe have begun importing imperial magical medicines. The use of such products manufactured abroad is outlawed in the kingdom, so of course, they can’t mention the drugs’ true origins on the front lines.”

“I know it’s awfully callous of me to say this,” Richard said, smiling slightly,

“but I’m glad our products are selling nevertheless. If they didn’t, the economy of our southern lands would collapse at this point.”

After the resolution of the Psyend incident, Richard had proposed the construction of a factory to produce magical medicines under Monica’s supervision. It had been the central measure in the enterprise of the region’s recovery. Naturally, he had included that as a factor in his overall strategy from the outset.

Except the reality had far outpaced his own predictions. On top of the astounding deposit of magical stone they discovered, the factory itself was many times more operational *and* profitable than he had forecast. It was steadily churning out high-quality magical medicines even as they spoke. With both internal and external demand for the tablets and elixirs, Psyend was already out of the red and on its way to being in the black. That monetary upswing for the region also meant Richard’s capital was steadily increasing too. He would need every bit of his funds later.

Simultaneously, the damage wrought by monsters was on the decline because of Monica’s efforts as a priestess. That had led directly to a reduction in military spending. Richard had used his newly acquired savings to furnish the imperial chivalric order with brand-new equipment. Things were now proceeding exceedingly smoothly, and that was with just one holy woman taking up residence in the Empire.

“Now then,” Richard said, standing up. “The merchant responsible for selling off the sacred tree will be coming to see me tomorrow. I’ll have to make sure he works hard for the sake of the Empire.”

He walked out of the gazebo, followed by his two trusted confidants. They headed toward the special forces’ training ground. At the sight of them, all the knights conducting exercises stopped what they were doing immediately and saluted their commander.

“Thémon,” Richard called.

Hearing his name spoken by his commander, the knight approached. Richard smiled easily at him as he saluted once more. “If I recall correctly, tomorrow is your son, Kash’s birthday, yes?”

Thémon's face lit up joyously. "Your Highness, I'm so honored you remembered!"

"It isn't much, but I've sent a gift for him to your residence. I wish all the happiness in the world to your boy blessed with such a brave father."

"Th-Thank you so much, my lord!"

The knight's voice was choked with happy tears as he saluted Richard's departing figure. Thémon wasn't alone in his admiration, though. The other knights watched their young, attentive, and considerate commander walk away with deeply respectful eyes.

Richard's next stop was the imperial capital building. As he made his way there, Darius followed along at his heels, continuing to brief him on various bits of information.

"Ever since Your Highness's return to the Empire, I have noticed that not only have the special forces' morale lifted, but the same can be said of each territory's chivalric order. I'm sure that Thémon, along with all the others, will continue striving ever more in their professional responsibilities."

"You all praise me too much. I'm only doing what's right." In a complete reversal of his earlier smile, Richard now released a cold, self-deprecating laugh. "It is my duty to act as the good and righteous knight commander for my subordinates who, in their roles, risk their lives and place themselves at my beck and call. Should the time ever come when they forfeit said lives for me, I would at the very least like to be a lord deserving of their sacrifice."

"I will be the first to entrust my life to you, Your Highness," Darius said firmly. "No one else is more willing and able, I promise you that."

Seeing Darius's competitive spirit roused, Richard smiled wryly. "You never change, do you, Darius?" Then the prince gave a long sigh. "Well, then, I guess I'll head into this battle against parliament's sly old foxes."

As he walked forward, brushing his forelocks back into place, Richard's face changed from that of knight commander to crown prince. "You can't save anyone with only noble wishes and gentleness. You can't effect change by dint of being a direct imperial descendant either," Richard muttered, speaking

directly to himself.

He closed his eyes and visualized his beloved saintess's delicate, proud back. She still held on to her pure dreams and gentleness. She remained stout-hearted, smiling beatifically even after being slandered and vilified. She utilized her innate talents for the sake of others.

As he stood behind her in his mind, Richard pictured the perfect person to stand at her side. He wanted to be that person, a version of himself that still believed himself just as his dazzling beloved did. He wanted to be a man he could be proud of. And he would use everything he had to protect what needed to be protected, whether it be his bloodline, his youth, his looks, or his military exploits.

"NOOOO!" I moaned, thrashing around in my bed. "I defiled Richard… *Uuuuggghhh*!"

Ever since I had that disrespectful, improper dream, I just couldn't bring myself to look Richard in the face. Whenever we worked together, I averted my glance and could only manage to speak to him if absolutely necessary. Beyond that, I avoided any contact with him.

I don't have any other choice! Not after that dream! That blasted dream! That astounding *dream!*

"Aaarrrggghhh!"

"Lady Monica," said a cool, detached voice, completely uninterested in my dramatic, despairing flails, "It is time for Their Majesties' treatments. Please get ready."

"Oh, yes…" I slapped my cheeks hard to shake off the heavy blanket of emotions suffocating me. Then I bounded off the bed, determined. "They're going to force me to listen to their love stories again, aren't they…?"

"Think of it as proof of your work bearing fruit. The fact that they trust you so much they feel they can speak freely with you is quite a compliment. Doesn't that make you happy?"

“It does, but…but… I am happy, I truly am. *But…*”

“You should be jumping for joy since that means more fodder for your dreams about His Highness.”

“Gaaaaaahhhhhh!!!”

“Do you really think that banging your head against a pillar will eliminate those thoughts? Or perhaps you have come to enjoy the pleasure of pain?” There was an evil glint to her smile at that remark.

“Wrong, wrong, wrong! I did that because of my overwhelming guilt… Aaaaahhhh!”

“We’re leaving.”

“Yes, ma’am…” I sulked after her, pouting.

The minute I left my room, however, I straightened my posture and took on the mantle of “serious resident holy woman.” Soon, I joined Lady Louise, who was also on her way to Their Majesties’ private rooms. When I opened the door to the emperor’s bedchamber, I found him standing ready inside. Stripped bare to the waist, he smiled broadly and opened his arms wide in welcome. “I’ve been waiting for you, Monica!”

“Your Majesty,” I chided, “you really must watch the way you speak. An outsider could have easily misunderstood you just now. Now, now, into the bed and on your front you go.”

Lady Louise brusquely coerced His Majesty onto the mattress. I quickly placed my hands on his back and inspected his aura. His entire body was exhausted from his efforts with his official duties as well as his physical training. He wasn’t sleeping much, either. *Then how is he still so energetic? Hmm. Could it be the power of their newlywed-again love-dovey bond?*

“Ahhh, that feels wonderful, Monica…” His Majesty said, voice entranced as I poured my holy magic into him. “I do believe I can make love to Tundica all night long tonight as well.”

“Glad to be of assistance.”

“The other day, Tundica said how much more beautiful she found my body

with its new muscularity. Her praise warmed me all over, you know. She was particularly enraptured with this area here on my lower back as she traced it with her slim, dainty, limber fingers."

"W-Well, isn't that something! But I'm afraid it's Her Majesty's turn! So I take my leave, Your Majesty!"

"Right, then, I'm counting on you. Ahhh, I can't wait to see my love…"

"Begging your pardon!"

I had to cut him off, politely of course, before his love story turned into a lewd one. I practically ran to the connecting door to Her Majesty's chamber. Clad in a paper-thin negligee, the empress had already been lurking impatiently for me within her room.

"I've been waiting for you, Monica."

What were the odds that both husband and wife would be expecting me with basically the same words and same pose? *Very good for these two, apparently.* In order to maintain my equilibrium, I calmly and quickly performed my analysis on her after ushering her into her bed. And just as rapidly, I healed the empress.

For a brief moment, I worried that she might get cold in the barely-there lingerie. But it turned out my concerns were for naught because Lady Louise had taken no chances with her preparations. Several hot water bottles had been inserted in strategic locations in the bed, and she had also readied an exceedingly soft, fluffy gown to go over the negligee.

"Make sure you wear this even when you're intimate with His Majesty so that you don't grow cold, hm?"

"Thank you for worrying about me, Monica. But I'll be fine. Whenever His Majesty and I are locked in a tight, passionate embrace, all the places our bodies touch burn so hotly. *So. Hotly.* We aren't even in the depth of winter, yet I grow so warm that sweat slides down everywhere."

"I'm…glad to hear that…" I said, voice choked.

I took that as my queue to leave, excusing myself politely. I ducked out of the empress's room along with Lady Louise and Solarus, who had been following

behind me and acting like her normal ever-silent, ever-vigilant self.

We had barely even closed the door to the bedchamber before we heard them calling each other's names in ecstasy.

"Ahhh, my beloved emperor… You look as splendid and virile as ever."

"Tundica, Tundica, my love, it's just the two of us here now. Please, say my name, won't you?"

"Oh, Christopher. Christopher… *Ahhh*!"

I couldn't very well cover my ears to block out Their Majesties' voices because that would be the height of disrespect. So I did the next best thing. I emptied my heart and mind, turning them both into endless voids. And I endured. I. Endured.

Next to me, the mistress of the robes sobbed, nodding happily, clearly moved by what was happening. "I…I can't believe they have both become so animated…and unflagging…"

I endured, but I hadn't been completely successful in controlling the violent storm of emotions inside me. Nevertheless, I suppressed them as much as I could before responding properly to the weeping Lady Louise. "It truly is a wonderful thing, isn't it?"

That was the best I could choke out at the moment. Of course, it was wonderful. *Of course* it was. But…still…

Thankfully, we soon reached the portion of the hallway where we were to split ways, and I headed back to my room.

I let out a moan as I flopped onto my bed, burying my face in the covers. "Those two…are incredible…my *goodness*."

Was that the norm when two people were already in love, and had their romantic attachment to one another strengthened even more with the addition of healthy, wholesome sexual desire? If these were the results of such a thing, then I was genuinely stunned and impressed. Despite being a holy woman who incited lust in others and herself, I had lived my life until now knowing nothing about love or eros. And it wasn't like all my encounters with lust were anything

beautiful or promising—I was just constantly in danger by crazed aroused people who wanted to assault me, my own mind venturing into strange thoughts whenever my powers put my libido into overdrive.

To be blunt, my experiences with sexual desire were either extremely unpleasant or crude. I could think of only a few other things related to the topic, such as the prostitution that had gone on in the town inside of the front-line base, or the breeding habits of farm animals. That was the extent of my knowledge on the subject. And yet…

"Two people who love each other so deeply can become wildly happy just through the act of affirming that love…?" I asked quietly, my heart aching.

Over the past few months of our treatments, Their Majesties' vitality and energy had increased steadily, and for the better. But that dynamic blossoming in their lives couldn't be attributed to their official work going well or their bodies' biological health improving. No, it was because they enjoyed their lovemaking tremendously, and always looked forward to it. Their recovered sexual intimacy was the reason they were so joyous and refreshed all the time now.

"How envious I am of them," I whispered, the words revealing the truth in my heart. Still lying limp in my bed, I decided that since the door was open anyway, I might as well unleash all my complaints. "I wonder…will a day come when I can revel in those sorts of feelings too?"

Though I had been scrupulously fastidious in avoiding learning about that side of life, it wasn't as if I *didn't* want to fall in love. Of course I was curious about the romantic and sexual aspects of being human. I had just closed the lid on those thoughts and feelings because I had been afraid to make missteps and cause misunderstandings as a holy woman. I had shut away that side of myself in self-defense.

So if I had the chance, who would I fall in love with?

When that thought slipped into my mind, Richard's voice tickled a soft part of my heart. *"Miss Monica."* I heard his melodious voice. I saw his gentle eyes. And then I pictured the entire ever-dependable gentleman they both belonged to.

"Well…" I said with a sigh, "I guess my moral compass has officially shattered

now that I've used Richard as an experimental object of my potential affection."

My sense of guilt returned in full force; my heart felt suddenly full of dark clouds. In an attempt to calm myself, I took a deep, restorative breath. *Anyway, I thought I decided that Richard just isn't the type to feel sexual desire…?*

Could anything else be the case, when he always, *always* managed to retain his cool composure, even when I was in heat or drove others around us into their own? There was never even a chink in his stoic expression. Our battle with the legendary snow beast was a perfect example. For mercy's sake, I had used so much of my holy power that wildflowers and grasses grew in abundance around us. In *winter*, no less. And yet, there'd been nary a hint of lust in him to be found.

In contrast, my behavior at the time still made me powerfully ashamed of myself. Even though our lives had literally been at stake, I had *still* expected something to happen, wrapped up in the intense arousal caused by overusing my power. I found it hard not to despise myself for that reaction.

But that wasn't the only reason I was unsuitable for Richard. It certainly wasn't the focal point for my self-flagellation.

"An outstanding, wonderful individual like Richard…who just also happens to be the imperial crown prince… I *sullied* him in my indecent dreams… Ahhh, I'm so unworthy!"

I rolled around on my bed in despair and humiliation for a while, but it did little to erase my guilty conscience. Finally I just lay sprawled out, spread-eagled as I stared up at the ceiling.

"I wish…Richard was just a normal man," I said quietly.

If only he wasn't the imperial crown prince. If only he was just a normal man with a normal libido. Then, I could have—

"Hold on! I could have what?! I could have *what*?! What in the world am I even thinking?!"

As a certain thought tried to take root in my mind, I took immediate action and banished it by shaking my head vigorously in denial. *Was I really about to entertain such an outlandish idea?*

“Time for me to go to sleep,” I muttered. “Right, that’s got to be the best thing for me to do for now. And anyways, I’m so…exhausted…”

I quickly jumped out of bed, changed my clothes, and crawled right back in, squeezing my eyes closed tight. But alas, sleep didn’t come to me easily. Richard’s image seemed branded into my eyelids because it just would *not* disappear. *My chest feels tight.* I couldn’t help wanting to see him.

“What *is* this?”

I thought back to the day’s events. I had only used my holy powers to heal and stimulate Their Majesties’ senses. Nothing else, so that couldn’t be the source of this restlessness. I hadn’t even used my special abilities on myself. And yet, the odd sensation wouldn’t leave me. Like I was both floating and dying. *It’s almost as if I’m in lo—*

“No. No…not with Richard. *Anyone* but him. Because…he’s not that kind of man…”

I forcibly slammed the door shut to my heart again. The time for wallowing was over. There were just too many feelings that I didn’t want to and *couldn’t* acknowledge at this moment. So instead, I burrowed deeper into my bed and crushed a pillow tightly to me as I fell asleep.

“HMM. Up until now, I’ve been using fish wort and common rue to keep sexual arousal in check. But instead of using such a pungent scent to discourage it, I wonder if a milder one to calm me would be better… What about a perfume made of cedarwood grown in the territory of Hetzside? With hints of bergamot, perhaps? Or maybe orange peel? But they all need to be ordered from faraway places, so that might not be the most logical route… Mint is an option too… Hmm.”

I was in a section of the herbal garden. While I tilled the plot, I thought about which herbs I should plant for a spring harvest because I wanted to create a new formula of magical medicine to control my libido. Totally absorbed in my contemplation, I failed to notice the person who appeared right in front of my eyes.

“Miss Monica.”

“Gaaah!” I shrieked.

“Why are you screaming like that?”

I looked up at Richard, finding his gaze simultaneously reproachful and dissatisfied. “I-I rarely see you out here. That’s all.”

“The ceremony just ended, so I came straight here.”

Ah, that’s right. Up until a short time ago, I could vaguely recall hearing the sound of an orchestra playing lively tunes from the great plaza. I guessed by the look of Richard’s outfit that he’d dressed for the occasion.

He looked resplendent in his formal military uniform, his hair brushed back smartly underneath the military cap. Compared to his figure in his suit of armor, this particular attire always emphasized the beautiful proportions of his body. His thick chest. That narrow waist. And those long, slender, but muscularly well-proportioned thighs. *An unbelievable temptation, through and through.*

I involuntarily stepped back and turned my face away from him. Richard being Richard, of course he wouldn’t let that stand. With one easy step, he closed the distance between us.

“…Miss Monica.”

“What?”

“I’d rather talk comfortably seated than standing around like this.”

“I-I—”

“Ah, perhaps you want to tell me that your schedule is open until the afternoon? I’m well aware, thank you.”

The master strategist anticipated what I’d been about to do and made the first move himself, cutting off my escape route. I floundered for words. *Richard’s acting strange too.* Under the shadow cast by the visor of his military cap, his fiery eyes resembled the setting sun as they captured me in their intense sights. I felt bound by his unwavering stare.

“Oh, fine.” I consented. *Reluctantly.* I had no other option after all.

My heart beat fast from nervousness at seeing this rare version of Richard, totally opposite from his usually bright, smiling self. He led me to a garden table positioned in another part of the herb garden. A nearby maid considerately unlatched and opened the large parasol attached to the table. Then she brought us a tea set along with a warm lap blanket for me.

"Thank you," I told her politely.

Once she bowed and left us alone, I *really* had no way out.

A sweet scent drifted in the air from the rose-infused black tea. It accompanied the delectable aroma of oven-fresh pastries baked with herbs.

Silence filled the air between me and Richard as we both just sat there without saying a word. *Good grief,* I thought. *This is so* awkward. I felt unable to break the uncomfortable wordlessness between us, but Richard didn't seem so bothered. He rested his elbows on top of the table, steepled his fingers, and stared directly at me. The silence stretched.

I felt incredibly unnerved—Richard was usually so garrulous and ready with his smiles, but he was acting so incredibly different today. *Where is the Richard who always comes bouncing up to me, asking me if I want to go for a round of hand-to-hand combat? The one who always cheerfully asked about me and my life in the Empire, or if I'd like to go on an outing?* It was hard for me to even think of a time that we'd spoken when he hadn't beamed at me, his face cheerful and lively.

And the minute I thought that, I came to a sudden realization—I had been terribly spoiled by him for the entirety of our relationship. No matter the time or place, he would speak to me gently, always considering my feelings and state of mind. I barely tasted the tea as I came to terms with the fact that it must be *my* fault his countenance was so stern. The only one I could blame for this uneasy atmosphere was myself.

"Miss Monica."

"Huh?!" I gasped, shocked by my thoughts.

"Honey. Are you sure you don't want your usual spot of honey in your tea?"

"Oh… Oh, I do, thank you."

Prompted by Richard's comment, I picked up the glass pot of honey and poured some into my cup. *He remembered that I don't like my tea black…* I thought, my heart softening. Even with this layer of awkwardness between us, his level of consideration for me made warmth blossom inside of me. Unfortunately, it made me want to run away all the more.

"Miss Monica," Richard said again.

I looked up. "Y-Yes?"

"Have you been avoiding me lately?"

His decisively straightforward question made sweat pour down my back like a waterfall. *D-Darn it. Of course he noticed and of course he wouldn't let it slide.*

"U-Ummm… No, I haven't?"

"Liar," he said, voice frustrated. "Look, you're avoiding my eyes even now. You're terrible at lying, Miss Monica."

I winced and peeked at his face. His eyes were so dark and stormy with emotion I shivered involuntarily. It was the first time I'd seen this particular expression of his. Even in Hetzside, presented with the head of his would-be assassin, he had been many times more cool and collected.

"Do…you hate me now?" Richard asked softly.

"What?! O-Of course not! Never! There's no way I could ever hate you."

"Then why have you been avoiding me lately?"

I looked away, flushing. "I-I haven't."

"You most certainly have."

"I…well…"

"Yes?"

"Well…um…"

"It hurts me when you avoid me, Miss Monica."

Richard's frank confession jolted me into confronting reality. He wasn't glaring darkly at me at all. *He's sad. Lonely.* I had only imagined anger on his

face because of my poor attempt to assuage my own guilt.

"Richard…"

"Miss Monica, *please,"* he said, voice both earnest and forlorn. "I'd rather you tell me the truth if you have a reason for not wanting to see me. If I did something, anything to hurt your feelings, I'll apologize and repent so I don't do it again. Are you worried about something? Do you have specific complaints? Whatever it is, just *tell* me. I don't want you to be reserved with me… The reason I brought you here was because I want to make you happy."

His fingers were no longer steepled. Instead, they were laced together tightly as if in prayer. "If you truly, truly don't wish to see me anymore," he said in a rush, "then of course I'll respect your feelings—"

"W-Wait, Richard. Wait. That's not it at all. It really isn't."

Unable to bear his pain any longer, I interjected. He so thoughtfully, seriously wanted to know why I had been avoiding him. I was devastated that my immature behavior had forced him into this untenable position.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I can't believe I made you agonize so much… You did absolutely nothing wrong, Richard. It's *my* problem, *my* fault. I handled it poorly and hurt you instead. You're the victim in all this."

"The victim?"

Seeing Richard's befuddled look, I mentally fortified myself to tell him everything. That was the least I could do. "Forgive me. I, well, the reason it's been so, um, difficult for me to see you… You promise you won't be repulsed by what I'm about to tell you?"

"I would respond with 'Do you even have to ask that after we've known each other for so long?' but I see that you're serious, so let me reassure you, Miss Monica. Nothing you say or do will ever repulse me."

Finally, *finally*, his lips curved upward ever so slightly. I had a feeling that inside his beautifully shaped head, Richard was scrolling through his recollections of the various foolish things I'd done. Though I felt both warmed and embarrassed by his reply, I braced myself and began speaking once more.

“All right then. Recently, His Majesty and Her Majesty have been summoning me for private conversations quite frequently… And, um…those chats combined with my exposure to their overall auras as well as their nightly, uh, activities, led me to experience…a strange dream.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, bother…do I *have* to tell you?”

“I can’t say I’m not curious.”

Is he being serious?! Or is he bullying me?! I couldn’t tell at all. Either way, I decided to continue, but my words just trembled at the edge of my tongue when I went to speak them. *Both my lips and cheeks must be undoubtedly scarlet by now.*

“Um…well, you know very well that, uh, I’m not particularly knowledgeable about *those* sorts of things…and I don’t r-really have any other men that I’m close to…not like you…so…”

“Right. Go on.”

“S-So…in my dream? I…well…you appeared, Richard…”

“I did?”

He sunk his teeth into that bit of information, metaphorically of course, and leaned forward over the table, thoroughly intrigued. Unable to bear the closeness, I instinctively pulled back from him. Naturally, he drew closer again. I retreated once more. He came back. *I wish he would just leave me be!* Having his beautiful face so near made me want to escape far, far, away.

“Ummm… Right, then…I had a strange dream…l-let’s just say if a wizard had entered my dream and pronounced me guilty of treason against the Empire for the, um, things you and I did, I wouldn’t be able to defend myself against that charge…it was *that* kind of dream…”

“Hm. I think you’ll have to spell it out more clearly for me.”

“Bah! F-Fine. It was…a lewd dream…”

Clatter.

“Huh…? R-Richard! The tea! The tea!”

Somehow Richard had managed to knock over his teacup with his elbow and send the liquid inside splashing all over the place. While I stood up and rushed to him in a panic, the maid left her post a distance away and raced toward us. Together, we pulled off the tablecloth, and then I checked to make sure his uniform wasn’t stained.

“Thank goodness,” I said, letting out a sigh of relief. “It didn’t drip on you.”

Seeing nothing on his chest and legs, I finally relaxed. But then I immediately realized I was directly at eye level with him in my stooped position.

“O-Oh…” I mumbled, cheeks flushing.

“Miss Monica…you are truly one of a kind.”

We were close enough now for our breaths to mingle. Richard smiled ruefully, watching me. Relief. Bewilderment. Bashfulness. Surprise. His expression seemed to be a mix of all those emotions and more.

“In short…you found it difficult to face me because of a strange dream you had about us?”

In that moment, I learned how brutally tough it was to be asked such a question point blank by the very man I had defiled in my dreams! Still, I had to answer him truthfully. I had to take responsibility for hurting him. So I nodded meekly.

“Correct,” I agreed. My cheeks burned and I felt a compelling need to howl in embarrassment. Instead, like a child about to be scolded, I pursed my lips together tightly and hung my head down.

“Ahhh. I see… Indeed…” Richard covered his mouth with a hand wrapped in a pure-white glove. He nodded to himself like he had finally grasped something important. And, oddly enough, his cheeks were flushed.

This was yet another new expression of his that I witnessed for the first time. *Oh, dear, and I believe I know precisely why he’s making it…* How else was a man supposed to look when he had just been informed by a holy woman with an unholy side effect that she had not only dreamed of him, but she had also

done indecent things to and with him in that dream?

A strong urge rose up in me to go dig a hole and bury myself in it. But since I couldn't do that, I started babbling excuses.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. But don't worry! It was definitely an odd dream, but, um, it wasn't *that* graphic. I think. Maybe. I mean, I don't know a lot about that side of life. So, you see, there's a limit to my imagination. Or something. So, no need for you to worry!"

"Then what exactly *did* happen in the dream?"

"Huh?!"

"I find that I'm positively dying to know, Miss Monica. About what I was like in your dream. What did I say? What did I do? Regale me, and please don't spare any detail."

"W-Will you stop that?! I…there's no way I can talk about it…"

"Fascinating," Richard drawled, voice deepening. "Did I truly do such unspeakable things to you in your dream, Miss Monica?"

"I do *not* appreciate this interrogation, Your Highness. Cease and desist *immediately*. A-And your face is too close."

"Mm-hmm… To think *that* is the reason you were so desperately avoiding me. What a surprise."

Richard's earlier depressed attitude had completely vanished. Now he was like a child who had just received a new toy to play with. He was blatantly enjoying himself as he grinned, watching me. Flustered, I returned to my chair. The maid had kindly cleaned up and reset the table, refilling our teacups as well. I raised mine to my lips, sipping on the black tea.

Richard leaned forward, propping his elbows on the new tablecloth, and began laughing uncontrollably. "So that's all it was, hm? Will wonders never cease…" After a few minutes, his outburst subsided. But still chuckling, the horrid man insisted on pushing me. "Have those two really been *that* outrageously indecent with their talks and behavior?"

"Will you give it a rest already?!" I snapped, flushing.

Richard chuckled. “I really must remember to thank my brother and his wife.”

“What?! *Why*?!”

“Well, Miss Monica,” he crooned, “that would be because, thanks to them, I got to experience such a new and engaging side of you.”

I pouted, flustered by his teasing. “You’re so mean!”

This sent Richard into another paroxysm of laughter.

I still very much wanted to crawl into the aforementioned hole. But more than that, I felt incredible relief seeing Richard’s mood so drastically improved. I thought back over our conversation and realized he’d spoken about Their Majesties quite cheerfully, in contrast to the grave, worrisome tone his voice often took when their issues were brought up. I felt utter delight at the change.

Richard had left his homeland due to the political confrontation between those who supported his brother and those who had tried to install him as ruler without his consent. From there, he’d concealed his identity and fought on the front lines against monsters in another country entirely, never knowing when he might die. *Brave, noble Richard.* For him, Their Majesties’ concerns, particularly their struggles with infertility, had been so deeply serious that he could never even crack a hint of a smile when it came to a matter that concerned them.

That very same Richard was now within the palace, dying of laughter at my silliness, while simultaneously being grateful for Their Majesties’ renewed enthusiasm for life and especially each other. I felt abruptly as if I’d been given the rare chance to see a glimpse of Richard enjoying a bit of hard-earned happiness. If all I had to do was reveal my embarrassing dream to make him smile like this, it was definitely a trivial price to pay.

“How are those two faring, by the way?” Richard asked. “Ah, I don’t need details. Just a light summary is fine.”

“A light summary, hm?” I replied, smiling teasingly. “Both their health and relationship are in excellent condition. According to the attending physician, at this rate…he’s hopeful that conception isn’t far on the horizon.”

“I’m very glad to hear that. Now then, Miss Monica…about *your* particular

matter.”

“Which matter?! Not my impure dream again! Please, I’ve had enough!”

Richard coughed, just barely holding back another bout of laughter. “Truth be told, I was deeply upset just moments ago, thinking that for some reason I’d made you hate me. Just the thought alone weighed heavily on me, you know.”

“I could never hate you, Richard. But I really am very sorry.”

His face turned serious without warning as he stared at me. “Miss Monica… Do you remember when I said that I wanted you and you alone to believe in me no matter what?”

I nodded. “I do.”

He lowered his gaze. “As ‘Richard Il Belktrius,’ I’ve always been careful of how I present myself, because I’m constantly under everyone’s scrutiny. That never-ending awareness has forced me to calibrate my behavior depending on how I wish others to see me. But…sometimes I find myself feeling empty with that sort of life.”

He pulled his military cap from his head, leaving his hair bare. A tuft of it fell across his brow, casting a shadow over his vermillion eyes.

“I’m always acting the part of the ideal crown prince, taking on the attitude others wish to see from me. There have been numerous times when I’ve had to crush my sentiments and use whatever means necessary, including trickery, to accomplish my necessary goals. It takes a toll on a person’s mind… Growing up in the Empire, I never had someone who I could open my heart to easily. Until I met you, Miss Monica. So…” Richard raised his head and seized me with those gorgeous eyes, a soft smile on his face. “Now that I have this freedom with you…hearing you say my name and the fact that we can talk about all manner of things unreservedly makes me incredibly happy.”

“I…I’m glad.”

“Miss Monica, you are of course an extremely dependable holy woman. But I think you’re a marvelous young lady too. I admire you greatly, you see. Which is why I dearly wish that we can *always* remain so close, just like this.”

“You praise me far too much…” I said, my eyes drifting to the table. I let my lids fall slowly down, obscuring Richard’s overwhelming radiance.

But Richard…he didn’t stop staring at me. I could feel his gaze. My cheeks flushed as a bubble of shyness burst in my chest, summoned by his determined stare. I changed tactics, fussing with my wimple in a blatant attempt to evade his eyes, but that didn’t distract him the least bit either. He continued watching me intently, thoughtfully. I felt ensnared by his intense gaze.

“Whenever we meet, Miss Monica, my smiles come naturally to me.”

“Richard…”

“So no matter what roles you have me perform in your dreams, I want you to come to me anyway. There’s no need to stress yourself over it either.” At this last sentence, Richard sent me a wink.

I choked.

“As long as it’s *you,* Miss Monica, I will welcome any part you would have me play in your sleep.”

“O-Oh, stuff it, will you?!”

“And of course, you’re more than free to tell me every single detail regarding your dreams about me. In fact, I insist that you do≡.”

“N-Now I definitely *never* will!” I snapped, an embarrassed flush crawling over my skin from my head to my toes.

Richard threw back his head, roaring with laughter. “All right then, Miss Monica,” he said with a grin, “I’ll give you a pass, with one condition. As long as you stay by my side, I won’t ask anything else of you.”

He said that as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Those unequivocal words, his beaming smile, and that warm gaze all combined to make my cheeks flame bright red. *Vexing man.*

I knew there was no *special* meaning in his words, not for someone like me. But understanding that logically and understanding it emotionally were completely different issues. Though I knew his words meant no such thing, my heart still pounded at what sounded like a confession of love.

To smooth over both my blushing face and the unfurling heat in my chest, I took a sip of the black tea in front of me. It was sweet, with just a tinge of bitterness.

“That’s right, Richard, you don’t have a libido at all…” I grumbled, trying to calm my runaway pulse. “And since you have no interest in finding a partner, there’s no reason for me to feel jealous of them either. So as long as you’re fine with me being your best friend forever, I’m fine with that too.”

I tipped my head back, emptying my teacup of its contents in one long swig. Then, without glancing once in Richard’s direction, I dove straight into the confections, leisurely savoring each delicious morsel. I breathed in the scent of the breeze, wallowing in the strong, herbal scent it carried and hoping it would ease my tension. It did—my mind began to drift idly.

Judging from that warm breeze, spring isn’t so far away, I mused, cheered by the thought of how the flowers in this garden would bloom only a month or so in the future. Many of the flowers for medicinal use were unfortunately destined to be plucked before they even got the chance to bloom, though, which I found rather depressing. *What a waste.*

“Richard, I have a question,” I said, not looking away from my contemplation of the garden. “What kind of scenery does the Empire have in springtime? I imagine it’s quite beautiful.”

The only answer I got was silence.

“Richard?” I asked. “What’s wrong?”

Silence.

This finally prompted me to look at him; I hadn’t looked in his direction since my best friend speech. I froze at the look on his face. His eyes were unnaturally wide, and he was staring at me dumbfounded.

“Um…is something the matter, Richard? You’re acting strange.”

Did I say something rude? I wondered. I cycled back through my past few comments, and then it hit me.

“Oh, I see… Of course, not all people without sex drives will abstain from

romantic relationships entirely. To each their own, yes? I'm sorry for that faux pas." I bowed my head deeply in penance, but Richard remained frozen.

Hmm, something else must be bothering him, then.

"Uhhh…Miss Monica."

"Yes?"

"I think you might have some sort of misconception about me…"

My brow furrowed. "Whatever do you mean?"

He went silent again, his expression both baffled and strained with some tense feeling. It was a total reversal from his softly smiling face from just a few moments before. How to describe him… He looked like someone forced to swallow an astringent concoction while tackling a particularly difficult political challenge, his brain under intense mental stress.

"Well…um. Huh." He frowned in thought. "Perhaps I can use it to my advantage, after all…"

"R-Richard? Please tell me if I'm actually misunderstanding something. I'd be happy to correct my error."

"You know what? Never mind. Not a problem whatsoever." He schooled his features once more, having come to some internal conclusion. "But keep one thing in mind, Miss Monica. I absolutely, positively adore you and that reality will never change."

"Yes, sir!" I said, sending him a mock salute.

I wasn't fooled—I knew Richard had pulled the wool over my eyes about something. I just didn't know what. But since I'd resolved to trust him, I decided not to press him on it. If I pushed too hard, I feared destroying our relationship. And *that* was unacceptable.

IN the capitol building of the Kingdom of Kophe's royal citadel, the spring parliamentary session was now taking place. Priests took their turn in front of the dais hosting the king's throne, reading aloud reports of the monster expeditions going on in the regions the Great Church had dispatched them to.

The priests all wore snow-white silk robes with hooded cloaks pulled up over their heads. The cloaks came in various colors that signified their ranks and affiliations, which were also indicated by the wings that spread over the cloaks' shoulders, embroidered in silver thread.

Every single priest's report contained similar sleep-inducing information for his audience. Regardless of the area under their supervision, they all had one thing in common to inform the king of—a succession of victories. They claimed that both human casualties and property damage were less than half of what they used to be when holy women had been employed.

Sitting to the left of the king's throne was the most powerful person in the Great Church, High Priest Pisciozze. Seated at the king's right was his uncle, Lord Kantas, who was also a minister in the government. As he listened to his subordinates' reports, High Priest Pisciozze's wrinkled face transformed, flooded with delight.

He then turned his attention to the king. "Your Majesty, what say you? Our priests' powers, honed from years of training, are more than enough to subdue the monsters even without holy women."

With sunken eyes, the king watched each priest take the podium and give his report. "This is exactly what I wanted, Pisciozze."

To the king, holy women were an aggravatingly inexplicable existence. He scoffed at pronouncements of them being the country's salvation, because he only thought of them as witches who undermined his kingdom's stability. They were abominations born spontaneously, irrespective of social class. Vile women who couldn't be controlled within the normal confines of human society. Though the holy women were the object of envy from other countries, the king despised his nation's reliance on them. He found it humiliating and a disgrace to the monarchy's honor.

So, in order to ostracize and eventually expel the priestesses, the king joined forces with High Priest Pisciozze, who himself was scheming to expand the Great Church's authority. He had even used his Crown Prince Medaikonar—his dimwitted son—and his capricious personality to further his aims.

When his son had come to him with his reckless demand to marry that

lascivious priestess, the king had given him permission. And when his son had voided the engagement, the king had allowed it. Everything was part of his plan to eliminate his kingdom's excessive dependence on holy women.

Once he had exposed the vulgar priestess, the one with exceptionally highly ranked powers, he had grounds to banish her from the kingdom. She had served as the perfect scapegoat to convince parliament of his platform to reject all holy women. And the result of his machinations? The Kingdom of Kophe had achieved tranquility under the system of order created by the Great Church and the aristocracy.

High Priest Pisciozze glanced at his distinguished subordinates and said in a voice full of arrogance, "Kophe no longer has a need for holy women with their obsolete witch powers. Yet the masses continue their ignorant protests, believing in these priestesses' importance. Even so…as it stands, intellectuals, royalty, and the nobility welcome our priests' leadership on the front lines. There are none among the aristocracy who support the existence of holy women. Eventually, the rest of our citizens will fall in line and forget that holy women ever existed."

The king nodded in silent agreement. "History will prove us right. Holy women are savage, repulsive creatures."

ONCE the assembly had ended, a father and son—both aristocrats—boarded their carriage to return to the family's estate in the royal capital. Upon arriving, they headed straight for the office, their loud footsteps conveying the anger in their hearts and on their faces. Once inside the room, they both sighed in exhaustion.

"That was a complete farce, wasn't it, Father?" huffed out the young man wearily. He was around twenty years old, and was his father's oldest son and heir.

"His Royal Majesty will never know the harsh reality plaguing the outside world—he's been sequestered within the royal palace's sturdy walls his whole life. To a decrepit old man who has never once stepped foot outside the capital's gates, the screams and wails of his people must indeed seem farther

than the twittering of even the smallest bird.”

That comment alone was enough to get the older man charged with treason and summarily executed. But the count, who was around forty years of age, was gravely concerned about the devastation in the regions impacted by the church’s extensive reformation. As family patriarch, he worried for his children and wife, as well as the people who lived in the areas under his control.

All throughout the Kingdom of Kophe, monster invasions were reducing the areas of both cultivated and habitable lands. It was an inescapable fact. The country as a whole was growing poor in many ways at an alarmingly accelerated rate. Many provinces were raising taxes on their subjects after exhausting their budgets defeating the monsters.

“Father. It’s only a matter of time before our nation is annihilated. We continued to employ holy women in secret against the Church’s edict, so we’ve managed to hold the line against the monsters in our county. But this isn’t a sustainable strategy. Somebody needs to raise the alarm about this situation.”

“Yes, I fully agree with you. Somebody does indeed have to say something. Yet this is what I’ll get for trying to appeal to reason.” The older man shaped his fingers into a knifehand strike. Then he placed it against his own neck, mimicking the executioner’s axe chopping his head off.

His face grim, the count leaned against the window wearily. “The prominent noble families have all thrown in their lot with the Great Church and endorse the removal of holy women. So, for one sole count to advocate for their necessary presence would be suicidal.”

“But if we leave those idiot priests to their own devices…”

“I know, I know… Damnation, if only I had the status and power of a higher-ranking bloodline.”

The priests dispatched by the Great Church were wildly inadequate in their efforts to defeat monsters. They disregarded and derided the experiences and opinions of those familiar with the situation on the ground. They ordered knights using armchair theories. They deployed sacred magic from the highest, safest locations instead of at close-range, where it would be most effective.

Unlike the holy women who fought bravely on the battlefield and adapted their magic as circumstances changed, the Church's priests had never even strayed close to the front lines. They thought themselves too sanctified for such behavior. To those priests, their chief duty was blessing the knights with strengthening magic. After all, it was a much easier feat for the knights to exert themselves and use their knowledge to do what they were trained to do. That was how their arrogant minds worked.

Naturally, any casualties and property damage weren't their responsibility either. *No*, accountability rested on the shoulders of those on the battlefield. All simply pawns and human shields for the Church's priests. And even if things didn't go well in the present, those so-called holy men had convinced themselves that they could eventually do everything the holy women had.

What made the situation even more tragic was the anti-priestess sentiment that had taken over parliament. Because of it, each region had no choice but to rely on the incompetent priests in their battles against monsters. At this rate, their country would be destroyed, and all hope seemed lost.

While father and son ruminated, the family's steward entered the office.

"What is it?" the count asked.

"My lord, you have a visitor. It is a merchant from the Belktrius Empire, one who has recently been selling magical medicines in our land."

The count and his son exchanged glances. Magical medicines manufactured in the Empire were high quality and low price. They were imported as substitutes for holy women's powers and were an extremely useful commodity. Ordinary magical medicines functioned by enhancing the magical reserves of an injured or ill person to natural healing abilities. But they possessed nowhere near a priestess's powerful ability to reattach severed limbs and regrow organs like eyes, noses, and teeth.

That wasn't the case for the imperial drugs imported in recent weeks. They were capable of rejoining a severed limb to the host's body if the medicine was used quickly after the detachment. They could also regenerate the aforementioned organs too, albeit at a slower pace. The medicine possessed practically the same efficacy as a holy woman's rare powers, so some folks had

started calling it “holy woman water.” And the visitor in question was one they both knew. He had his own independent supply channel, selling this miraculous medicine for even less than usual throughout the Kingdom.

“Hm… An imperial merchant…”

The count was well aware that the merchant’s business was just a guise to collect information on Kophe’s internal affairs. But he was determined to protect his lands and his people, so the tradesman wasn’t the worst business partner. All things considered, the count had no qualms about purchasing the magical medicine from him in bulk.

He did find this particular development interesting, though. Not only had the dubious man deliberately traveled to the royal capital when parliament was in session, but he now also sought a meeting with him.

“Should we send him away for the time being?” the young man asked his silent father, who was bracing an elbow against the arm he had wrapped across his stomach.

The count rested his chin in his hand, contemplating the situation. And then—he pushed himself away from his reclining position against the window. “My son,” he said, tone serious. “I have neither tremendous authority nor status.”

“Father…?”

“But as a lord who wishes to protect his lands and his people, I *do* have the ability to decide who will work for me.” A light suddenly flashed through the count’s dark, gloomy gaze. Straightening his posture, he told his steward, “Let the man in. I, too, would like to have a word with our visitor.”

SPRING had arrived in the Empire in more than one way. Her Majesty was pregnant! So far, her pregnancy had proceeded smoothly, and she had now entered the stable stage, which was the point at which a magical physical conducted an examination to determine the baby’s sex. Their Majesties had soon found out that they’d be adding a little prince to the fold.

The imperial capital’s largest and grandest spring festival was hastily converted to one praying for both the baby’s and Her Majesty’s health, as well

as a safe and uncomplicated birth.

In order to protect both the empress and the child resting in her womb, I had moved to a room adjacent to hers. This way I would be ready at a moment's notice for anything. In the meantime, it would be much easier for me to continue monitoring and treating Their Majesties with my holy abilities.

And then—on a warm day when the spring blooms had long since scattered in the wind and bright green leaves were sprouting verdantly everywhere, the long-awaited imperial prince was born. He shared his father and uncle's dazzlingly shimmering deep red hair and had inherited jet-black eyes from his mother.

Since the prince's birth a month ago, I had been using my priestess powers continuously to help Her Majesty's body recover from the toll that pregnancy and labor had taken upon her. I had also been maintaining both her and her son's health.

"Monica," the empress called during a momentary moment of calm. "Come here and hold him."

"Um…are you sure?"

It made me anxious to carry an existence that was so profoundly important for the Empire. What if something happened while a common holy woman like me held him?

Her Majesty laughed softly at my consternation. "How could I not let you hold him? After all, one of the main reasons this child was able to be born was because of your efforts."

She gently, carefully passed the small bundle of life from her arms into mine. I held him gingerly, still nervous. The sweet soft scent of mother's milk drifted up from the little prince, who stared intently at me with his dark, dark eyes—and then he dozed off in my arms, just like that. Suddenly, I felt tears prick my eyes. *Life is truly precious.*

"His Imperial Highness really *is* here…"

"I love you, Monica." The empress embraced me tightly, her son still held in my arms. She placed a gentle kiss on my cheek. "I think of you as a dear

younger sister. Please continue to lend me your strength in the days to come and beyond."

"Yes, of course, Your Majesty!"

At that moment, I had so much confidence in myself that I felt like I could proudly scream "I am indeed the holy woman with peculiar powers!" from the highest tower. There was absolutely nothing wrong with being a heat-inducing holy woman. Wasn't lust a healthy, natural part of the human condition? Sexual desire was valuable, indeed. Not only for deepening the bond between two people, but also because of its wondrous power to create life, like this beautiful baby. *Yes, yes, wondrous, indeed…*

All of a sudden, vertigo rushed through my body. I choked, swaying.

"Monica?"

"Oh, um…I believe it's time for me to return His Highness to you."

Her Majesty's eyes rounded with concern. "What's wrong?"

"I, well… I'm, uh, experiencing the backlash of maintaining my holy abilities continuously… So…I think I need some time to myself…" I mumbled, fumbling my words considerably while trying to avoid being overly explicit. Sexual desire was certainly wholesome and valuable, but it remained an embarrassing topic for me to discuss.

"*Ah*."

Everyone present in the room right now—the empress, her wet nurse, Lady Louise, and a maid—made the same sound of understanding. They were all well aware of exactly what I meant, since they knew about my saintly superpower's side effect. Excusing myself quickly, I strode briskly into my room, shut the door, and secluded myself inside.

"Good grief… I'm at my limit…" I moaned. Despite my best efforts, the moment I stepped into my personal chamber, everything in my field of vision immediately took an obscene appearance.

"Gah, the butterfly hinges…male and female…mating butterflies…flying in the air, a single female swarmed by dozens of males… Oh, no, the ceiling, look at

the ceiling… Ceiling, so high… Peaks are high too… Mountain gods and stories… Stories have climaxes… But I have a feeling there's another improper definition for climax too… *Uggghh*!"

I picked up the magical medicine—the new formula of which was ten times stronger than the last—I'd made from dried fishwort and poured it down my throat. Then I burrowed into my bed, pulling the covers over myself to block out as many sensations as possible.

"I *will* calm down. Gosh darn it, Monica, just remember how His Highness's soft, plump little cheeks feel. Remember the sacred light of life. Erase all the vulgarity from your mind!"

A moment of silence passed, and then I thrashed violently in frustration. "Ugh, *hellfire*, it won't disappear!"

Unfortunately for me, my lust wasn't something that could be eliminated through sheer willpower alone. I shivered. The silky rustle of bedsheets sliding against my skin, accompanied by the creaking noises of the bedsprings and my own raspy breathing, was only exciting me even more.

Focus on the bitterness, I told myself, trying to consolidate my attention on the lingering aftertaste of the chameleon plant that still soured my mouth. But its scent seemed to be awakening something new in me.

It hurts, I thought, moaning. *Oh, no, this is bad.*

I groped around blindly for a bed cushion. When my hand landed on one, I dragged it toward me and squeezed it tightly as I gnashed my teeth, enduring the unbearable heat inside me. Then I realized that my blind groping had led me to the cushion that was in the shape of a red heart.

Red.

Suddenly, all kinds of sweet images featuring red glittered and flashed behind my closed eyelids. Silky, flowing scarlet hair. Long eyelashes in a gentle face. A pair of distinctly crimson-hued dazzling eyes, akin to flames dancing in a fireplace. A deep voice calling me "Miss Monica" so sweetly. Straight, white rows of teeth. An Adam's apple and strong neck combined with a thick chest and muscular back, all at odds with an almost femininely graceful countenance.

And lastly, a comforting scent, drifting from arms that had held me on both the battlefield and the ballroom dance floor.

"Richard…" I moaned.

Though I felt awful about it, I continued thinking about him as I clamped down even tighter on the cushion. Speaking of this bed accessory, it had originally been diamond-shaped. But all of my relentless squeezing had totally warped its form. When Solarus had noticed its mangled state one day, she had been kind enough to remake it into a heart shape.

"I haven't seen Richard lately…" I murmured mournfully. "Even though *I'm* the one trying not to meet him…"

Despite Richard himself having admitted that he missed me whenever we didn't see each other, he had considerately reduced his visits to me. It seemed he had deliberated carefully on the matter, taking various recent factors into account. Part of it had to do with my near-constant treatment of the empress with my holy powers, though I had no doubt his need to attend to his own official duties had something to do with it as well. Richard's tasks had exploded with the birth of the eagerly expected prince, so he had apparently been busy traveling from place to place.

All of that combined meant the last time we had even caught a glimpse of each other was some time ago at the imperial prince's official birth announcement. That itself had taken place two weeks after His Highness was born. Which meant it had been over a good month now since we had last properly met.

"Oh, I miss him… I want to see him…"

I could never say those words to his face, so I whispered them alone within the dark cocoon I had created for myself in bed. It was now my well-ingrained habit to think of Richard anytime I paid the price for overusing my holy abilities. I knew how absurd it was to have the imperial crown prince be the object of my insane lust. Yet here we were.

"But…I can't help it… I can't think of anyone except Richard in that way…"

I lacked both knowledge about sexual things as well as romantic experience. I

had never even viewed anyone as a potential partner. He was the only person I had ever been able to trust from the bottom of my heart. And that naturally made him the only one I felt comfortable thinking about in such a fashion.

Moreover, he was the imperial crown prince, so there was no chance of any indiscretions occurring between him and a commoner like me. Plus, he didn't have any libido to speak of anyway, which also made things easy for me. But I had honestly become frustrated with only seeing him in my imagination. I wanted to see the real thing already.

"I want to see Richard…" I moaned.

"Well, I'm certainly honored to hear that."

I gave a little laugh of frustration. "Wow. I must truly be desperate to see him. Evidently, I've reached the point where I'm now experiencing auditory hallucinations. I have officially lost my mind."

"Would it reassure you to know that I wanted to see you badly as well, Miss Monica?"

"…Huh?"

Silence reigned. My heart thundered. I grasped the cushion tightly, wishing I could hold on to my sanity in such a way too. I couldn't believe my ears. *This… can't be happening, right?*

A few minutes before current events, Richard had been sitting in his office. He'd been in the process of reviewing information from various sources about the Kingdom of Kophe's current situation. His flame-colored eyes had burned bright and sharp in his face, closely resembling the stare of a bird of prey on the hunt. It was an expression he would never let himself reveal in front of Monica.

Monica Regulus, he thought longingly. *My exceptional, highly ranked holy woman.*

Her work had always been perfect, no matter the task. Whether she was to subdue monsters here in the Empire, construct magical wards, accompany him and Her Majesty on state visits across the country, or even solve the imperial

couple's infertility problem, she always managed to meet—no, *exceed*—Richard's expectations in ways far beyond anything he could have predicted.

The only reason Richard had been able to solve the various domestic issues afflicting his nation this year was because of her hard-won achievements. The effects of her actions would be felt for a long time in the future.

At present, peace blanketed Psyend once more. It had become a major manufacturer of high-quality magical medicines thanks to Monica's willingness to donate the use of her powers, and the land's natural deposit of large magical stones. Those products were bringing in a steady stream of foreign currencies into the Empire, padding the country's revenues.

One such source of profits was the Kingdom of Kophe. A select few merchants had been granted permission from the Empire to export the medicines to the Kingdom at lower, wholesale prices. The natural result was that imperial elixirs now completely dominated the medicinal industry's market share in Kophe.

The Kingdom of Kophe was the only country in the world blessed with the existence and continual birth of holy women, and yet it had rejected that gift. It was hard for Richard to understand why the Kophe royal family had made the incredibly foolish decision to join hands with the Great Church to exterminate the very priestesses that kept them alive, but as it suited his ends, he didn't worry himself too much over it. Hilariously, the reason that the Empire's miracle drugs had so taken off in Kophe, was because they'd overly relied on the holy women in their care for so long that it had stunted their development of magical medicines.

On the imperial domestic front, the Empire's insurrectionist element had quietened after Holy Woman Monica's efforts had borne fruit.

The six powerful families comprising the three imperial and three borderland houses now strongly pledged allegiance to the emperor. Long plagued by instability since their father's death, his older brother—the young ruler, Christopher—could finally see signs of stability in his reign.

His sister-in-law Tundica was also doing well—she had safely delivered an imperial prince. Both mother and babe were hale and hearty. Richard suspected that another child would follow within a few short years. Those aggravating

voices who clamored for the emperor to abdicate and Richard to ascend would finally be silenced now that his brother had succeeded in continuing the Belktrius bloodline.

He couldn't have been more grateful. Because never once had he had the desire to usurp Christopher and take the throne. *And I never will.*

"Thank you for your reports," Richard had said to those in his office. "You're excused."

At Richard's dismissal, his subordinates had saluted and scattered like the wind to their original posts.

In the new silence blanketing his office, the emperor's younger brother had spoken quietly to himself. "The Kingdom of Kophe should be reaching its limits soon," he'd muttered. "Although I must admit I'm surprised by the speed of their downfall. Even I didn't anticipate that."

He'd settled himself deeply into his leather-covered chair and steepled his fingers on top of his desk. Frowning intensely at the empty space in front of him, he'd synthesized the various pieces of information in his mind to try and see what the future held. His analysis was neither derived from magic nor a supernatural ability like a holy woman's. It was instead wholly the product of the Ferocious Crown Prince's own towering intellect.

"My special forces knights are ready," he murmured to himself, eyes alight with a cold gleam. "I do believe the hour has come to clear Holy Woman Monica's name."

He stood up and left his office, his brisk stride carrying him directly to another corner of the palace. There, he would find her, his precious key and beloved holy woman—Monica Regulus.

"*RICHARD*?!"

Engaged in the personal war I had been waging against myself on my bed, I seemed to have missed the entrance of a certain Imperial Highness. I peeled back a corner of my blanket fortress, peeking out just enough to catch sight of his booted feet.

He has some nerve entering a lascivious priestess's bedchamber, I thought wryly. Just looking at the tips of his highly polished shoes had my chest squeezing painfully.

"Richard…why are you here…?"

"I wanted to talk to you in person, so I decided to come see you."

"I-It's too dangerous f-for you to be here right now," I stammered. "G-Get away from me."

"I won't be leaving, and I won't allow you to attack me either, Miss Monica," he said firmly, though his voice was gentle. "Remember…? I want you to trust me."

It was everything I could do not to moan. I'd been wanting to hear that voice for *ages*. My racing heart thundered in my ears and shook my body, and I felt a keen urge to play the coquette with him, unleashing my most sultry voice.

Wait… I thought. *How do I even do that?*

Idiot! Imbecile! Fool! Why was he here?! But I was undeniably happy at his arrival, since I'd been dying to see him. *I want to see his face.* A variety of emotions assaulted my body as my reason steadily dissolved.

Richard kept himself at a good distance away from me, leaning comfortably against a wall. I had to concede that he had a point—even if I attacked him at full strength, Richard being Richard, there would be no improper conduct between us. He was physically much stronger than me and he knew all my habits when it came to both my martial arts training and my holy powers. Not to mention he wasn't the sort of person to view me in a romantic or sexual light. The thought made my heart throb as a piercing pain shot through my chest. Just as I was on the brink of falling into a chasm of self-hatred, Richard broke through my gloomy silence.

"Miss Monica, you've been working too much lately."

"I'm fine," I snapped. "Working here is much more preferable to my time at Mayga Cieux."

"Even then, I thought you worked too much, and I've known you for a long

time now. Are you aware that all the maids worry about you? They're afraid you're seeing delusions or something of the sort."

I moaned into the bed in embarrassment. "Ugh, I'm so sorry."

"Although, I guess ultimately it's my fault you overtax yourself. After all, I'm the one who was dead set on piling up your achievements." His voice turned cajoling. "Will you forgive me?"

"Stop it. The imperial crown prince should never apologize so easily, especially to a commoner. Besides, I love what I do, so it doesn't feel like work to me at all."

"Miss Monica…" he said in a tone that made me feel sure he was smiling, "you truly are such a virtuous individual. I adore you, you know."

It was just his usual sweetly matter-of-fact profession, but it was so hard for me to remind myself that he didn't mean it the way I wanted him to. The words were always a bittersweet balm to my heart…except for today. I narrowed my eyes. *What's different?*

That's when I realized that instead of the usual ache of pain and sweetness, some other strange, indescribable sensation rippled wider and wider within my chest.

And on the heels of that realization, came another. *Wait,* I thought. *Why did he suddenly barge into my room? That's a first for him.*

I peeked farther out of my blankets, assessing Richard. There was something off about him today, that's for sure. I quickly noticed that he was wearing his formal military uniform. Could he have visited me during a break in his official duties? But I couldn't keep my mind on the subject—the sight of him thoroughly entranced me. I froze, half in and half out of my blanket fort, clearly captivated by Richard's…*everything*.

Taking this as his cue to attack, Richard pushed himself away from the wall. His boots thudded softly on the floor as he drew close to me.

"*Huh*?!" I cried, eyes widening in horror. "Richard, you stop that this instant. Stay away from me!"

“I will not.” His tone was imperious, very much the high-handed crown prince. He reached my bedside and bent down on one knee like the gallant knight he was. Then he wound his fingers around a lock of hair spilling out of my comforter, lifting it reverently toward his lips.

It wasn't like hair had any nerve endings, but the moment his supple lips pressed against those particular strands, electricity zapped right through my body.

"O-Oh…" I wheezed, beginning to tremble. All of a sudden, I was overcome with the need to cry. "R-Richard…what are you doing…?"

An unbearable impulse burst inside my heart, trying to claw its way out. But I pushed it back down, crushing the cushion I still held in my arms flat. *Why is he doing this to me?* Watching Richard brush his pale, soft lips against my hair made me feel as if he were planting kisses all over my skin. I would have exploded by now if my hair actually possessed a sense of touch.

My pulse was beyond wild at this point, like trees swaying on a stormy night. *Am I…still breathing?*

"Your hair used to be so close to silver, but now it's undoubtedly the color of fresh peaches," Richard murmured, his voice thick with fascination.

"St…op…it…"

"Such a beautiful pink, like a flower petal," he continued, his voice low and deep. The sound of it reverberated throughout my entire body, and gooseflesh, the good kind, spread across my skin, making me shiver deliciously. My mind went blank.

"This color is proof of all your efforts, hm?"

Why, oh, why is he being so cruel to me? Any reason I had left melted away like snow. *I'm sure this is nothing to you, tender, kind gentleman that you are,* I thought desperately. *But my wretched self can't say the same. Because, I am in —*

"Miss Monica. Won't you look at me?"

"No," I said crankily.

"Then I'll tug this blanket down and join you inside it myself until you do."

"That…that's definitely the worse option," I said with a sigh. Reluctantly, *extremely* reluctantly, I widened the gap in my blanket fortress and poked my head out, forcing myself to look at his face.

Richard's direct gaze was joyful and certain as it ran over me. I couldn't help but notice that strands of his flaming auburn hair dangled enticingly over those crimson eyes, which were reflecting the color of the setting sun. And when I saw myself reflected in those pupils? I was overcome with a terrible, burning heat.

Please, please, stop, I moaned internally. *Why are you doing this to me? You* know *how frenzied of a state I'm in. My urges will only trouble you. The respect and affection I hold for you are on the verge of becoming an entirely different emotion. I can't direct those feelings at you because they'll only cause you grief.*

But despite my thoughts, animal lust and something more overflowed within me, an unstoppable torrent.

I don't know what came over me then, but I shrieked, "Richard! Please…*please* castrate me." My voice sounded shrill to my own ears, but I couldn't stop myself from pleading with him, drowning as I was under such an onslaught of sensations.

But Richard just shrugged. "That's an impossible request, Miss Monica, since castration can only be done to males."

"Fine, whatever you want to call it, *I don't care*. I just need…*something*…to be done with this godforsaken body!"

"It must be painful, hm?" he replied, voice consoling.

"You know darn well it's unbearable! I mean…I just *hate* it. I hate when this happens to me. I feel so dirty and ashamed. And each time it happens, I'm afraid that I'll lose control and attack you. I…" My voice thickened with unshed tears. "I don't want to ruin our relationship, Richard." It would be the worst kind of hell if my pure feelings for him transformed into ugly, carnal passions of the flesh.

"Miss Monica, there is most certainly nothing dirty or shameful about you," Richard told me firmly, straightening a bit so that our gazes were on the same level. "You're *beautiful.* That is what you are. And no matter what happens, our relationship will never be destroyed. I swear it."

I shook my head vehemently, denying his words and his blinding smile.

"*You're* the beautiful one. You're the very model of a splendid imperial crown prince, beautiful and virtuous and kind."

"I disagree," Richard said with an offhand shrug.

"Bah! You…you're always like this! D-Do you even k-know what I'll do to you if you i-insist on telling me s-such sweet nothings?!"

I'll pounce on you, you vexing man! I'll drag you into this bed and shower your gorgeous face with kisses upon kisses. Then I'll tear off your perfectly ordered uniform from your amazing body and have my way with you!!!

Ahhh, the end was nigh. Only a void existed in my useless brain now. *I bid this life farewell…*

"Be that as it may, Miss Monica," Richard said, voice abruptly quite serious, "Might I tell you why I barged into your room like this?"

"A-All right…" I nodded, squashing down my beastly urges as I managed to dredge up a *smidgen* of a *smidge* of composure. After all, I *had* been curious about the reason for his unusual invasion of my privacy. Before I lost my mind, of course.

"I know this news will be unexpected for you," Richard began, "but approximately half of your homeland has been overrun by monsters."

"*What*?!"

"Under the pretense of humanitarian aid, I plan on marching into the Kingdom of Kophe with my knights of the special forces unit. And I'd like *you* to assist me, Miss Monica." He beamed at me, but my brain had shorted out for reasons beyond lust this time.

"What say you, Miss Monica?" Richard asked with a merry smile. "It will be a joy, will it not, to accompany me and witness the disgraceful failures wrought by those who slandered you as a lewd saint and exiled you?"

Wh-What did he just say?

Richard burst out laughing at the look on my face. "Look at you, going so rapidly from blushing embarrassment to calm composure. Ah, Miss Monica, your dramatic changes in expression always amuse me."

“W-Well…what did you expect?! Hearing such news would shock anyone into reality!”

The fever in my body had immediately cooled upon hearing the news, though Richard’s radiant smile didn’t budge at all.

I climbed from the bed and ate more of the dried fish wort medicine I had stored nearby, then tilted my head back and emptied my pitcher of water in one long swallow, quenching the thirst I had apparently built up during our arguing.

That done, I sighed, then turned to face Richard once more. “Let me shower first and change my clothes. We can talk after, and I’ll make my decision then.”

To Be Continued In Volume 2…!

Bonus Chapter: A Stroll with the Imperial Prince and a Chat about the Future

TODAY'S *a fine, sunny day for a stroll in the gardens,* I thought as I carried the new imperial prince outside in my arms. His wet nurse, along with several other maids and attendants, followed us on our walk; one of them kindly held a cotton parasol over our heads as I shuffled forward.

I peered down at the soft curve of His Highness's forehead, which was illuminated in the gentle rays of the sun that passed through the parasol's thin fabric.

He looks so cozy in those soft baby clothes! I thought with a smile.

One of his tiny, chubby hands reached out and clutched the edge of my wimple. His hands weren't the only place where he was chubby—his little cheeks were all round and plump too. He was the picture of health.

"He's so cute…" I breathed, smiling softly.

Everyone around us gave enthusiastic nods at the comment.

Lady Louise drifted over to my side. I tilted the baby so she could see a bit better, and she leaned over, peeking down at the prince's face.

"Honestly, no matter where I look, he so strongly resembles his mother…" she said with a hearty grin. "She was born with a head of thick, fluffy hair too, though hers is black…"

I smiled at her in response, and she kept up a light flow of chatter between us as she scrutinized His Highness from various angles, seeking out all the ways he looked like Her Majesty. She spoke of his plump cheeks, his tiny ears, the way he cried, and even more. I had been listening to the very same words in some form or fashion every single day since the prince had been born, and I honestly wouldn't have been surprised at this point to discover that my ears had grown calloused from the verbal beating. Even so, I knew her endless chatter served to

express her delight in the prince and his birth, and I found that charming in and of itself.

By that point, we'd reached the courtyard, and I couldn't help sighing in delight as we strolled through it. My eyes traced the vividly blooming flowers growing around the space's edge as pleasure filled my heart.

"It's so peaceful out here…" I murmured. "It almost makes the combat expeditions I've taken throughout the Empire so far seem unreal."

As I cradled the prince's small, warm body against mine, the sunny afternoon seemed to stretch out before me, as if time had stopped for the two of us alone. It felt as if we were both suspended in our own little bubble as the day slipped slowly by.

Because of my work, my typical companions of late had been armored knights and the old men who led the research team at the institute. The contrast between being surrounded by them and being surrounded by giggling, chatty women felt almost surreal to me. And that wasn't even mentioning how the sweet-smelling little baby boy in my arms made me feel.

As I continued on my stroll, body swaying as I walked, my gaze happened to lock on to His Highness's. His plump cheeks lifted with a cheery smile. Well and truly caught by his innocent grin, I beamed back at him.

"Oh, are you enjoying yourself too, Your Highness?" I asked, giggling a little. "I'm pleased to know that."

The little prince and I smiled at each other. Then, all of a sudden, I noticed that the angle of the parasol shading us had changed.

"Hm?" I looked up, finding that at some point the attendant had vanished, and now Richard held the delicate contraption instead.

I choked, slapping my free hand to my chest in shock. "Good grief, Richard! You startled me…"

He gave me a wink, even as a smirk curved his lips. "I humbly beg your forgiveness," he told me, eyes shining, "you just looked so utterly divine that I found it difficult to talk to you, Miss Monica."

“Divine…?” I asked, skeptical. “Me?”

“Indeed,” he replied, nodding. “You’re the very image of a goddess with that babe in your arms. Then again, you *are* a holy woman, so perhaps my comparison isn’t that far off the mark.”

I glanced around us, immediately noticing that the wet nurse and other maids had taken the initiative to retreat a fair distance. My heart softened. *Looks like they’re being thoughtful of our privacy now that Richard has joined us.*

Richard reached out and expertly caught his nephew’s soft, chubby fist in his fingers. He stared at the prince with gentle eyes as he playfully shook the baby’s hand, as if to create a facsimile of a handshake.

“And how are you today, good sir?” he asked the child lightly. “Are you enjoying the comforting cradle of Miss Monica’s arms, our future emperor?”

His Highness squealed in delight, laughing up at his uncle. The baby’s free hand reached excitedly for Richard’s aiguillette, which was an ornamental braided cord that hung from his uncle’s uniform.

“Your Highness, you mustn’t do that,” I chided him, panicking and trying to gently grab his little hand in order to steer it away.

But Richard just laughed. “It’s fine, it’s fine,” he reassured me.

The little prince tugged curiously on the cord, and Richard took advantage of his distraction to lightly poke his fat cheeks.

“He seems to be in a good mood, hm?”

I nodded. “Indeed. He appears to be happiest in those intervals between nursing and napping, and one just so happens to be right now.”

“And you’re sure he’s not too heavy for you? I’ll hold him for you if his weight begins to be a strain.”

I smiled gently at Richard. “I’m fine,” I insisted. “I’m actually quite used to taking care of little ones, you see.”

I dangled my wimple in front of the baby’s face, encouraging him to switch his attention to it instead of poor Richard’s clothing. Ever since the little prince had snatched up the cord on his uncle’s uniform, Richard had been walking while

half stooped over, which I knew couldn't be comfortable.

I waited until the baby's tiny fist had a firm grasp of my headwear, and then turned in the direction of the garden, Richard following at my side. That was when I finally elaborated on my earlier comment.

"Back in my village," I explained, "it was considered the older children's responsibility to look after the younger ones while the adults were busy in the fields."

It wasn't an unusual way of life for a village like mine, which was located far in the countryside. Rural families like us didn't have maids or servants as the nobility did, and so a good bit of the child-rearing duties fell on older children and the family's elders.

"I was the eldest daughter in my family," I told Richard, the words spilling out of me as I smiled down at the baby in my arms. "That meant that I was responsible for many of my younger brothers and sisters, and my skill at caring for them proved a huge help to my parents. And, believe it or not, it appears that the way one takes care of a baby doesn't change, whether I find myself in Kophe or not."

My tone had been bright, but I didn't miss the shadow that momentarily crossed Richard's eyes at the mention of my home country. Whatever he'd thought, he must have chosen not to touch on it, since he tucked the darkness away and smiled down at me instead.

"You never cease to amaze me, Miss Monica," he said softly.

I felt gratitude rise in my heart for the way he'd avoided pressing on my old wounds. Even though it was all in the past, the knowledge that those children I'd cared for and held in my arms were gone, along with the rest of my village and family, made an ache take up residence in my chest.

I'll never get to feel their warmth in my arms like this again, and I'll never get to see them grow up… I thought sadly.

But the little prince seemed to know I needed a distraction, for he raised his voice and made a little "Ah!" demanding my and Richard's attention. The baby's big eyes moved around restlessly, as if they were chasing something.

I tracked the direction of his gaze with my own, almost immediately noticing a large butterfly that was flapping in the air near us.

“Ah-ha,” I said with a smile, pointing at the hovering insect with a finger. “That is a butterfly, Your Highness. It’s quite pretty, isn’t it, with those large fluttery wings?”

The butterfly—which looked to be a giant swallowtail butterfly—flew away from us with a graceful whoosh, then landed on a rose petal and shut its wings. I rearranged the prince in my arms so he could get a closer look at it, letting out a little huff of effort when I adjusted his weight. I held the little prince tight as I took one step closer, and then another, my breath held tight in my throat.

The baby let out a soft crooning noise, his little hand reaching out to touch the butterfly. But it easily evaded his tiny fingers and fluttered away.

“Oh, my, you were so close, hm?” I said lightly, tapping the little prince on the nose. “Please do let me know the next time you see another one, Your Highness. I would be more than happy to act as your tour guide.”

The baby giggled in response, babbling happily at me.

“You look happy, Miss Monica,” Richard said, watching us with warm eyes.

“Because I am,” I replied. “I couldn’t be happier right now. Babies are adorable on their own, but this one is extra special to me because of the respect and affection I have for his parents. I feel privileged to even be allowed to care for this extremely precious prince.”

I rubbed the baby’s head, luxuriating in the feel of his silky red hair. *Those cute curls are just one more thing he’s inherited from his father,* I thought with a smile.

“Is that right?” Richard said thoughtfully. Then, all of a sudden… “Do you want children as well, Miss Monica?”

I blinked at him in surprise. “You mean of my own?”

“I do,” he said, nodding. His index finger gripped in his nephew’s hand. “If you want them soon, then I’d like to know, so I can work hard and do my very best to make that a reality.”

I sensed a hidden meaning in Richard's words and tone as he spoke, but in my confusion, I could barely parse his words at face value. Formulating a response for more than that was beyond me.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean when you say *you're* going to work hard to reach that outcome," I said with an awkward smile. "Regardless, I don't have a partner, so it wouldn't really make much sense for me to say I want children now."

I was temporarily distracted by the delighted chortling coming from the soft, warm bundle in my arms. The baby cheerfully wagged his uncle's finger, and my heart softened to mush watching them together. Suddenly my mind was full of my younger days and the happiness I'd felt back when I was surrounded by my family.

"That said…" I continued, "I do in fact want children someday. Back when I was a young girl, I was always imagining myself marrying, having children, and becoming a mother once I grew up."

Before my village had been destroyed by monsters, it had been my dream to be a bride and get married. But once my village and my family were gone, my dream had grown more urgent. I'd dreamed of growing up as soon as possible, so that I could get married and have a family of my own again. All the experiences I'd had as a holy woman at Mayga Cieux had made me forget that dream even existed. And then…

I'd been affianced to His Royal Highness, Prince Medaikonar.

"When the royal family chose me as His Royal Highness's fiancée, I was honestly a little happy," I admitted. "I thought I'd finally get my chance to be a mother…though of course I was deeply worried about the burden I would place on my children because of my low status."

"*Forget* that toad," Richard snapped.

I flinched in surprise, my eyes darting up to examine Richard's suddenly serious expression. His eyes were in complete Ferocious Crown Prince mode.

I gave a little huff of a laugh. "Richard, I could do with a warning next time you wish to frighten me with your scary face."

His intimidating glare vanished, replaced with a contrite frown. “Ah, my apologies, Miss Monica,” he murmured. “It’s just that, even though you were only engaged to that cretin for a short time, I still lose my wits when I think about it.”

“But whyever would you do that?”

“I just can’t help but abhor my own attitude back then, and I get angry at myself remembering how I thought I should let you go, because if I did, it would mean your happiness. Truly, I can’t decide who was the greater fool then, me or him.”

“I…I must thank you, for being so considerate of me.”

Seeing him get so angry on my behalf only provided me with further proof of his kind heart. *This is just another reminder that Richard the prince is still the same compassionate man as my Mr. Redhead from the front lines.* Happiness filled my veins at the thought.

“I didn’t have much of a choice back then, when I was told I was to marry Prince Medaikonar…” I admitted. “At the time, I thought that I could be content as long as I had children to make up for the arrangement. But thank goodness the marriage never actually took place. I shudder at the thought of bearing that man’s children.” I gave a little shudder. “I can’t even joke about it, the prospect is so revolting.”

“I must admit I feel the same,” he said, nodding. His eyes were downcast, as if he couldn’t bring himself to look at my face. “That situation is definitely not a laughing matter.”

“Richard, your anger truly is real anytime we speak of that, hm?” I asked.

“Of course it is,” he said indignantly, his eyes finally meeting mine once again. “That’s why I fully intend to do everything in my power to put you at ease, so that you can have a family of your own soon enough.”

The earnestness in his tone made me giggle. “There’s no need for you to be so enthusiastic about it,” I told him, smiling. “And I already told you, didn’t I? I don’t even have a partner in sight. Plus…”

I trailed off, eyes flickering to the newly sleepy baby in my arms. I

repositioned him so he was more comfortable, then gave him a gentle pat on the back before speaking to Richard once more.

“Plus, my work as a holy woman is my number one priority right now. And it seems I *do* have family now, seeing as Her Majesty honored me by saying she considered me part of hers. I must admit, I think such a gift is wasted on someone like me. But if having her blessing means I can take care of His Highness like this, then…as far as I’m concerned, the Belktrius imperial family is my family too.”

“Fa…mily…” Richard mouthed slowly. The word was garbled and soft, like his lips had gone numb.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” I gasped, realizing with a rush of dismay how presumptuous my words had been. “It’s terribly discourteous of me to claim the imperial family as my own.”

“Perhaps it is…” Richard murmured enigmatically, “but what if I told you I could do something that would legitimize that claim? Something that would *truly* make you a part of our family?”

I found myself without words to respond to such a mysterious query. I just blinked up at Richard in surprise. His mood seemed to shift, then, his seriousness mellowing out to his normal cheerful goofiness.

“Miss Monica,” he declared, spreading his arms wide, “won’t you teach me how to hold my nephew? I want to master the skill now, since I have a feeling my future wife will insist on me hugging our children.”

I nodded, taking his request seriously. “Remember, he still can’t hold his head up by himself, so you have to support him firmly with a hand behind his neck. Put this arm like this, and the one other like this… Good.”

“Egad,” Richard muttered. He clung to his nephew carefully, unused to the positioning of his hands. “This is terrifying! Hahaha… I had no idea babies were such fragile creatures.”

As I watched Richard cuddle his nephew closer, the image overlapped with the memory I had of the joyous way His Majesty had cradled his son once he was born.

Now that his nephew is born, I realized, *Richard's free from the problem of succession. Coupled with his triumphant return, Richard might even have the chance to settle down soon himself.*

For some reason, my heart squeezed in pain at the thought. I knew I had to stay focused on the little prince, but watching Richard hold him made it difficult to breathe…

"Miss Monica…?" Richard leaned forward, tilting his head questioningly toward me. "Why do you look so sad?"

Richard had always been accomplished at reading my expressions, but at the moment, his intuition only brought me more pain. "I just…I found myself feeling a bit lonely, thinking of how you might welcome a bride someday in the near future. Once you have a wife, we won't be able to spend time like this anymore."

I gave a dramatic shrug of my shoulders, trying to act like I felt cheerful once again. "It's truly quite frustrating! If I were a man, I could stay by your side forever, Richard, just like Darius."

Darius loves Richard to such an obsessive extent that an outsider would be appalled at his attitude, I thought. My lips twitched just thinking of the way he acted toward his commander when they were together. But Darius would still be able to work by Richard's side, even if he were to marry. The same could not be said for me. Once Richard found himself a fiancée, I'd lose the ability to stand at his side.

But Richard just waved off my concerns. "You're an exception though, Miss Monica," he said cheerfully. "Which means I see no problem in our situation remaining unchanged."

It surprised me how disappointed I felt by his dismissive attitude. *Does he not understand that our relationship would be destroyed if he gets married?* I went to say something, I knew not what, but Richard beat me to the punch.

"I mean, think about it," he declared, his lips curving slightly as he spoke. "If you were a man, you wouldn't be able to have children, right?"

"Well, I…I suppose you're quite right about that, yes," I said, feeling rather

flustered. “But that isn’t quite the point. I would hate to have your partner think I was your mistress or some such. Even if *you* were fine with things staying the same, Richard, *I* certainly am not. So you should know that when the time comes for you to marry, I *will* be leaving your side.”

“You are unfortunately quite wrong about that,” Richard told me, eyes glinting. “You’re not going anywhere without me, Miss Monica.”

“Just because you don’t care what others think doesn’t mean I feel the same!” I cried, growing truly upset now. “Honestly, Richard, if I were your wife, I would most definitely feel depressed should I discover that you were keeping a holy woman you’d known for much longer than me by your side.”

Richard let out a thoughtful little hum, his flame-colored eyes narrowing as he stared at me consideringly. With his head cocked to the side like that, his entire aura screamed, “Whatever am I going to do with you, Miss Monica? You know, you really are incredibly smart. And yet you still seem to be having quite a lot of trouble figuring out what I actually mean.”

Once again, I could sense some hidden meaning lurking behind Richard’s words, but as always, I found myself unable to grasp what that meaning was. Sensing my failure, Richard grinned, clearly having a lovely time enjoying himself at my expense.

What a vexing man! I thought irritably, glaring at him.

“Don’t worry though, Miss Monica,” Richard murmured, his voice low. “Because I find this bumbling, confused side of you charming as well.”

I went rigid, my mind going blank, and then…

“Bwaaah!”

The little prince scrunched up his face and started wailing hysterically.

Richard jolted in surprise at the surprisingly shrill sound coming from his nephew’s body, and I scooped His Highness back out of his uncle’s arms.

“I do believe it’s time for him to relieve himself…” I said, my voice a tad too high-pitched. “Ah-ha! Yes, indeed, his clothes are wet.”

I turned around and marched quickly back into the palace, settling down a

little as I focused on soothing the crying prince.

“Well done, Your Highness,” I crooned at the baby boy. “You very clearly communicated to us how unpleasant it is to be surrounded by your own waste.”

“Abooo!”

The wet nurse and the maids came rushing forward on churning feet, and I gratefully handed His Highness back over into their care. I glanced back behind me, finding Richard standing at my back. “We’re going to return to the nursery now,” I told him.

“Perhaps I should join you…?” he asked tentatively. “I would very much like to spectate what happens next.”

I snorted. “And pray enlighten me on what you’ll do if any of his wet splashes on your uniform? I know you snuck out of work to visit us. So it’s time for *you* to head back as well, Your Highness. Shoo, away with you.”

I turned Richard around and gave his back a shove, moving him along.

The odious man looked over his shoulder, winked at me, and grinned. “I’ll be seeing you again soon, Miss Monica,” he murmured.

Afterword

NICE to meet you. My name is Makino Maebaru and my favorite food is udon.

Thank you so much for reading *The Inconvenient Life of an Arousing Priestess*. Speaking of the title…I hope it didn't give you any pause before you decided to buy it. In fact, I thank everyone for choosing to read this story *despite* its extremely direct title! My fervent wish is that all of you find my novel enjoyable as you progress through its pages.

The original web version of this work was approximately 20,000 words long. At the time, I had two main thoughts motivating me while I wrote the story: "I want to write about a righteous, heroic prince!" and "I want to tell the tale of a cute holy woman's life!" So imagine my surprise when my whimsy-driven story got novelized! It's true what people say: You never know what life may bring. For example, it didn't seem like the original story had much of a possibility of getting a sequel, since it was only 20,000 words in length, but…it turns out I was wrong on that front, too, because this story will continue!

For the novel adaptation, I made significant revisions to the setting and the plot, so I could transform it into an even more dramatic romantic comedy. That expansion of the storyline came along with new characters like Solarus the maid and Darius the knight. The first volume sets the stage for our main characters on their journey. We have our workaholic holy woman, Monica, who strives to establish peace in every territory of the Empire through her efforts, and Richard, our ferocious prince who spins his strategies from the shadows, all while remaining infatuated with and devoted to Monica. In the second volume, I hope to write much more about their developing relationship as well as the Kingdom of Kophe's final fate.

Now then, the last thing I want to do in this space is acknowledge everyone involved in the publication of this book. I'd like to say thank you to all the readers who supported me warmly during the story's serialization, and to Hachi Uehara, the esteemed artist who drew such beautiful illustrations of Monica, Richard, the imperial couple, and the two bodyguards. I'd like to thank my

editor and proofreader for their steadfast patience in correcting the endless amount of careless mistakes I made, as well as for giving me their passionate thoughts about my work every time I submitted a manuscript. I'd like to thank the designer for making the beautiful cover image even more gorgeous and vivid. And finally, to everyone else without whose efforts this book wouldn't exist, I'd like to thank you so very much!

In addition, I extend my deep appreciation to my best friend B, my friend T in Maebaru City, and my grandmother. Thank you so much for always supporting me. I'm so grateful to all of you.

What do you think will happen to the Kingdom of Kophe? What do you think Monica will do, now that she's become aware of her own feelings toward the imperial crown prince? And speaking of the Ferocious Crown Prince, what do you suppose Richard's true intentions are? I hope you're on pins and needles to find out all this and more. I know I am!

Thank you very much for reading. I'm looking forward to seeing you again in the next volume!

Makino Maebaru

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