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The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress!
Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End


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Chapter 1: The Execution of an Evil Woman

Ever since she was a little girl, Westalia had dreamed of being queen. She wished to be clothed in dresses of the most delicate make, to be attended by scores of servants and knights, and to face the world with unmatched dignity and noble bearing. She wanted to be the kind of queen who would support her king with wisdom and devotion, show love to her subjects, and be respected by them in turn. Any little girl would have dreamed as such, and Westalia was no different.

When she was, in fact, chosen to be the next queen, Westalia was ecstatic—her dream was really coming true. However, when she actually became the crown prince's fiancée, it was not a sparkling life that awaited her. She was confined to a solitary palace…under the guise of receiving a thorough queenly education.

She had been cut off from all human contact, except for her teachers and servants. Just once, however, a young boy of roughly her age had wandered into the royal villa, and Westalia, on a whim, had spent a little bit of time with him. It had been almost ten years since that day, but she could still remember it. It was rare to have had such a pleasant experience during those suffocating days.

"All I desire is to be a wonderful queen…but it feels like I'm not doing anyone any good right now, not with how my life is going. It's painful. I cannot bear it," Westalia had said, somehow finding comfort in the boy's presence despite never having met him before. She'd never been able to speak so candidly with anyone else before.

"Your efforts will eventually bear fruit, in one way or another. You will be a good queen. I… I will always support you," he had said. His response touched her deeply. She had been alone all her life; this was the first time someone other than her family had expressed such support for her. In her earnest pursuit of becoming queen, Westalia had endured so much loneliness, never uttering a single complaint; the boy couldn't have known how

much his encouraging words meant to her.

She had hoped to thank him someday when she became a great queen, should she ever see him again, but that wish would never come true. Her efforts would not bear fruit, and in the end she would be beaten, trampled, and left to wither away. She was to be convicted of a crime she didn't commit and sentenced to death before she could be crowned queen.



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I wonder what kind of man that boy's become… Westalia thought, lost in her nostalgia.

"Now commences the execution of the criminal Westalia Lejainne!" The executioner's words jolted her back to reality. Westalia, the daughter of a duke, had been sentenced to death by poison for the attempted assassination of Princess Lily. The attempt had occurred but three days ago, yet in the blink of an eye she was on the gallows. In truth, she'd been falsely accused, but her proclamations of innocence were ignored.

Our executioner is rather impatient, isn't he? Seems like he really doesn't like me…

The event was taking place in the royal city's central square. Westalia was being marched toward a raised cobblestone platform by a pair of knights, her hands bound. Even though it was a weekday afternoon, the square was packed with onlookers all eager to witness the public execution of the villainess who had tried to kill the princess. Curses and stones flew at her all along the path to the executioner.

"Wretched woman!"

"Kill her quickly!"

From a passing glance at the crowd, Westalia could tell that they were truly disgusted with her and reveling at the chance to abuse and humiliate her.

I was only trying to be a queen worthy of you…

Among the assembled, only Felix, the crown prince and her former fiancé, looked at her with a sympathetic expression. Westalia opened and closed her mouth as she walked past him, but no words came out. Felix was the crown prince in name only, a man weak in political power and lacking initiative. Upon Westalia's conviction, their engagement had been dissolved.

The streets around them were festive, lined with stalls selling alcohol. People were pushing and shoving each other to witness the moment of execution. One curious onlooker, who had waded through the crowd right to the very front, saw Westalia and let out a shocked gasp. Westalia was dressed simply in white with silk socks, but that didn't lessen her imposing aura even slightly. Her

hair was long, wavy, and bright red, and she had narrow purple eyes that turned up sharply at the outer corners. Her lips were full and shiny, giving her an air of glamor.

Westalia Lejainne was what some called a “hidden daughter.” She had been confined to the royal palace since she was a child, isolated from the outside world and educated to be a queen. In the Kingdom of Lhumzia, the king was allowed to marry more than one person at a time. A king’s first wife was given the title of queen, but if the king took another wife, the new wife’s title would become queen consort.

As of late, Delphine, former consort and the last king’s second wife, opposed the idea of Westalia assuming the title. Using her immense power, Delphine wanted to slot Lily, her own daughter, into the position. It wasn’t impossible, despite Lily being the daughter of the former king. In aristocratic society, consanguineous relationships were very common, and a niece-uncle marriage was no exception.

However, in order to prevent Delphine and her family, the ducal family of Wynd, from expanding their power, the royal family had selected Westalia, who hailed from a duchy with little power or influence over the crown, to be the next queen. If the king took another bride after making Westalia his queen, every subsequent wife would be known as queen consort number one, number two, and so on.

In other words, as long as Westalia was around, Lily would never be number one. Delphine found that unacceptable, and she had used her power to imprison Westalia in that isolated villa. She’d assumed the girl would soon give up and withdraw her candidacy, but Westalia had shown unexpected persistence. Westalia’s first public appearance was scheduled for when she came of age, but no one but the royal court officials had seen her. Because her true nature was a mystery, rumors and speculation spread like wildfire among the public.

Her personality was the worst, the people said. They whispered that she was a flamboyant, man-crazy, pleasure-seeking woman who spent the people’s hard-earned money on frivolous luxuries and countless male prostitutes. In addition, she was said to throw temper tantrums, yelling at her servants whenever something didn’t go her way, and even resorting to violence on occasion. And

now she had been sentenced to death for attempting to assassinate the princess.

All of those horrible rumors are lies. They're all made-up. I was set up by that woman…

All the scandals they spoke of had been of Princess Lily's making, and she'd used the former queen to spread the word around. Westalia, meanwhile, had sacrificed much to become queen. She had endured the previous queen's punishment of isolation and had worked hard to become fit to one day rule the kingdom. Lily had been her only friend. Westalia had *trusted* her. However, Lily hadn't felt the same way, because she was in fact aiming for the queen's throne herself. All this time, she had been scheming—and acting on those schemes—to steal the position of the crown prince's fiancée.

Westalia, who had trusted Lily, had soon become the most hated person in the country without even realizing that she had been betrayed. Lily had pretended to be the only one on Westalia's side, but she had relied on her mother to sully Westalia's name. Lily herself had raised the poisoned cup to her lips right in front of Westalia to frame her for the poisoning. And after drinking the poison, Lily had told her smugly that it was all part of the plan.

As the daughter of the former queen, a woman of great power and reputation, Lily's testimony was enough to convict Westalia. The poison Lily had ingested was so minimal that she had only fallen asleep for a few days, but Westalia had been convicted of the crime of high treason.

Now, a cup of poison was placed in front of Westalia. It was the same poison that Lily herself had drunk, but this was a lethal dose. To imbibe the same poison as her victim—this was to be her final punishment.

Judging by this color and appearance…there's no doubt, it's agisakuragi. After ingesting a certain amount of the seeds, one develops cramps, abdominal pain, difficulty breathing, numbness throughout the body…and finally death due to organ failure.

Agisakuragi were rare in this country. They were tall, evergreen trees found in the eastern part of the continent, with seeds containing a toxin that impaired organ function.

Where did Lily even get this poison…?

Westalia calmly observed the poison. The former queen saw

her as an enemy and could have threatened her life at any moment, so Westalia had acquired knowledge of poisons to use as a weapon of her own, just in case. The idea had come from that boy who had once wandered into the palace.

The crowd swelled with excitement. Behind the deafening cheers, the sound of heels clicking on cobblestones could be heard.

“Princess! You must not approach! Purge that criminal from your thoughts!”

“No! Westalia is my dear friend! It hurts that she betrayed me, but it doesn’t change the way I feel about her. Let me talk to her one last time!” Lily rushed up to Westalia, ignoring the pleas of her attendants and escorting knights. The people around her were moved, murmuring about how kind she was to take pity on the person who had tried to kill her and to even be present at her execution.

What a terrible farce, Westalia thought with a snort as Lily stood in front of her, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“You’re a good actress.”

“Thank you for that,” Lily said, wiping the expression off her face. She picked up the cup of poison that Westalia was about to drink from, gazed down at Westalia with a chilling gaze, and then drew close to her ear.

“I’m so glad to finally be rid of you.”

So she’s finally shown her true colors, Westalia thought, remaining silent. Lily drew back and narrowed her eyes. It wasn’t her usual flowery smile but a grin that sent a chill creeping down Westalia’s spine. In that moment, she was reminded—whether she wanted to be or not—that the kind, pure woman she’d thought she’d known was nothing more than an illusion.

“You’ve always been such an eyesore with that stoic look on your face. But you’re getting what you deserve. How I’ve waited to see you in such a miserable state. So, how does it feel? To fall from the lap of luxury straight to the depths of hell?” Lily’s lips curled into an icy sneer. Westalia, her hands now unbound, was unfazed, and with a graceful gesture, as if she were drinking liquor, she took the poisoned cup and brought it to her lips.

“It feels wonderful.”

“What?!” Lily was taken aback by her response.

Westalia continued to smile as she drank down every drop of the poisoned liquid. The poison soon took effect, and Westalia's consciousness faded along with her pain. Blood trickled from her mouth, and the last thing she saw in her blurry vision was Lily's face. Betrayed by her best friend, she had lost her position and her honor. Everything she had worked so hard for had gone up in smoke. On top of all that, she was being executed as a villainess. She could only thank Lily for giving her such a rare experience. She was happy that her sarcastic remark at the end had caused such an amusing expression to appear on the other woman's face.

If you fall so far that you can fall no farther, your only choice left is to crawl upward from the depths. Oh, Lily, that face... I'll burn it into my memory.

And after a few agonizing moments, Westalia let go of her consciousness. The crowd roared at the spectacular end of the most evil woman of the century. However, Lily was the only one who felt that something was off about Westalia—and the strange calm she retained in the face of her imminent death.

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"Oh, this will fetch quite a pretty penny."

The sound of a man's voice and the light of a handheld lantern on her face woke Westalia, but she kept her eyes closed, peeking out from under her eyelashes. After all, she was supposed to be dead.

Good, it seems like it worked.

Westalia felt relieved, but there was still a man rifling through her coffin. He was what was commonly known as a "grave robber"—the unscrupulous individuals who ransacked tombs to steal and sell the relics buried with them, or who stole the corpses themselves and offered them to researchers for dissection. Westalia was the villainess who had tried to kill the princess; she had been poisoned and buried. No one would believe that she was still alive. However, she was not *actually* dead; she had faked it. Before her execution, Westalia had hidden the antidote behind her tongue and forced it down her throat along with the poison.

In order to fake the perfect death, she'd bitten down on her tongue so that blood would come out of her mouth, and the

wound was now throbbing.

Lily's mistake was that she didn't have my head chopped off.

Westalia wasn't sure if it was Lily's decision or someone else's that had condemned her to death by poison, going out of their way to make her suffer rather than just beheading her. But it *had* kept her alive. It was also fortunate that the guards hadn't discovered that she had obtained the antidote and that they hadn't checked her mouth before the execution.

Quickly, she reached out and touched the wrist of the thief who was rummaging through the coffin. Without him noticing, she pressed her favorite ring against it, turned the jewel setting to the right with her thumb, and drove the concealed anesthetic needle into his skin. Westalia had studied poisons as a self-defense measure in order to survive in a royal palace filled with enemies. She also carried on her at all times a number of concealed weapons with poison in them, including that ring.

"Guh!" The man collapsed into the coffin with a thud. Westalia moved him out of the way and sat up.

She smiled sweetly at him. "What a careless thief! To think he'd fall asleep in the middle of burgling."

A huge quantity of priceless jewelry had been placed around her in the coffin. The hoard of jewels was so dazzling it was almost tasteless; they were practically begging to be stolen.

I must get out of here before the guard patrol comes. As an anti-grave-robbing measure, the guards would sometimes do night patrols. Should any of these guards happen to run into her, it would be obvious that she was still alive.

She took the leather bag from the comatose thief and crammed it full of jewelry. The missing body and jewelry would be written off as the work of a thief. No one would think that the dead woman herself had woken up and run off.

Here's a little reward for your hard work, she thought as she placed the most expensive-looking necklace in the hands of the thief lying at her feet. If he hadn't spotted her grave and dug it up, she probably would've suffocated. It was too small of a reward, really, for saving her life, but the amount he could sell it for would be enough for a commoner like him to live the rest of his life on. "Well, as long as a night watchman doesn't find you," she whispered to the man, then calmly walked away.

Westalia left the graveyard and began making her way down a secluded, narrow path. Above her head stretched the brilliant indigo of the predawn sky. The morning sun in the distance seemed to be unusually dazzling today.

From here, Westalia planned on leaving the country in a horse-drawn carriage. Her destination was the Archaites Empire, which was the grandest nation on the continent in terms of both territory and power—bigger than her home country of Lhumzia. In Archaites, she had one goal: to participate in the selection process to choose a consort for the new crown prince. The woman selected through this grueling process would become an object of admiration for all the women in the country.

Lily, her former friend, was the sort of person who desired to dominate all others, which was why she'd gone so far as to strong-arm Westalia out of her position. *If you become queen of Lhumzia, Lily, then I shall simply have to acquire more power than you and prove my innocence. That will be my revenge, and I will accomplish it by any means necessary!* Westalia thought as she hiked across the wet ground in her silk stockings, her fists clenched tight. She had worked so hard to become queen, even though she'd been imprisoned in a separate royal villa. But in the end, she'd lost everything, never experiencing the happiness that other people did.

Westalia wouldn't stand for that. All she'd wanted was to wear her favorite dresses and dance at balls, make friends, contribute to the national government, and get involved with the citizens of her country. Yet she hadn't done any of that. She hadn't been needed by anyone, hadn't been of use to anyone. None of her hard work had been put to any good use. She had decided when she was locked in the dungeon that she would instead go to the Archaites Empire to stake a new claim on what she had lost and to make her own dreams come true.

The empress of Archaites was chosen in a very special way. Every woman in the country was eligible, regardless of age, social standing, or experience, as long as she was a citizen of Archaites. However, there were several phases of the selection, and the woman who found herself on the throne would be only the finest—the one with the highest intelligence, prettiest looks, most

winning personality, and various other abilities.

Westalia found a stream by the side of the road and dipped her hair into the water. The red safflower dye she had crafted herself washed away, and her hair regained its original silver color. Though this was her natural color, in Lhumzia, white hair was characteristic of old age, so she'd taken to dyeing it. She would return to her true self, a far different figure from the wicked woman that everyone around here recognized her as.

Since Westalia had been hidden away since birth, only a few people other than her family knew what she really looked like. Her family, however, had spared not a thought for her, despite their own power-hungry ambitions.

Westalia Lejainne is dead. I can no longer bear that name. She would no longer be a helpless woman who could do nothing but throw herself at the mercy of those around her. The Westalia who'd been but a meek, well-mannered young maiden was no more. From now on, she would live for only herself, however she liked, without a care for her position.

Looking around, Westalia saw a chameleon plant blooming on the riverbank. She recalled seeing them in the garden of the palace as well, but they'd always been ripped out because of their foul stench and impressively prolific growing speed. Despite all this, the plant wasn't toxic, yet still it was rooted out and destroyed based on prejudice—just as Westalia had been. The flower petals were even the same color as her hair. Westalia allowed herself a wry smile.

"My name is now Cordata. It fits perfectly for a discarded, miserable woman."

Cordata was the scientific name of the chameleon plant. Princess Lily was also named after a flower, and as her name suggested, she'd been praised extravagantly as she grew up. Westalia's name came from the wisteria flower, but nobody ever bothered to look up and admire them blooming quietly overhead. It would be the greatest irony for a woman with the name of a weed to become empress. She would prove that a weed could shine brighter than any lily.

I'll regain everything I've lost with my own two hands. You may have won this time, Lily, but just you wait... Westalia stood and looked across the river.

And with that fateful drink from a poisoned cup, Westalia's tale was well underway. Executed as a villainess, she had lost everything and started over. Her new goal: to become the empress of the largest empire on the continent.

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Westalia made her way into town after the sun rose and sold off a small portion of the jewels, using that money to buy more suitable clothing. She bought a dark robe with a hood, which would make her look like any other traveler on the road. Her silvery white hair was quite conspicuous, so she tied it up in a bun and tucked it under her hood. Then, she boarded a stagecoach and opened her map.

So I'll go from here to here... she thought as she marked out her route. From the royal capital where she was now, she would have to go through the Kingdom of Slidd to reach the Archaites Empire. The entry procedure into the empire required a number of documents, including an ID card, but there simply wasn't enough time to forge them all before the empress selection began. This meant that she had to avoid areas with strict border checkpoints and instead sneak across natural barriers like rivers and mountains, meaning it would take her about three weeks to arrive in the empire. The crown prince had acceded to the throne six months ago. The selection of the empress would begin in two months. Considering the various procedures that would be necessary after entering the country, she would have just barely enough time to make it as it was.

The native languages of the Kingdom of Lhumzia and the Archaites Empire were different. Since the language of Archaites was widespread and used as an official language of many other countries, Westalia had learned it, but she needed to be perfect by the time she entered the empire.

The first stage of the selection for empress was a written exam. By the end of that stage, due to the low literacy rate among the common people, it was usually only the daughters of noble families, who had received a good education, who remained in the running. Additionally, the results were ranked, so if a woman placed highly, she would likely leave a lasting impression on the

imperial family.

There's lots to do while I travel. I must study, of course, but I also need...allies. At least one, Westalia thought.

Then, after passing the first round of the selection process, there would come a point when she would need to be accompanied by a lady's maid. The competence of the lady's maid was of utmost importance, as it also was a measure of her employer's abilities.

I will be handpicking a lady's maid to an empress. She must be strong both mentally and physically. Of course, it must also be someone who understood her situation. Besides, Westalia was too sheltered to live in a new country for the first time by herself; she didn't even know how to do any domestic chores. She needed an ally who could fill in the gaps where her knowledge was lacking. She looked out of the carriage window, wondering where she could find someone who would fit the position.

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Two weeks later, Westalia found herself in the Kingdom of Slidd, which was located between her home kingdom of Lhumzia and the Archaites Empire. The country was rife with conflict and public unrest.

"May I have some of those medicinal herbs?" Westalia asked, pointing to some herbs lined up on the shelves of an apothecary's shop she'd stopped at.

The owner frowned. "Those leaves have a very strong effect. If used correctly, it can be a good medicine, but if used incorrectly, it can be a dangerous poison. I don't know what you intend to use it for, but I can't give it to someone who doesn't know what they're doing with it."

Westalia let out a small sigh. "That plant... Its red berries have a dangerous paralytic effect on nerves, but the leaves, on the other hand, have antipyretic and analgesic properties and are used as medicine for the dying and sick. There is nothing wrong with it, as long as you use it in the right amounts."

"Y-Yes, you're correct. You're well-versed in medicines."

"Yes, my father is a doctor and asked me to come buy some for him. There is a...terminal patient who is suffering greatly, so my

father needs the herbs to make the patient as comfortable as possible," Westalia said to the man, her acting putting Lily's antics to shame. Obviously, she couldn't tell him she was planning on using the herbs as a *poison*.

"Oh, yes, a doctor's daughter. I understand now."

After she bought the herbs and left the store, the apothecary tilted his head to the side. "Huh, I didn't know we had a doctor in this little town…"

This shopkeeper had unknowingly allowed her to buy materials for poisons and other hidden weapons. She would pretend to be a simple traveler to Archaites, secretly crafting self-defense weapons. Westalia caught a ride on the wagon of a passing merchant. The wagon was half covered and filled with crates of miscellaneous goods for trade. Westalia wrapped herself in a large blanket to keep the cold wind off her body.

Westalia looked out at the deserted streets. The occasional people that she saw walking around were all wearing shabby clothes and gloomy expressions. The buildings lining the street were in a state of disrepair.

"The people in this town are kind of…ambitionless," she said without thinking, so caught up in the sorry state of things.

"There was a conflict here a little while ago," the merchant replied. "Crime is rampant here now. Human trafficking, for example. You should be careful. They're after good-looking girls like you."

"Thank you for the warning…" Westalia replied, pulling her hood farther over her face and stroking the place where her handmade poisoned needle was hidden.

"Help me!" a voice cried suddenly.

"Huh?!"

What was that?

A girl suddenly made a flying leap onto the back of the wagon as it rolled slowly by. Her clothes were tattered, and she was bleeding in places. Her hands were bound in manacles, the chain dragging. She was trembling furiously.

She's terribly frightened… Westalia thought.

With tears in her eyes, the girl looked up pleadingly. "I'm being chased. Can you hide me…?" Her voice was hoarse, as if she were having to wring the words out of her throat. Seeing what a state

she was in, Westalia nodded silently and concealed the girl under the blanket.

Soon, several men came running toward the cart. Westalia calmly opened her book on top of the hidden young girl. The men looked frantically around the area.

“Find her quickly! She couldn’t have gotten far!”

Westalia guessed that these men were slave traders looking for their escaped goods. She met their eyes for a brief moment, but she smiled a gentle smile and they were so entranced by her beauty that they did not notice the unnatural bulge in her blanket.

“Let’s go,” she said quietly to the merchant and he sped the horses up. The girl was still trembling next to Westalia’s legs. Westalia put a hand on the blanket to soothe her.

Westalia whispered to the girl after they’d gotten safely out of the city. “It’s okay, you can come out now.”

“Really?” the girl replied, peeking out from under the blanket. She had round eyes and a childish face, but she actually looked to be a little older than Westalia herself.

“Yes.”

“Good,” the young woman sighed in relief.

The merchant looked back over his shoulder at them. “Hey, wait a minute, when did *she* get here?! She must be a slave from a trafficking ring. If they find out, I’m going to lose my head!”

“Please don’t take me back to those people. I beg of you… Please…” the girl pleaded.

Westalia glared at the merchant. “She’s already frightened. Have some consideration!”

“S-Sorry!” The man rubbed his chin, embarrassed. Helping a slave escape was still a serious problem. If it came to light, he would be punished for aiding the fugitive.

I don’t know what to do here… Westalia thought.

The young woman twisted her wrists to try and remove the manacles. The sound of metal scraping against metal echoed through the air. She wouldn’t be able to remove them on her own, and she would never truly be free until she could rid herself of the proof that she was a runaway slave.

“Let me see those manacles,” Westalia said.

“O-Okay…?” the young woman replied.

“They have a lock on them.”

“Nobody except the leader of the organization can remove these. But please, I can’t go back there…”

“I know. Stay still.” The lock on the manacles was simple. Westalia took the pin holding her blanket shut and inserted one end between two stacked boxes. She held the top box with one hand and used the other to bend the pin upward. Then, she bent it at a right angle.

The young woman and the merchant looked at each other, wondering what Westalia was doing.

Westalia then pulled down her hood and took out one of her hair clips, removing a piece of metal wire from it. The young girl gasped at the sight of Westalia’s long, silvery hair cascading down. Westalia inserted the straight wire from the hair clip and the blanket pin into the lock on the manacles. She made a series of small adjustments, twisting one side so as not to damage the inside, until the wire and clip were in the perfect position.

There we go. She gave the wire and pin a twist, unlocking the manacles with a click.

“Wow,” the young woman gasped. “You opened it with just a pin and a hair clip…”

“A neat trick, isn’t it?” Westalia replied.

“Um…” The young woman looked at Westalia as if she might be a seasoned thief.

Westalia wasn’t used to making jokes, which made it even more awkward for her. “I’m…kidding. Don’t look so worried.” She put the used clip and pin into her pocket, wiped the young woman’s wrists clean with a handkerchief, and then gently covered her again with the blanket.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Westalia asked.

“Yes. As you may have guessed, I was kidnapped to be sold as a slave.” She was the daughter of a low-ranking nobleman from a foreign land who had come to the Kingdom of Slidd on a visit. She’d gone shopping in town and lost her escort. She’d followed a man who had claimed he would show her the way back, only to discover that he was a slaver.

Hmm, to think some women can be so naive. Even children know not to follow strangers, thought Westalia, the woefully naive young woman representing the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

Westalia gave the young woman enough money to get back to

her hometown, along with a poisoned needle in the shape of a pen that she'd made from materials bought in the marketplace, knowing it was dangerous for a woman to travel alone. Inside of the cylinder of the pen was an anesthetic solution.

"Is this a...pen?"

"It's no ordinary pen. It's got a little device inside. If you remove the cap and place that end against someone's body, it will administer a dose of poison."

"Poison..."

"Use it in an emergency. You'll be able to protect yourself, even if you're otherwise helpless," Westalia said.

When the young woman fearfully asked what the effects of the poison were, Westalia responded simply that it would numb the body. It wasn't lethal, but it was effective enough to prevent someone from moving.

"How do you know so much about poisons?" the young woman asked.

"Someone, a long time ago, told me that the most beautiful flowers protect themselves by being poisonous."

The young woman tilted her head, not understanding the meaning of Westalia's words.

Incidentally, Westalia had learned about lock picking when she'd been reading up on how to make poison needle weapons, and had been wanting to try it out.

"Mister, I'm getting off here. Can you take this young woman as close to her hometown as you can?"

"What?! You're pushing this problem off on me? No way!"

"The slavers don't have that much free time. They're not going to come after a single escapee. Besides, the chains that bound her are off," Westalia replied, holding the manacles in front of the merchant's face.

"Gimme a break," he muttered, shaking his head in irritation.

"Would you do it for *this*?" Westalia flashed the hair clip with the missing wire in front of his face. It was an ornate piece of jewelry with expensive-looking gems embedded in it.

"You drive a hard bargain, lady," the merchant replied, accepting it.

"Um, thank you for helping me, and for the money... Is there any way I can repay you?" the young woman asked.

“I just did the obvious thing,” Westalia replied.

“No, you didn’t. I will repay this blessing some day!”

“Then that’s enough for me. If you see someone in need someday, give them a hand. Oh, if that merchant just takes the reward and doesn’t get you home, stick him with this poisoned needle,” Westalia said, handing over a second poisoned needle.

“And…what does this poison do?”

Westalia plucked a sprig of flowers that were growing near the carriage and put a drop of poison from the needle on one blossom. The flowers that came into contact with the poison withered and died. The young woman and the merchant looked at each other with pale faces.

“It’s a very, very terrible poison. Even just a drop of it is enough to kill a man,” Westalia said, a threatening look in her eye. In truth, the poison that had killed the flowers had no major effect on humans. It only stopped one from urinating and defecating for a while.

The merchant let out a yelp and then said, “D-Don’t worry! You can trust me; I’m getting paid, which makes this a job. I’ll make sure she gets home.” Then he smiled at the young woman.

“Wonderful. Take care.”

“Wait! I’m Lyra. What’s your name?”

Westalia narrowed her eyes. “Cordata. No surname. Now I’m…just Cordata.”

After disembarking from the carriage, Westalia searched for a nearby inn. Her plan had been to travel a little farther today and stay in a place four towns away, but her plans had suddenly changed. According to Lyra’s story, the slavers had everything from beautiful women they kept as pets to strong men they used for work.

Slave traders… I’m intrigued. If I go there, I might find someone who fits my needs… Her curiosity piqued, Westalia’s supple lips curled upward. The sun was setting and the world around her was turning orange as Westalia disappeared into the crowded streets.

The next day, Westalia began her investigation into the slavers. Apparently, the buying and selling took place every Friday night, in the basement of the town’s arena.

Westalia spent one of the nights that weekend replenishing her

poison needles. There were various tools spread out across the desk of her room at the inn, including mortars, pestles, and beakers, as well as several tall stacks of books. She ground poison powders with the mortar and pestle and poured them into the pens, along with a solvent. Once the caps were securely closed, her weapons were complete.

"There, finished." Westalia put the concealed weapons on the desk and stood up from her chair. The room she was staying in had two beds side by side. She was only using one at the moment, but if she was lucky there would be someone else joining her tonight, so she quickly tidied up the room a little bit.

Westalia opened the closet, pulled out the hanger on which her outerwear was hanging, and took off the loungewear she was currently wearing. The light shining through the window illuminated her smooth skin. She'd been dressed casually since she was indoors, but now she changed back into her regular clothes, put on her cloak, and pulled the hood sharply over her head. After finishing her preparations, she left the room.

Later, Westalia made her way to the arena, her face hidden by a mask. There were several attendants at the rear entrance checking entry permits. One needed to be a member to enter, and Westalia was not a member.

"Please present your membership card," one attendant said to her.

"I don't have one. Instead...here." Westalia quickly removed her favorite ring and handed it to the attendant as proof of identity. She'd worn the ring, with the hidden anesthetic needle in it, since she was young, and it was engraved with the Lhumzian royal crest.

The attendant checked the family crest, recognized Westalia as eligible, and let her in.

You weren't surprised at all by the royal crest...so that means you're used to seeing it, huh? Westalia thought. She could surmise that a considerable number of the upper class visited this place to buy slaves. Judging from the attendant's lack of reaction, it was likely that even other foreign royalty, like herself, came here.

Westalia was shown into the basement of the arena, where the slaves were housed. The stone walls were damp, there was a strange odor that stung her nose, and there was dirt everywhere.

What an atrocious environment. This is no place for a human, she thought. She held a handkerchief over her nose and mouth and frowned.

"What kind of slave do you want?"

"A woman strong in mind and body. Do you have any female gladiators?" She had one purpose here, and that was to find an assistant to help her in the empress selection.

"Yes, of course. This way, please." The salesman cocked his chin and motioned her toward the back. The slaves, chained together in cages, stared at her with hatred. She arrived in front of the innermost cage, practically feeling their loathing on her skin.

Westalia's eyes met the eyes of the slave through iron bars. Inside the cage was a beautiful young man with blond hair like sheaves of wheat and indigo eyes. He looked remarkably calm and had a cold expression on his face.

"Isn't he a man? I said I wanted a woman."

"No, no, she may look like a man, but she is really a woman," the seller explained with a wry smile. According to him, her name was Paige, and she often fought in the arena above, putting her life on the line—as a spectacle. Her opponents varied from humans to big game, and she killed for entertainment. She was the strongest fighter and hadn't lost a single fight.

The reason such a strong and beautiful woman hadn't been sold yet was because she'd ignored her first buyer's orders and fought against him repeatedly, eventually causing a serious injury that took several months to heal, which had led her back to this basement. After that, everyone was so afraid of her that nobody wanted to purchase her.

"This time a lady wants to buy me? You have a very discerning eye," a new voice said.

Westalia put her face close to the bars of the cage. *This woman could seriously injure me…* What she wanted was someone who would be absolutely loyal to her.

"I can't take you with me if you won't listen to me as your master," Westalia said.

"They say in all beautiful things lies something poisonous, right? You must love them all, right, master?" the woman said teasingly, with a charming smile on her face.

"Why did you turn against your previous master?"

“He was a prick.” Paige’s former master had been an arrogant nobleman who often threatened his wife and resorted to violence. That violence had gotten worse when Paige was in his service. When the man had cut his wife’s hair and hit her in the face with a liquor bottle in a fit of rage, Paige had finally snapped and beaten him to a pulp.

“You did well! You made the right choice. But that was a big risk. Things might’ve turned out really badly for you. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“I decide who I’m loyal to, even if that means ending up back in this dingy basement or having to kill again.”

Westalia remained silent. She herself lacked that kind of backbone. All these years, even when she’d been confined unreasonably, she hadn’t said a single word in protest. She’d just meekly obeyed all the rules. If she’d been prepared to abandon her country instead, would her future have been different?

So she chooses for herself whom she’s loyal to… I wish I could tell this tale to my past self. Nobody from her home country had shown any worry about her. On the contrary, in the end they had only glared at her, blamed her, and shouted at her to hurry up and die—all while she’d been trying to be a good queen who protected her people.

“You’re quiet all of a sudden. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing… I have a number of things I would like to ask you. Can you do household chores?”

“As much as anyone else.”

“And what are your combat capabilities and physical strength?”

“As per my introduction, I’m likely the strongest one down here. My physical strength… I could probably carry you around this whole town in my arms.”

“One last thing. Will you put your life on the line in service to me? If you can swear to it, I’ll get you out of here.” Westalia moved even closer to the bars and shifted her mask up. It was selfish to ask someone she’d just met to put their life on the line for her. She wondered what Paige’s response would be, but the woman just laughed.

“Yeah, sure. But one day, if I decide you’re not worthy of my service anymore…”

“You’ll strike back at me? Like your previous master?”

“I hope you handle me well, so I don’t have to.” Paige’s lips curved into a smile and she looked provocatively at Westalia.

She’s got guts… I like it. If Westalia was going to drag someone into aristocratic society with her, it was better that it was someone who wasn’t afraid to show her fangs. After all, if there was anything Westalia was used to dealing with, it was poison. And poison could be good medicine too, depending on how it was used.

Westalia looked back at the seller. “I will take her. Right now, in fact. How much?” She opened her attaché case, which was filled with wads of cash. Paige and the seller looked at each other, clearly wondering just who she was. The seller’s offer was exorbitant compared to the market price for a regular slave, but Westalia paid on the spot and had the cage opened.

“Let’s get out of here quickly, Paige.”

Westalia and Paige left the arena. After they returned to the inn, Paige washed herself. Without the dirt covering her body, she was suddenly beautiful. Westalia sat her down on the bed and carefully began tending to the woman’s wounds, one by one. What she could see of Paige’s body was muscular and well-defined, but her skin was still soft.

She’s covered in scars… Westalia thought. The scars varied from old to new, deep to shallow. She used her fingers to apply ointment to the still-fresh wounds on Paige’s arms, then bandaged them.

“These must hurt. Let me know if the ointment stings,” Westalia said.

“These aren’t that bad. They’ll heal on their own,” Paige replied.

“No, they won’t! You’re not a wild animal. We have to take care of them so they don’t fester,” Westalia argued. “There we go. You can get dressed now.”

Paige was silent as she put on her shirt, but she looked in Westalia’s direction as if she wanted to say something.

“What’s the matter? Do you still have other injuries?” Westalia asked, and then she shrieked as Paige reached toward her. Paige took the medicine box from her hands and grabbed Westalia’s arms, forcing her to sit down on the bed. Then Paige opened the box, took out the ointment again, and placed some on her finger. She gently applied it to Westalia’s injured finger, where she’d

gotten a cut when she was making her poisoned needles. Paige frowned as the medicine soaked into the wound.

"Ouch…" Westalia muttered.

"It's fine that you're taking care of me, but what about yourself? And please put up with at least this much. I did."

"You're so kind," Westalia whispered, looking at Paige as she applied a bandage to the wound.

"No, you are the kind one."

After that, the pair went to a tailor to buy suitable clothes for Paige. She wanted clothes that would be easy to move in, so they bought a button-up shirt, slacks, and a vest. The masculine clothes made her look like a beautiful young nobleman.

"How are you feeling?" Westalia asked. "You've been in such a horrid place for so long… Maybe you should see a doctor."

"I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me," Paige replied.

"Do you want something to eat? Are you thirsty? If there's anything you want, you let me know."

Paige stopped in the middle of the street, a serious look on her face. "Why are you being so nice to me? I'm a slave."

"A former slave. I bought you, but I am not like the previous buyer. I will not mistreat you and I will reward you for your achievements. And in due time, you shall be lady's maid to an empress," Westalia responded. The position she promised was a glamorous job that any woman would love to have. If Westalia was going to ask Paige to cooperate with her from now on, it was only right for Paige to be aware of the situation.

Paige blinked. "Empress…?"

Westalia looked straight at her. "Before long, I will become empress of the Archaites Empire. I will have everything and be the most powerful woman in the land. That's why I chose you as my ally, because you are strong in mind and body."

"I heard that the empress of Archaites is chosen from among all the maidens in the country by a special selection process. Will you be able to do it? I don't know how competitive it is."

"It's not a question of being able. I *will* be empress."

Just as Paige had wished for sunlight when she'd been underground, Westalia wished, from the very bottom of her soul, to regain all that she had lost. Having experienced humiliation, the

only thing left for her to do now was to crawl back up, aiming higher and higher.

Paige saw the conviction in Westalia's eyes. She knelt down on the spot. Westalia caught the sharp gaze that shot out from between the locks of Paige's bangs.

"To be honest with you," Paige started, "I come from a ruined family of knights. I was reduced to being a slave, but I have trained since childhood and always dreamed of becoming a knight."

"I see. So you wish to be a knight and not a lady's maid?"

"If my dream were to come true..."

Westalia bid her to wait, then walked around the area, leaving Paige with her head still lowered. Westalia picked up a tree branch that was lying nearby and walked back over to Paige, tapping her on each shoulder with the branch—like it was a sword. This sword salute was the gesture symbolizing that one had just been knighted.

"I will grant your wish," Westalia said. "From this day on, you are my one and only knight."

"I hereby pledge my life to you—to be the spear that strikes your enemies and the shield that protects you," Paige replied. She was so beautiful as she clasped her hand on her chest and uttered the oath that even a woman wouldn't be able to resist her charms.

"So? What do I do first?" Paige asked. She was an excellent gladiator and had made fighting her entire life. However, she was still wary of Westalia and pondered what heinous crimes she'd be asked to commit.

But Westalia just smiled softly and raised a finger. "I'm going to have you scramble up that wall with me."

"Huh?!"

Westalia pointed directly at the wall that ran along the border between the Kingdom of Slidd and the Archaites Empire. Paige just blinked at this unexpected request.

Chapter 2: The Worst Meeting

“I never thought that the first person I would be forced to cooperate with would be an illegal immigrant. What a reckless mistress I’ve found,” Paige said.

“Oh shush. Just follow me.”

One night that week, the pair began scaling the tall wall between countries, using ropes to climb. Since Paige was in the lowest of the low of social classes—a slave—and Westalia was an evil woman who was supposed to be dead, there was no way they could cross the border by ordinary means.

Long ago, this place had been the site of a battle between two divided peoples, and the wall built at that time had remained standing as the border all this time.

“What happens if the night watchmen find us?” Paige asked.

“Then we go with them peacefully to the jail.”

“That’s absurd.”

“I wonder what the prison chef’s specialty is?”

“There’s no way they have a chef.”

There were no human settlements nearby, only a seemingly endless forest. There weren’t many border guards to begin with, but the pair would most assuredly be imprisoned if discovered. Westalia might actually be deported back to her home country if her identity was discovered, and then all hell would break loose.

Forging IDs costs time and money, and that’s the only way we’d be crossing by official means. And time is something we certainly don’t have. The only choice left is to use force, Westalia thought as she scaled the wall with the rope, sweat beading on her forehead. The day of the first round of the empress selection was fast approaching. There was still a lot of work to be done when they arrived at Archaites’s imperial palace, so they had to hurry.

“Here, give me your hand. Watch your feet,” Paige said, extending her hand from the top of the wall.

“Thank you,” Westalia replied, grabbing the hand. Paige easily pulled her up.

Westalia could see the glittering streetlights of the Archaitian

imperial city from the top of the wall. Le Chantier Palace stood in the center of the city. It was the country's grandest building, built by skilled craftspeople who had exhausted all their talent and resources in the process. It was the center of prosperity for the city. The royal family lived and conducted governmental business inside.

What a beautiful palace. It must be twice the size of the royal palace in Lhumzia, Westalia thought. "I… I really want to go there," she said out loud, looking straight at the building. The night breeze pulled down her hood and flowed through her long hair, turning it luminous and mystical in the moonlight.

"Why are you so stuck on becoming empress?" asked Paige.

Westalia's eyes narrowed. "Look. You see how the lights of the imperial city sparkle? But the farther you go out from the capital, the darker it gets. Do you know what this means?"

"Does it mean that there is a gap between the rich and the poor?"

"Yes. And there are many noblemen who exploit the weak to line their pockets. It will take power to bring them to heel and make everyone prosperous." Although Westalia had never experienced poverty, she'd seen with her own eyes those in power who were crass enough to use others as stepping stones to satisfy their own greed.

I won't allow anyone to be the victim of power like I was. The empress's job was to protect the innocent and contribute to the establishment of a peaceful order. In the process of her rigorous training to become queen, Westalia had actually acquired a passion for the role. To regain her lost position was not only her revenge against Lily but a means of fulfilling her own dream.

"I can't turn a blind eye to the fact that someone in power might be acting tyrannically somewhere. That's one of my reasons for doing this, at least," Westalia said, smiling softly at Paige. "That was a little too serious, no?" she continued. "I could list all sorts of lofty motives, but to be more honest, I just genuinely want to be the empress. I want to help a lot of people and be needed. It's been my dream since I was a little girl. Every girl dreams at least once of being a princess, right?"

"Does my mistress truly possess such a pure heart?" Paige asked, laughing.

“How rude! I am splendidly pure,” Westalia replied, laughing along as they began to climb down the opposite side of the wall.

Westalia got a little farther down the rope before her foot slipped on the wall, causing her to let go of the rope. She screamed.

“Mistress!” Paige flung her hand out, but it only grazed the tip of Westalia’s nose.

Westalia felt like her body was floating as she fell down. She’d been warned to watch her step, but she’d been careless. The sky was full of stars. Her road to becoming empress had just started, but would it end here? *This is the first time I’ve ever flown,* she thought, having come full circle back to being calm as she gazed up at the night sky. The days spent cooped up in that villa, when she had no time to look at the beautiful sky, flashed before her, and she gently closed her eyes.

However, Westalia’s body didn’t experience the hard shock she had expected—she was instead caught by the muscular arms of a man.

“I didn’t expect someone to fall from the sky. Life is full of surprises, isn’t it?” said a deep, clear voice.

Westalia opened her eyes and was greeted by the sight of a handsome man. *How bewitching,* she thought. He had deep, green eyes and shiny, jet-black hair that looked like it had absorbed the night sky. His sharply contoured face was perfectly proportioned and balanced. On his ear sparkled a long earring with small, strange patterns engraved on it. His eyes pierced through her. When she met his gaze she was unable to look away, and for a moment, they just stared at each other.

Westalia was the first to come to her senses. *Oh no, he must be a night watchman on patrol!* It was good that she’d been rescued, but she didn’t know whether to consider herself lucky or unlucky to have run into someone patrolling the streets. She pondered how best to excuse herself, then smiled affectionately, knowing it was all or nothing.

“How nice to meet you. I am your goddess, descended from the heavens.”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?” the man replied.

“I’m serious.”

The man was on guard, but he suddenly relaxed and looked at

Westalia with a cold expression. “Well, you must be crazy. Completely crazy. If you’re going to make excuses for illegal entry, then you’ll have to come up with something better than that. What country are you a refugee from? You’ll be punished less if you tell us the truth—”

The joke had been intended to loosen him up. Not one to miss a moment of opportunity, Westalia, with a mild smile on her face—but not the slightest hesitation—took a poison needle from her breast pocket and stuck it into his neck.

“What are you…?”

The man suddenly fell to his knees. Westalia, freed from his arms, pulled her hood back over her face and looked down at him from above, narrowing her eyes.

“A…poison?” the man asked.

“It won’t kill you. It will just incapacitate you for a little while,” Westalia replied, putting the used needle back into her pocket and wrapping it in a bit of fabric. She carried poison needles all over her body, in addition to her rings, for just this kind of situation. There were all sorts of poisons, and the one she had used on him would paralyze his body for a certain period of time, making him unable to move, but he was still able to talk.

“You must be a very dangerous woman to be carrying around such a thing,” the man said.

“Someone once told me I should protect myself with poison,” Westalia replied.

“Then they’re just as much of a scoundrel as you are.”

“As I am?”

“Anyway, don’t you worry. You’re already too late,” he said sarcastically, even though he was numb and immobile.

Just then, the bushes rustled and Paige arrived, dragging two unconscious men with her.

“Oh good, you’re okay,” she said.

“You seem all right too. And those two?” Westalia asked.

“Night watchmen… I think. I knocked them out before they saw me, but now what? Should I bury them?”

The man with the long earring frowned at the two unconscious men. “Wait. Those are my men.” He began negotiating for their freedom, but Westalia and Paige couldn’t just hand them over for nothing. They made the man promise to overlook their illegal

entry, then demanded that he give up their horses.

"So you're just thieves," he said.

"Are you really in a position to be saying that?"

"I saved you!"

"I didn't ask you to," Westalia spat back, brushing his words aside. Looking through his belongings she noticed he had many expensive-looking things and seemed to be quite wealthy. She also noticed the particularly expensive-looking long earring shining on his ear. Westalia reached toward his left ear and removed the metal clasp. She tilted her head at the exquisite pattern engraved on the back of the jeweled ornament.

"What is this pattern?"

"Give it back. That is the one thing I cannot give away. It's important. I swear I will never tell anyone about you."

"I don't think I can trust you," Westalia replied, dismissing his desperate pleas with an emotionless, brusque laugh. Westalia had been betrayed by her most trusted confidant. She no longer believed people's words so easily and wouldn't make the same mistake again. She put the long earring on her right ear and spoke coldly to the man.

"Yes, this is very important to you, isn't it? I will give it back to you at the point when I decide if you're a trustworthy person. I'm going to be the empress. So don't get in my way."

She called out to Paige and turned away without further ado. They borrowed two fine horses from the man and descended the mountain. If she wanted to become empress, she would have to resort to any means necessary to do it. With a little pang of guilt, Westalia shrugged to herself. *Now I really am an evil woman... That's okay though, if it means making my wish come true.* If she wasn't prepared to do that, there would be no point in risking so much to come to the Archaites Empire. The ornament swayed on Westalia's right ear as she straddled her horse. She could never have dreamed what the earring she had taken from the man meant—nor how that alone signaled his noble background.

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Left behind, the man let out a small sigh and muttered a few words. "She's a devil." What was with her bit about being a

goddess from heaven? Ridiculous. There was no way she was any sort of goddess.

On his way back from an outing, he'd been riding his horse along the border toward Le Chantier Palace when a girl fell from the sky. Leonardo Orencia, the crown prince of Archaites, had been quick to catch her in his arms. When he did, he had seen a lovely girl looking up at him. She had purple eyes and wavy, silver hair that looked like silk, and she was probably still in her late teens. This was the second time in his life he'd been so captivated by a woman. She had looked at Leonardo with a dignified gaze, and he had felt his heart stir with some sort of sense of nostalgia.

But despite her pretty face, she was vicious and conceited, the worst kind of woman. She'd stabbed her savior with a poisoned needle, then robbed him of his earring, *the* symbol that denoted he would be the next emperor.

At first glance, the earring looked ordinary, but there was a small pattern engraved on the back. The pattern was Leonardo's personal design, and it was enough to move an entire army. It would be a serious matter if it were misused.

In addition to all that, her companion had appeared with Leonardo's men, whom she'd rendered unconscious. That masculine woman must have been very skilled indeed to defeat the crown prince's own men.

"You lot! Get up!"

"Mmm? Where are we?"

"The forest along the border." His men finally woke up two hours after the girls had taken their horses and fled. The numbness inside Leonardo's body had finally subsided.

"What the hell happened?" The men didn't seem to understand the situation. As long as the girl had the earring, Leonardo couldn't tell his men about the illegal immigrants. He rubbed the bridge of his nose and sighed.

"You must've collapsed from the exhaustion of the long journey. We'll camp here tonight."

"Y-Yes, Your Highness."

Claiming both of them had fainted at the same time was a little unbelievable, and they were clearly suspicious, but they couldn't refute the words of the crown prince. Whatever Leonardo said would be the truth.

Leonardo recalled what the girl had said as she was leaving. With an expression too frank for someone evil, she'd claimed she would be empress.

That unmanageable girl is going to be my wife? No way. The country will totally fall apart the day she becomes empress, Leonardo thought. But he felt he didn't have to worry too much. There was no way an impudent girl like that would be chosen as empress. Women from all over the country vied for the role of empress, but only one of them could fill it. The girl would be eliminated quickly if she didn't have the right qualities. Besides, as crown prince, Leonardo himself would be participating in the selection. He wouldn't vote for her even in the worst-case scenario.

In any case, I have to track down that girl and get my crest back. What a hassle, Leonardo thought. But for some reason, Leonardo couldn't get her earnest gaze when she said she was going to be empress out of his mind.

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Westalia and Paige had entered the Archaites Empire. It was much richer than Westalia had imagined. The Kingdom of Lhumzia was exhausted now after several years of epidemics, but this country was disease-free, its people healthy, and its economy in good condition. The Kingdom of Slidd, where Paige was from, had been plagued by frequent conflicts and was not safe, making Archaites the most stable of the three neighboring countries.

Various stores lined the sides of the streets.

"Hey there! You newlyweds! How would you like some fresh-picked vegetables? You two beauties make a good match," a woman at a vegetable stall called out to Westalia and Paige in a lilting voice.

"No, we're not a married couple. She's a woman," Westalia replied, smiling at the woman and pointing at Paige.

"Really?! She's got such handsome features. If I didn't know she was a woman, I woulda almost fallen in love with her!"

Paige smiled bewitchingly and moved in close to the woman. "Well, I don't mind if you fall in love with me anyway."

"W-Well..." The woman's cheeks flushed and she looked entranced.

Westalia noticed that the young girl standing at the woman's side had the lower half of her face covered with a cloth. The girl was looking down and not making eye contact with anyone. Her eyes looked very similar to the woman's, so Westalia guessed she was the woman's daughter. At that moment, the wind blew and the cloth covering the girl's face fluttered up, exposing her mouth, which was covered with a rash.

I see, so you don't want other people to see that.

The girl hastily covered her mouth again. "I'm sorry to show you something so unsightly. It's a condition," she said, embarrassed.

"The chameleon plant is good for that," Westalia said.

"Huh?"

"Look, growing in that garden and along the side of the road there. Chameleon plant is an anti-inflammatory, so if you put some on your face it should make it better. It's quite simple, so I'd be happy to show you how to make a liquid medicine from it," Westalia explained.

"Thank you! Please do!" The young girl's face lit up, making Westalia happy as well. After all, any weed could be useful to someone and have a chance to shine.

Westalia sold off the rest of the jewelry she'd brought with her and then went through the several steps required of her in order to purchase real estate in the imperial capital. In this country, buying expensive real estate was one way to obtain citizenship, so the two of them were now, on paper, citizens of the Archaites Empire. With this, Westalia had cleared the minimum requirement needed to participate in the empress selection.

They now owned a mansion that was way too large for the two of them. Tension drifted through the dining room. Westalia sat on a sofa, with her elbows propped up on a table and her hands folded. Her natural poise took Paige's breath away.

Westalia smiled, resting her chin on her hands, and broke the silence. "Paige. I've run out of money and I'm in a lot of debt. I don't even have enough money for us to eat today."

"Don't say something so depressing with a smile like that on your face!"

The jewelry Westalia had brought from her grave wasn't enough to cover buying such a huge mansion, so she'd had to

shadily borrow shady money from an even shadier financial institution. Even before that, she'd spent a fortune to get Paige out of slavery. Purchasing the best female gladiator had been more expensive than purchasing the mansion.

This was the first time in Westalia's life that she'd been in poverty. Until now, she'd been able to get whatever she wanted simply by commanding it, and she'd never had to work to earn money. But there was no use in worrying about it.

"What are you going to do? We'll starve to death before you even come remotely close to becoming empress."

"You're right. Do you think it would be a good idea to find part-time jobs?" Westalia smiled cheerfully, and she pulled out an illustrated field guide in one hand and a weed from the garden in the other and placed them both on the table. The plant had a strange shape, with wavy, tangled stems.

"Look, I think you can eat this weed!"

"Do you *want* to eat that?"

Westalia silently handed over the weed to Paige, who took the totally unappetizing piece of foliage with a sigh.

The illustrated book listed edible wild plants and mushrooms, and the pair decided to go out later to pick some.

"I should tell you that I've never worked or ever done any housework, including cooking, laundry, and cleaning," Westalia said, smiling.

"How have you lived this long?!" Paige replied, utterly appalled at the sheltered life Westalia had lived. It was a valid question. Westalia was the daughter of a great aristocratic family and a former candidate for queen; she was a hardcore sheltered child. She had no life skills and really didn't know anything about the world. "Well, there are a lot of things that can be confusing, but it's not difficult. I can teach you how to do the housework, and you'll be off and running in no time," Paige said.

"Thank you, Paige." At any rate, the two of them would have to work together to get by.

Thus the pair began their life in the Archaites Empire.

The pair immediately set out for a nearby mountain. With the field guide in hand, they harvested edible wild plants and mushrooms. In the evening, after getting a job recruitment form

in town, they returned to the mansion and Paige adeptly made them a meal. She made a stir-fried dish of mushrooms and wild plants, along with a soup. There were no seasonings, so the ingredients retained their natural flavors.

As a former aristocrat, Paige was well-versed in table manners. She handled the knife with exemplary form and said, “It’s worse than I thought. I’ve never seen food explode before! This is beyond not having any life skills.”

“Oof.” For some reason, every vegetable that Westalia had fried came out charred black. She’d told herself over and over again that failure was part of learning something new, but Paige had casually dismissed her, stating that she herself had never turned anything to charcoal, even as a beginner.

Westalia had always been able to do everything with ease, whether it be studying, embroidery, or playing a musical instrument. However, she thought she might’ve finally found something she wasn’t all that good at.

“I think you should work somewhere other than in the culinary arts,” Paige said.

“Yeah.” To make a living, Westalia had to work. Paige said she would do manual labor because she was physically strong, but what about Westalia?

It would be nice if I could find a job as a tutor or an interpreter. Or somewhere where my knowledge of medicine would be useful, Westalia thought, even though her knowledge of medicines was really a knowledge of poisons.

Paige’s gaze caught on the long earring dangling from Westalia’s right ear. “You’re not gonna sell that? It looks expensive.”

“No way. This earring is insurance so we can live safely in this country.” The man Westalia had met that night had seemed to value this quite a bit. As long as she had this, no harm would come to her. She couldn’t give up this earring, no matter how impoverished she became.

Well, I probably won’t ever see him again anyway, she thought, gently stroking the earring. This country was huge. Finding a single person here would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

“And who was he, anyway?” Westalia asked. “He was quite well-dressed, and his pronunciation of the official language was

beautiful."

"I dunno. Maybe he was the son of some wealthy family," Paige replied.

Even now that night—that moment she stared into eyes that were as green as the deep forest around them—was seared into Westalia's mind. *For some reason, it felt like this wasn't the first time I'd met him…even though I was kept hidden away and not allowed to interact with anyone,* she thought. Why did she feel nostalgia for that man when she could count on her fingers all the people she knew?

Westalia and Paige continued to talk as they finished eating.

After dinner, Westalia returned to her room and sat down at her desk. She took off the earring, shone a nearby lamp on it, and took a better look at it.

I wonder what this pattern is… An intricate pattern was carved into the blue stone. That man had pleaded with her so desperately to return it, but why on earth was he so obsessed with the trinket? The carving was too fine to make out clearly, so she took out a loupe and a piece of paper from the drawer and began copying the design down.

"I see. It's a coat of arms." A crown, a horse, a sword. And…a rose. The rose had to be the national flower of the Archaites Empire. Each aristocrat had their personal crest to show their house and status. Although each peerage had a specific pattern it was allowed to use on its coat of arms, Westalia wasn't sure what level was allowed to use a crown, a horse, a sword, and a rose. Surely this was not just a meaningless pattern. It was a sign of that man's status, which was why he had tried so hard to get it back. Was he in a position where he should not be known to others? There was also the possibility that he was an illegitimate child or the bastard son of a well-known aristocratic family. In any case, Westalia was not familiar with the family crests of the aristocrats in this country, so it would be worth looking into. Perhaps she would be able to find out his value too.

After a moment of thought, Westalia put away the loupe and paper in the drawer.

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Only two weeks remained until the first stage of the empress selection, and every day had been quite busy for Westalia. She had to work in order to eat. She decided to work in an apothecary's shop because of the extensive knowledge of medicines that came via her specialty in poisons. However, this dubious establishment was filled with dubious products and run by a dubious, middle-aged owner—Daniel.

"Gimmie that! *That*..."

"Do you have an order to pick up?"

"Y-Yes! Hurry up and bring me my usual! Okay? Make sure it's wrapped good and tight so no one can see what's inside," said a suspicious man who'd entered the store with his hat pulled over his eyes.

"Yes, sir."

The man had been very concerned with his surroundings before even entering the store, and he still looked fidgety. Westalia checked the list of reservations and pulled out a medicine from the shelf.

"This is the medicine you reserved. Hair regrowth—"

"Don't say it! I know what it is, so you don't gotta say it!"

The preparation was a hair regrowth agent made from a mixture of oil extracted from snakes and several medicinal herbs. When this was applied to the scalp, it was said to stimulate the growth of new hair. The effect was only a placebo though.

"Hey, you. You got anything else that's effective for...y'know?"

"There is a medicine you can take that contains a mixture of peony root and aloe, both of which are said to be beneficial for the scalp." Westalia refrained from adding on that that, too, was merely a placebo.

"I-I want it! Please give me that too."

"Thank you very much."

The man gladly bought that medicine as well and left the store. Just as he went out the door, a strong wind blew and his hat flew off, exposing his forlorn head. He hurriedly put his hat back on and looked back at Westalia awkwardly, so she pretended not to have seen anything and kept her eyes down.

The store sold only unusual medicines that Daniel purchased from here and there, which were otherwise hard to find in the market and were popular among a certain clientele. The products

were ones with a limited demand, such as hair regrowth medicines, medicines to make one taller, medicines to make one thinner, and medicines to make one's breasts bigger, among others. Of course, all of these medicines were only expected to have a placebo effect, so as far as the people of the city were concerned, it didn't really matter if one actually took them or not.

Daniel had once been an apothecary at the imperial palace and was now famous because of his achievements. He was an excellent apothecary, to be sure, but he was also a research geek with a curious and inquisitive mind. He often spent time in the back of his store looking into medicines he didn't know the use of.

Paige objected to her working in such a bizarre place, but Westalia was quite happy with the job.

"Good job today, Cordata," Daniel said as Westalia prepared to leave for the day.

"Um, what's in that cauldron?" Westalia asked.

"A lizard's tail, a frog, and a cat's claw, mixed together with a special potion. Now I'm going to make it into a love potion," Daniel replied, laughing flippantly as he made another strange medicine. "It's sort of like a witch's brew, and it's pyrophoric. But who's going to buy it?" Daniel continued, muttering to himself as he picked up a medicine bottle that was rolling on the floor. Just then, the green liquid in the kettle exploded, scorching the shopkeeper's hair and beard and turning them crispy.

Westalia narrowed her eyes in dismay. "Can you really call that a success?"

"Unquestionably a failure."

Thus went Westalia's interesting life as a part-timer.

Compared to her home country of Lhumzia, Archaites was far richer economically and culturally, and the people were kind. The longer she lived here, the more she fell in love with the country.

Westalia headed home from her part-time job, dragging her exhausted body along. The evening sun bathed the buildings and cobblestones in orange.

"Good evening, Cordata! Are you finished with your work?" asked a woman on the street.

"Yes..."

"My husband had a terrible backache, and the poultice I bought

at the pharmacy worked surprisingly well. Tell Mr. Daniel thank you."

"I will. He'll be pleased," Westalia said. *Surprisingly well...?* The woman spoke as if it usually didn't work at all.

Westalia was approached everywhere she went these days. The people of this country were friendly and hospitable, even to strange foreigners. It was the first time that Westalia, who had been separated from the world, resented, and neglected for so long, had felt warmth from others.

Westalia stopped when she saw a poster hanging in the display window of a clothing shop. The large poster read "The Empress Selection."

"Hey, what does that paper say?" a little girl asked Westalia. The girl was holding hands with her mother.

"It says 'The Empress Selection.' It means that the test to decide the empress of this country is about to take place," Westalia replied.

"So you wanna be empress?"

"Th-That's right."

"Wow! Good luck!" the girl called as she was led away by her mother.

Westalia raised her gaze a bit and saw Le Chantier Palace sitting atop the hill. She wanted to go there. She wanted to go to the center of all this prosperity and regain what she had lost. *I still want to be empress. I wonder how beautiful the city looks from such a big palace...* she thought. Westalia understood how difficult it would be to whittle down from a large number of candidates to only one. The very thought of what she was going to attempt was anxiety inducing. She might fail and end up worse off for it. However, her longing to become empress had only grown. She could not sit still and do nothing. Even if she was betrayed, she would not be discouraged, and even if it was painful, she would not give up.

When Westalia returned to the mansion, the smell of dinner cooking wafted toward her nose. She put down her packages and went to the kitchen, where Paige was simmering a pot of soup.

"I'm home."

"Welcome back, mistress," Paige said, smiling at her. Paige was

working as a cargo hauler and should have been much more tired than Westalia, but she didn't look the least bit fatigued—as one might expect from a woman who had fought in an arena.

"Is there anything I can help with?" Westalia asked.

"Uh, yeah, you can do nothing. It's for the best."

"How rude! You make it sound like it's a nuisance for me to help you."

"I don't want to see another pot explode."

"Ugh…"

"What's with that sound?"

Westalia frowned as Paige poked at the sore spot. To tell the truth, Westalia had repeatedly exploded her cooking, giving birth to charred, pitch-black creations. At first, Paige had indulged her, but eventually she had run out of patience and banned Westalia from cooking at all. Westalia puffed her cheeks out as she fished around in her bag and pulled out a cookbook. She'd bought it on the way home from work today. Westalia thrust the cookbook right in Paige's face.

"You're going to study with this?" Paige asked, laughing.

"Yes. I'm going to make a dish that will impress even the finest chefs, and make you eat your words. Just you wait!"

"Really?" Paige giggled again, looking straight into Westalia's face as she smiled maliciously. "I'm looking forward to it."

Westalia blushed and looked away. *She's making fun of me!* Westalia put the book down on the table and then moved behind Paige and put both of her hands on the other woman's shoulders.

"Whoa, what's with you all of a sudden?!" Paige cried.

"I'm sure your shoulders are stiff from all the heavy lifting you do at work. I thought I'd give them a rub…"

"Heh… Aha ha ha, that tickles! Please st-stop… Ha ha, I'm cooking right now! I'm sorry for making fun of you!"

Before either of them had realized it, the former slave and the evil woman who was supposed to be dead had become friends. The two spent a lively evening joking around with each other.

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One week remained until the empress selection began. Westalia had studied hard up to this point, and all she had left to

do was take care of herself and get ready for the real thing.

But then something unexpected happened. After finishing work one day, Westalia was walking along the sunset-drenched streets as usual when she was suddenly approached from behind.

“Found you.”

Westalia turned around with a start and came face-to-face with the man she’d met that fateful night at the border. He was wearing a cloak to hide his face, but the green eyes peering out of his hood were unmistakable. Today he had no subordinates with him. She’d assumed there was no chance he could find her in such a vast empire. The man smiled elegantly as Westalia’s eyes went wide.

“Been a while, Ms. Illegal—”

“Hey! There are people around!” Westalia said, putting a hand over his mouth to prevent him from saying “illegal immigrant.”

“Mmmph!” The man’s eyes widened.

Westalia then noticed the touch of his lips on her palm and withdrew her hand, flushing slightly. It was not polite to touch the lips of someone of the opposite sex without permission. He, too, awkwardly lowered his eyes.

The man was no longer touching her, but Westalia could still feel the softness and warmth of his lips on her palm.

“What brings you here?” Westalia asked.

“It’s the imperial capital. Of course I would be here.”

“You speak like it’s your own backyard, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

“I just happened to be here…” he said, and then he noticed the earring that was dangling from Westalia’s right ear. He reached for it, but Westalia turned her back to him. He reached for her again, but she dodged backward. After a few more rounds of this back-and-forth, Westalia glared at him, hand covering her ear.

“I’m not going to hand it over.” This earring was a bargaining chip to make this man keep Westalia’s secret. She’d told the man that night that she would return the earring if she determined he could be trusted—not that she had any intention of returning it at all. She put her hand in her pocket, calling attention to the fact that she had another poisoned needle on her, and the man sighed in frustration.

The man gave up on taking back the earring and instead took the stack of books that Westalia was carrying in her other hand.

“Oh…”

“You’re awfully carefree so close to the empress selection. Are you going to give up and become a chef?” the man asked. The books she’d been carrying had titles like *Cooking for Beginners*, *Even a Monkey Can Do It! The Basics of Cooking*, and *Recipes for Ultimate Beginners*.

“Absolutely not. I’m still studying; this is just my hobby,” Westalia said, snorting and snatching the books back from the man. She put the books on the ground, pulled a paper bag out of her purse, and handed it over to him. They were cookies she had baked yesterday. She had brought them in to give to her current employer, Daniel, and the customers who came in. The man looked inside the paper bag and frowned.

“What’s this?”

“Cookies. Leftovers from the ones I gave away at work.”

“There’s no way these are cookies. These are pitch-black,” he said, a serious expression on his face.

“What did you say?!” Westalia cried, her brow furrowing in anger. “Well then, why don’t you try them and find out. They *taste* like cookies! See!” Westalia picked a cookie from the bag and shoved it into the man’s mouth.

“Mmghghph!” He turned pale, nearly gagged, and clamped a hand over his mouth. “Ugh…”

“H-Hey, what’s wrong with you? You don’t look so good. Are you feeling sick?” Westalia looked at him with concern, and he looked back at her with a deep furrow in his brow.

“It’s because you just fed me poison. You… Have you been giving these away?! That’s insane. People will die!” the man responded.

“Poison?”

“Stop learning how to cook. It’s not for you. It’d be more realistic for you to stand on your hands and make a loop around the whole city while reciting every law on the books.”

“What?!” Paige had also told Westalia again and again that cooking wasn’t for her. Westalia was good at embroidery, painting, musical instruments, studying, and everything else, but for some reason, cooking just didn’t seem to click. But Westalia, who was naturally competitive and hated to lose, wasn’t about to give up that easily. She was going to keep working hard on her cooking.

“The selection process for the empress is not as easy as you might think. The first round narrows the candidates down to a selection of just a hundred women from all over the country,” the man said.

“Honestly, the competition isn’t *that* tough. The literacy rate in this country is about fifty percent, even in the cities. Among those, only the wealthy are educated enough to be empress,” Westalia replied. The empress was chosen from among all the women in the empire. At first glance, it seemed fair and equal, but the finalists were inevitably always all daughters of aristocratic families.

“I think it’s just a waste of time to have someone who can’t read take a written test,” Westalia continued. “I wonder how long the imperial family will continue to bother with such unproductive things. Why don’t they spend the money elsewhere? Are they stupid?”

The man looked aghast, as if Westalia were chastising him personally. Westalia had the advantage of having been educated and cultivated as a consort in the Kingdom of Lhumzia. That knowledge would apply well to the Archaites Empire as well.

“I won’t fail,” Westalia said. The corners of the man’s mouth turned up in a smile at her confidence.



“I’ll be waiting to see how long you can survive. Good luck, Princess Stubborn.”

“Stubborn?! Don’t call me that! My name is Cordata. What’s *your* name? Who are you? Why were you near the border that day? And why are you so obsessed with this earring?”

“I’m…Leo. I’ll see you soon,” the man said, ignoring Westalia’s questions and turning on his heel.

“Wait! I’m not finished…talking with you…” Westalia tried to reach out to stop him as he walked away. If that earring’s pattern was a coat of arms, just who was this man? She tried following him to ask him more questions, but he quickly disappeared in the crowd.

He said he’d see me soon… Well, I don’t ever want to see him again*!*

Chapter 3: The Empress Selection Begins

It was the day of the first round of the empress selection. Westalia and Paige headed to the assembly area together. It was teeming with young women.

“Whoa, that guy is so handsome. See him?” a girl said.

“You’re right. He looks like a prince. Are you gonna talk to him?” replied another.

Paige was attracting a fair bit of attention from the young women. Westalia had thought from the moment she met Paige that she was quite handsome. Blonde hair, indigo eyes, slender height, well-proportioned face, and a fresh smile—Paige had everything a girl would want in a man.

“May I ask your name? I saw you from afar and thought you were quite attractive…” the first girl said.

“Thank you. I’m Paige. I’m glad to have the chance to speak with lovely young ladies like yourself. Good luck with the first round!”

“Eee! Of course! I’ll definitely pass for sure!”

Girl after girl came and spoke with Paige, and she responded kindly to each of them. Maybe because it would be a hassle to explain to each one of them, she didn’t tell anyone she was a woman and treated them the way that a man would.

What are you doing cheering on my rivals?! Westalia thought, silently sulking. Aloud, she said, “You’re awfully popular, aren’t you?”

“This is a bit much. But look, there’s someone else who’s popular over there.”

“Oh, that’s…”

At the entrance stood a young lady who was causing a stir among all the other girls in the hall. Her aura was clearly unique. Clad in a luxurious gown, she elegantly stood alongside the knights and attendants who accompanied her.

“I’m so lucky to be able to see Lady Elizabeth in person!”

“How dainty and beautiful she is! She is indeed the best candidate for empress in the entire empire.”

Listening to the whispered gossip, Westalia realized that the

woman was Elizabeth, the only daughter of the Reyn family, one of the leading ducal families in the country. The Reyn family was also a branch of the imperial family and wielded power on a national level. On the surface, they were a prosperous aristocratic family, but some whispers said they were evil, due to their willingness to use any means to gain influence. Elizabeth had a sharp mind and was good-looking. She was at the center of the current social scene and had been considered the best candidate for empress since she was a child.

The best candidate for empress in the whole country… An impressive reputation… Westalia thought. Suddenly, her eyes meet Elizabeth's. The other woman was of much higher rank than Westalia, so she bowed deeply to show her respect. The sound of heeled shoes approached her, and she was ordered to look up.

"You. What is your name?"

"I am Cordata Tzinnia."

Elizabeth looked Westalia over carefully, then smiled at her. "You are very beautiful. And your manners are lovely."

"Thank you very much."

"I hope I didn't startle you. I was so surprised to see such a charming person that I just had to talk to you. I am Elizabeth. Where are you from? Where is your family home?" Elizabeth asked, digging into Westalia's background and other details. However, when Westalia answered that she was a commoner from a foreign country, Elizabeth gave her a look of obvious relief. She must have assumed Westalia was just a good-looking but ill-bred girl.

It makes sense. From her expression, she doesn't think I'll become her rival. Westalia figured that Elizabeth had pegged her as a potential adversary and come over to probe.

Elizabeth left gracefully, saying with a smile that they should both try their best.

"She seemed nice," said Paige. "Do you think you'll become friends?"

"You really have your head in the clouds, don't you? Did you not realize? She just came over to size me up. She has no intention of befriending me. We're mutual enemies, after all," Westalia answered.

Paige hadn't seemed to notice Elizabeth's calculating attitude, but Westalia was sensitive to the smallest of reactions. Perhaps

she had become more wary of people since Lily betrayed her.

Her exemplary smile… It reminds me of Lily's… Westalia's mind flashed back to Lily's flowery smile and she recalled the chill that had run down her spine. For some reason, she wasn't a fan of Elizabeth. Remaining in the same space would bring back that trauma, so Westalia quickly left the entryway and headed to the reception deck.

"All right, I'm off then," Westalia said.

"Wait!" Paige pressed a good-luck charm into Westalia's hand and whispered in her ear. "You managed to win over the strongest female gladiator, so you should be able to pass the entrance exam with ease, right?"

Westalia was unfazed by the pressure Paige placed on her with that gentle smile. She told Paige to just leave it to her and went into the main hall.

The examination began with a simple questionnaire. All the applicants looked at their answer sheets seriously. At the examiner's signal, they all simultaneously turned their parchments over.

Well, time to do what I can.

And so, the examination began.

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Westalia had successfully completed her exam. It consisted of questions regarding both academics and the culture of the aristocracy. It was difficult for Westalia because her native language was different, but she felt she'd been able to demonstrate well enough what she'd studied so much in the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

From the second round onward, there would be practical tests such as ballroom dancing, etiquette, embroidery, and music. Westalia continued to study diligently, not allowing herself to get distracted after the first round.

Three weeks later, a letter arrived at the residence with the results of the preliminary selection.

A knock came on her room's door while Westalia was looking through a book on the cultural history of the Archaites Empire. Paige came in at her urging, holding a letter of notification.

“My lady, the message you’ve been waiting for has arrived.”

“Yes, thank you. You can leave it there. I’ll look at it later.”

“Oh… You don’t want to look at it now?”

“Why should I?”

“Because normally you’d be interested in the results, right? I’d like to know too.”

“Well, I don’t mind if you look at it.” Westalia was sure she’d passed anyway, though she refrained from saying that aloud. Paige nervously cut the seal with a paper knife.

“I’m impressed. Out of the tens of thousands of people who took the test, you came out on top.”

Westalia wasn’t particularly surprised by the results. She had been born into a distinguished ducal family and had been educated throughout her confinement. It was only natural that she would be able to pass.

“You’re not just self-confident, you really are intelligent. Even though you can’t cook worth a lick…” Paige said. The words were so inexcusable that Westalia stopped writing and looked up.

“Wait a minute. Wasn’t that last bit a little unnecessary? Besides, I didn’t burn the stew yesterday!”

“No, the bread just turned to charcoal instead.”

“Ugh…” Westalia was overwhelmed by Paige’s soft smile and fell silent.

The next round would begin with embroidering a handkerchief to be presented to a noblewoman. Westalia would then attend a tea party with the handkerchief. There, the noblewoman would evaluate each candidate’s mannerisms and behavior during the meal, and only one candidate’s handkerchief would be accepted out of several.

Furthermore, in the next stage of the selection process, each noblewoman who hosted a tea party would participate in a grand soiree with her nominee. The Dowager Empress of Archaites would be hosting the event, and even foreign aristocrats would be in attendance. The next selection would be to see how the nominees conducted themselves at the event.

“It feels like this is where the real selection process finally begins, doesn’t it?” Paige said.

“Yes, I’m really looking forward to it,” Westalia said.

“That’s good,” Paige replied with a laugh.

Westalia had never attended a tea party or soiree because she had lived her whole life in isolation, spending her time just waiting. To even be able to attend one of these gatherings was a dream come true.

Westalia had many dreams and a lot of anxiety. She didn't know what the future held in store for her, but she would still try to do her best at what she could. She would like to make her dreams come true one by one, in her own way. No matter how hard she was beaten down and trampled, she wouldn't wither away. She would endure the unendurable, and one day, she would surely bloom into a beautiful flower.

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Leonardo Orencia was reading a newspaper in his office in Le Chantier Palace. It was from some time ago, and it was about the public execution of Westalia Lejainne, an evil woman from the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

The article stated that Westalia had been jealous of the innocent princess and tried to kill her by poisoning her. Westalia had been given a poisoned cup and died a miserable death in front of a large crowd.

What made her into such an evil woman?! She was just an ordinary girl who had earnestly dreamed of becoming queen, Leonardo thought. He'd met her once when he was still a boy, in a royal villa in the Kingdom of Lhumzia. The girl Leonardo knew was pure, serious, and hardworking. She wasn't the kind of person who would kill. She was a delicate girl who had gotten caught up in the intrigues of the palace, where power and politics were always swirling. That's what Leonardo figured, at least.

So the Lhumzian royal family has fallen as well... Leonardo had read the newspaper over and over again, wrinkling the paper in his tight grip. He put it away in a drawer and let out a small sigh.

Aside from the matter of the late villainess, there was something that had been bothering him since the morning. It was the results of the first round of the empress selection. All the applicants had been graded, and reports on the personal backgrounds of the hundred women who had passed the exam were about to be delivered.

I wonder if that girl was accepted… Leonardo thought, suddenly thinking of Cordata, the illegal immigrant aiming for the position of empress. He remembered the other day when he'd bumped into her in the imperial capital and had been forced to eat the horrible cookies she'd made. She was an arrogant, free-spirited person. She'd treated him terribly, but for some reason Leonardo didn't hate her. And it didn't feel like it was the first time he'd met her.

This is the second time I've met a silver-haired woman… Westalia, whom Leonardo had met many years ago in the royal palace of the Kingdom of Lhumzia, had also had beautiful silver hair.

Then there was a knock at the door, and Leonardo's aide, Dion, entered at his urging. Dion's long hair was tied up in a bun and he wore his ever-present smile on his face. Dion had a frivolous air about him that made it hard to tell what he was thinking.

"Special delivery! The backgrounds on all of the one hundred prospective brides. Not that I suppose you really care, so I'll just leave this here. Or should I just go ahead and feed it to the goats?"

"No, I'll look over them now. Give it here."

"My, what a surprise!" Dion carried the documents over to Leonardo, still wearing his goofy smile.

The papers were arranged in the order of the scores from the first round and were accompanied by the candidates' personal histories. Most of the applicants were the daughters of aristocrats. It was pretty much as Leonardo had expected. However, the one with the most outstanding scores was a girl with no peerage from a foreign country: Cordata Tzinnia.

Even looking at her background, she was ordinary and nothing to write home about. She had gotten almost a perfect score on the written examination. Her response to the essay topic provided by the emperor was also very interesting. The prompt was "Speak freely on the implementation of the empress selection." Cordata was the only one to have written a critique of the selection process. However, she hinted at it cleverly, so as not to make people think that she was disrespecting the state.

"Oh, yes, she's an interesting one, isn't she?" Dion asked. "At first glance, she seems to be praising the nation, but at the same time she seems to be saying that the empress selection is meaningless."

“Yes, it’s provocative.”

This Cordata had referenced the low literacy rate in the country. She said that even if all women were eligible to apply, if they could not even read and write, they wouldn’t be able to take the exam, let alone progress any further.

That was true. However, besides the plausible purpose of ensuring that no talented woman would be overlooked anywhere in the country, this large-scale selection was also intended to add prestige to the imperial family—giving the empress the distinction of being chosen from among millions. She was to be the most outstanding woman in the country, and that alone had a unifying power.

Now that he thought about it, the last time he’d seen the Cordata *he* knew, she’d specifically brought up the matter of literacy rates. At that time she’d also mentioned that it was a waste of paper for all women to undergo the empress selection exam.

No. No way… It must just be someone with the same name…

“What’s most interesting about her is the reason she wants to be empress. See, here,” Dion said, pointing to a section on the page.

“Her reason?” Leonardo asked, looking through half-closed eyes at the spot Dion was pointing to.

It simply said “I wish to have all the power, honor, and wealth and to reign at the top of the empire.”

Leonardo wondered if any woman had ever submitted a statement of purpose so clearly steeped in desire. Leonardo was now thoroughly convinced that it was in fact Cordata, the illegal immigrant, who had submitted this answer. He could picture her smiling broadly as she took her place on the throne. She would say things like “I am the empress! Kneel before me!”

But where had she acquired this depth of knowledge? She’d been horribly boastful when she proclaimed to him that she would be empress, but she did seem to have a very high level of ability.

Even if she is smart, her personality is a big problem. Leonardo looked up at Dion, letting out a small laugh.

“Look into Cordata Tzinnia.”

“Heh, what a curious wind must be blowing, Your Highness. To think you’re actually interested in a girl. Why…I must go buy an umbrella!”

“An umbrella?”

“Yes, it looks like it’s going to rain tomorrow. No, it may be a whole storm.”

“Dion…” Leonardo pleaded with his eyes for Dion to stop the teasing, and the other man bowed reverently.

“As you wish, Your Highness!”

There was a rare visitor in the parlor that afternoon.

“I’m sorry to barge in on you so suddenly. Are you well?”

“Yes. You must have had a hard time lately,” Leonardo said.

The man who had come to see Leonardo was Felix Nezeroa, the crown prince of the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

The Kingdom of Lhumzia was an opposing nation that Archaites currently had a truce with but with whom they usually did not have active communication. However, Felix had been a close friend of Leonardo’s since they had studied abroad together. Although the peace negotiations between the Kingdom of Lhumzia and the Archaites Empire had not been going well due to the political situations in both countries, the two men had always been close on a personal level.

Leonardo felt sorry for Felix. His feelings must have been complicated after the execution of his fiancée, Westalia. Since he had come all the way to Archaites under such circumstances, he must have had something important to talk about.

“No, the difficult part is just starting,” said Felix.

“Just starting?” Leonardo asked.

“Yes. I must now expose the crimes of the real villains who framed my fiancée,” Felix replied.

Leonardo let out a gasp at his words. “She was falsely accused?”

“Yes, Westalia committed no crimes. She was just at the mercy of the powers that be.”

Leonardo remained silent. It was a pity that Westalia had been imprisoned during her royal education, and now her life had been taken from her. If only she had lived, she would have had a bright future.

How horrid… Leonardo thought.

Moreover, Felix said that it was the former queen and her daughter who had framed Westalia. He was gathering evidence to prove Westalia’s innocence.

“You’ve changed too, haven’t you?” Leonardo said. Felix was a man who was weak in the face of power and had a “if you can’t beat them, join them” attitude. He had no ambition or spirit of rebellion despite how he otherwise excelled, and he was always watching the former queen’s expressions closely, lest he be reproached. It must have required quite a fair bit of determination for him to be scrambling now to ease the burdens of his guilt, even though his fiancée had already passed away.

“It’s too little too late, though,” Felix said. “When Westalia was sentenced to death, I couldn’t appeal the false accusation. I was too selfish. I finally made up my mind when I saw her for the last time in prison. I wish I had changed sooner.”

“You loved her, didn’t you?” Leonardo said.

“Yes. Though she only ever saw me as a brotherly figure. It was a one-sided love.”

Leonardo was quiet as Felix talked. He said that he had fallen for Westalia without even noticing, as she had earnestly worked to make her dream of becoming queen come true, despite being confined to a detached palace. The former queen had been dealing with merchants of the Archaites Empire, despite the fact that trade was prohibited because of Lhumzia’s status as an enemy state. She’d also bought up medicinal herbs for diseases prevalent in the Kingdom of Lhumzia from Archaites and other countries, then sold them to the domestic market at high prices, earning huge profits.

Felix speculated that in the situation with Westalia too, the former queen had been able to obtain the poisonous agisakuragi seeds without leaving any trace because the transaction had been made with a country that was forbidden to trade with. Agisakuragi was found in the mountainous areas of the Archaites Empire.

According to Felix’s investigation, the former queen was suspected of killing several people using various poisons she had purchased. Several people in the royal palace who’d been involved with the former queen had died in suspicious ways. Felix believed that she frequently obtained poisons from a trading company from the Archaites Empire for the purpose of eliminating her political opponents.

“The Devorah Trading Company, huh? So, the name of another dark organization appears.”

“Is there any way, with your power, that you would be able to seize their transaction history?” If Felix could just obtain the transaction history, it would be substantial evidence to condemn the women who were involved in the case. However, since no one from the Kingdom of Lhumzia was allowed to investigate the Archaites Empire, he had come to ask a favor of Leonardo.

Felix had helped Leonardo a lot when they were studying abroad, and even before he became crown prince, so Leonardo wanted to return the favor if he could.

“I’m sorry for asking this of you.”

“No, no need to apologize.” The Devorah Trading Company, which sold poisons, narcotics, and weapons to the nobility, had often been a thorn in Archaites’s side. However, the management of the trading company involved the Reyn family, the largest ducal family in the country, so the police force was unable to do anything about it. This family was truly one of the country’s greatest evils.

“I understand,” Leonardo said. “I’ll move people here in secret. In honor of the deceased.”

Felix was quiet but looked like he had something more to say. Leonardo asked what was wrong, and Felix slowly began speaking again.

“I have one more favor to ask you,” he said. “If you ever meet a tall girl with silver hair and purple eyes, I want you to help her.”

“Wait, do you think she’s still alive? Miss Westalia?” Leonardo asked.

Felix looked at him in surprise. “How did you know that I meant Westalia? Only her family and I know that her true hair color is silver.” Westalia was identified by the public as having red hair, but it was actually dyed to disguise its true color.

The first person Leonardo had ever fallen in love with was Westalia, whom he had met in the royal villa when he had visited the Kingdom of Lhumzia as an attendant to the peace negotiations. He could no longer recall her face clearly, but he remembered seeing her secret—her silver hair.

“Well, that’s okay. I don’t have any solid proof, but I think she probably is alive. After all, I was the one to help keep her alive,” Felix said.

The words shocked Leonardo. Letting a criminal go meant that

Felix had broken national laws. Royalty or not, he could be accused of treason.

Rumors said that Westalia's body had been stolen by thieves and likely turned into a medical cadaver for research by now. But the truth was that she had asked Felix, her ex-fiancé, to prepare an antidote and to place a lot of flowers and jewelry in her coffin after her death. The purpose of this was to have a thief dig her up from her grave while she was in a state of apparent death.

"The antidote... It had a fifty-fifty chance of saving her life. If the poison couldn't be neutralized, she would have died."

"That was a reckless plan. More to the point, wasn't it just a matter of luck whether or not she was totally dismembered while unconscious?" Leonardo asked.

"She's alive. She's not the kind of person to die there."

The excessive amount of jewelry put into her coffin had been meant for her to fund her future life. Felix had been criticized for trying to fill the coffin of a would-be murderess with jewelry, but he had ignored them all and presented her with the glamorous jewelry she deserved.

"I will do everything in my power to help Westalia regain her name, even if it means making enemies of the former queen's forces. This is my duty as crown prince and my atonement for doing nothing to help her before she was sent to the executioner's block," Felix said.

"I see..." Leonardo replied. But now they had no idea where Westalia was or if she was even alive. "But there would be no way to know if I've even met her. She could be wearing a disguise. Are there any other clues that could point us to her?"

"The former queen was watching me closely, so I didn't have the chance to interact with her that much. She was well-behaved, quiet, and ladylike. That's about all I know about her."

The mention of silver hair made Leonardo suddenly think of Cordata, but that woman's characteristics were completely different than what Felix had described.

Cordata's a fierce woman, without even a shred of propriety to her, Leonardo thought, then drowned out the image of Cordata from his mind by thinking about the first time he had met Westalia, who *had* been ladylike and kind. Even if she'd been traumatized by the loss of everything in her life, would she really change so

drastically?

Felix continued speaking. “Oh, but I remember one time I saw her with her hair done up. She had three moles in a row on the back of her neck.”

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind. Well, it’s not like I’ll realistically even run into her in this country,” Leonardo said.

“No. You will. If she’s alive.”

Leonardo wondered why Felix would go to the trouble of entrusting him with Westalia and why he was so sure they would meet. The chances of meeting here among the innumerable people here were small.

But it would be a different story entirely if she were to undergo the empress selection and win.

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“Wow, lady! You’re so good at piano!”

“So cool!”

Westalia was practicing piano in the church chapel, in case there was a situation in the upcoming selection where she would suddenly be asked to play an instrument. The accompanist who had worked here had just quit, so in exchange for playing the hymns at the morning service, Westalia had been given permission to practice freely.

“Th-Thank you…” Her playing had been well received, and children began to gather around to listen to her. She occasionally taught them how to play, but since she had never had the opportunity to engage with children before, she was at a loss for how to react to their compliments.

“Hey, play more!”

“Play it again!”

“More, more, more!” The children all started to clamor for an encore. Shaking her arms out, Westalia nodded, folding to their pressure. She didn’t think it would be interesting to hear her simply practicing pieces, but perhaps it sounded fresh to the children, who had little in the way of entertainment.

Westalia’s fingers naturally began to play the national anthem of her home country. Although her patriotism toward Lhumzia, which had abandoned her in such a humiliating manner, had

faded, the song was still ingrained in her body. With the supple movements of her slender fingers, the delicate tones reverberated through the chapel.

I wonder how Lily is doing these days, she thought idly. The execution of the hidden daughter Westalia for the attempted assassination of the princess was widely reported in the Archaites Empire. Lily, having eliminated the obstacles in her way, would surely take the position of crown prince Felix's fiancée without any effort.

Westalia, on the other hand, was struggling to make ends meet, working part-time in the city. The second round of the empress selection would be held soon, and she needed a suitable dress for the occasion, but she didn't even have the money to buy it.

I wonder if there's an easy way to earn money. Maybe…at a casino? But if she, a lone woman, went to such a place, she might get into trouble. When she finished playing the piece, she heard a low voice mixed in with the children's applause.

"I was wondering what scoundrel would play the national anthem of an enemy country here in the imperial capital…and of course it was you, Cordata."

"Oh!" Westalia turned around and saw Leo standing there.

Leo looked down at the children. "I need to speak with her about some adult things. Could you all leave?"

"Okay!"

"Bye!"

The children nodded their heads and left the chapel in high spirits.

I doubt he actually has anything to talk to me about…

The two of them were now alone in the sacred chapel. Cordata furrowed her brow and said, "Are you stalking me? I'll take you to court."

"Look who's talking, criminal."

"Shut up."

"Then give me back my earring. I'm not gonna stop until you do."

"Oh, I'm soooooo scared." Westalia had let her guard down playing the song, since there had only been children in the church, but it *was* a crime to display the symbols of an enemy country. Of

course, she also hadn't expected Leo to know the national anthem of the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

"If you want to be safe in the imperial capital, refrain from any activity that brings to mind the Kingdom of Lhumzia."

"Thank you for your advice."

"Why that song?"

"No reason. I just happen to know it."

Leo sat next to Westalia on the small piano bench. It was only designed for one person, so they were in close proximity. They were so close that Leo could smell her perfume, which was strangely unsettling. It smelled of flowers, sweet and fresh.

She smells like…wisteria flowers, Leo thought. He put his fingers on the keyboard and began to play. He seemed to have been raised very well, as only the affluent upper class had the opportunity to learn to play the piano. He also had good taste in music. He spoke as he played the music with his supple fingers. "I heard you took first place."

"How do you know that?" The only people who would know the results of the first round would be the royal family, the applicants themselves, and the selection committee members. Westalia wondered how a man who played piano in church during the day on weekdays would know about it.

"Do you by any chance work for the imperial court? Or maybe you serve the royal family?" Westalia asked.

"Something like that," Leo replied, his answer half-hearted and evasive. "You seem to be well educated, but…"

"But?"

"Your personality needs some work."

"That's none of your business!"

Leo's serious face only made Westalia more frustrated. As Westalia gazed at his sharp profile as he played the keys, Leo suddenly stopped playing and turned to face her. Westalia's heart skipped a beat as his eyes, framed by long lashes, caught her gaze.

Leo leaned in a little closer and whispered, "Cordata Tzinnia is a fake name, isn't it? It was very well-done, but that personal statement was fake too."

Westalia gasped. She'd thought she'd made such a perfect personal statement that no one could tell it was fake and she

hadn’t expected him to be able to see through it. If her true identity was discovered, not only would she be stripped of her eligibility to participate in the empress selection, but she might also be deported back to the Kingdom of Lhumzia. A cold chill ran down her back.

Leo sensed Westalia’s agitation and said, “Well, you have something on me too. I won’t tell anyone your secret until you give it back.”

“Then this earring will never be returned to you.”

“Give it back.”

Westalia dodged his hand as he reached out, and the earring twinkled on her ear. “Well, in any case, if I had a respectable lineage, then I wouldn’t have had to enter the country illegally.” Westalia realized lying wouldn’t work on him, so she stopped making excuses. Leo had seen her entering the country illegally, so there wasn’t really a point in hiding it anymore.

Leo quietly got up from the chair and looked at the vase of flowers on the piano. Only the lilies had been pulled out of the vase and scattered on the ground. Westalia hated lilies, for obvious reasons. Leo slowly put them back in the vase one by one. Westalia resumed playing the piano. Leo watched her slender fingers play the notes, then took her hand after he had finished putting the lilies back in the vase.

“Such small hands. Do you really plan to seize the empress’s throne with these delicate hands?”

“Yes, I do. And I will.”

Leo stroked her fingers playfully, making Westalia fidget. The place where he touched her was burning hot, and the heat radiated upward, staining her cheeks red. Westalia’s heart began to beat faster, and she pulled her hand back and appealed to him with her eyes not to touch her without permission.

“I can’t figure out your circumstances at all. I don’t even know why you’re so obsessed with being empress,” Leo said.

“There’s no reason for you to know that.”

“Yes there is. I have to get my earring back. It’s a pain, but I have to earn your trust, don’t I?”

Westalia stayed quiet and gently touched her right ear. “If you want my trust, then don’t pry into who I am. I don’t want you to know.” Westalia didn’t want Leo to find out that she was an evil

woman who'd been put on trial for attempting to assassinate the princess. If he knew, he would totally despise her and wouldn't want to grow closer to her. And, for some reason...Westalia was afraid of that.

The look on Westalia's face was clearly bitter. Leo sighed in understanding.

Westalia closed the lid of the piano and looked up at him. "May I have one more thing from you?"

"What is it?"

"What are your plans after this?"

"Are you asking me on a date?" Leo asked, his eyes twinkling at the sudden question.

Westalia's mouth turned up at the corners like a child plotting some mischief. "Ding ding ding, that's right!"

Westalia, with Leo in tow, went to an entertainment district that evening. Wearing masks and concealing their identities, they entered one of the largest buildings in the district, where they were greeted by an elegant employee in a tuxedo.

"I'm stunned to learn that the future empress is a gambler," Leo said.

"Fundraising is important. The salary of a part-time apothecary is nothing and the selection of the future empress requires a lot of money," Westalia replied. She had to purchase suitable dresses for public occasions in the selection ahead. Dresses like those worn by the daughters of aristocrats were too expensive for the average person to afford after just a few months of work. That's why she needed to get rich at the casino.

"Does your shallowness have no limits? You don't seem to have the slightest idea that you could lose."

"C'mon, let's go." Since these places weren't safe, Westalia thought it would be better to be accompanied by a man than be by herself as a woman. As Leo had so conveniently shown up, she had decided to bring him along with her.

Westalia walked briskly in her high heels, looking around to see which game she wanted to play. She took a seat at a blackjack table and watched from the side, a glass of wine in her hand, as the other guests played the game.

"Do you want to play as well, miss?" asked the dealer at the

table.

“No, I don’t really know the rules, so I thought I would watch for a little bit,” Westalia replied. She did, actually, know the rules, but she watched the game as if she were only a beginner. Westalia memorized each card that came out in the game and made guesses as to what cards were in the rest of the deck. This was a blackjack strategy called counting cards. In the Kingdom of Lhumzia, the trick was banned because some people had made a lot of money using it; however, it had not yet been banned in the Archaites Empire.

Soon, she thought. With the cards in the pile reduced and the players gaining an advantage, Westalia hesitantly raised her hand. “I’d like to try too.”

The guest ahead of her graciously gave up his spot. He was a middle-aged man, obviously wealthy, as everything he wore was expensive.

“Place your bets.”

On the dealer’s signal, Westalia put out all the chips she had. The other customers were puzzled, whispering to each other if it was really worth it, but Westalia won one bet after another, each time increasing her stake.

“W-Wow, miss! How many bets in a row have you won?”

“I don’t know, but it must be beginner’s luck,” Westalia said.

“B-Beginner’s luck…”

Westalia had won a huge number of chips on her very first visit to the casino. She had cashed in the chips and was now sipping a glass of liquor on the balcony.

Leo, too, was sipping his drink and said suspiciously, “What was that joke of a victory? What the hell kind of trick did you pull off?”

“Heh, you want to know?” She took a sip of her drink and smiled gracefully. “I was counting cards. It’s kind of like cheating, so it’s forbidden in other countries.” Westalia smiled softly at Leo as she leaned on her arm on the white stone railing. “So that drink is hush money, okay?” she said, placing a finger to her lips in a universal shushing gesture.

“Well well, aren’t you in fine form?” Leo gave a small smile even as he chided Westalia.

Leo rarely smiled, and it was rare to see his face so relaxed. It was probably because he’d been drinking. Westalia managed to

keep from saying that he was quite attractive when he was smiling.

They spent an hour together like that.

"I think you still haven't had enough to drink!" Saying this, Westalia went to pour some strong alcohol into Leo's glass, but she missed and it spilled.

"Hey! It's getting everywhere!"

This faux pas was the result of an excess of alcohol in her system and her unwillingness to drink responsibly as advised.

"You're pretty drunk, aren't you?" Leo asked, looking at Westalia's unsteady steps and flushed cheeks. That question went in one ear and out the other.

"Iiii'm not drunk at all!" Westalia had a dumb grin on her face as she sunk into a sofa.

"So Princess Stubborn can't take care of herself."

"Heeey, I'm Cordata! I've always wanted to come to a casino at least once in my life. It was a lot of fun!" When she'd been confined in the royal villa, she'd been under strict rules and only allowed to drink alcohol on special occasions. Not to mention that gambling was a big no-no. Now, she'd become much more liberated.

"Now I can buy a new dress! What kind of dresses do you like, Leo?" Westalia rested her cheek on the armrest and looked up at Leo's face.

"I'm not interested in what other people wear," Leo replied indifferently.

"You must not be very popular," Westalia said with a laugh.

Leo crossed his arms with a scowl on his face and, after a moment's pondering, replied, "Purple."

Westalia's eyes were purple. In the Kingdom of Lhumzia, she'd had a number of purple dresses, but she'd never worn them in front of the people.

I wonder what happened to the dresses I left behind in the royal villa, Westalia thought. Those dresses belonged to Westalia as the next queen, so if Lily became Felix's fiancée, she could take Westalia's possessions as her own. Lily would surely dispose of all of them without mercy, even the dresses that Westalia had loved so much. Lily had taken everything from her, and it was likely easy for her to throw it all away.

It's so...stupid to go through such trouble to buy a single dress.

Tears suddenly began to flow from Westalia's eyes. Perhaps it was because she'd been drinking, but she was more easily moved to tears than usual.

"H-Hey, what's the matter? You're crying…" Leo said.

"It's nothing. Leave me alone," Westalia replied. She turned her face away from Leo so he wouldn't see her frustrated tears. She was struggling desperately to change her situation, but the people who had wronged her were probably laughing at her without her even knowing it. Westalia had gone past angry and now just felt empty.

"Sometimes, I get scared. I'm afraid that everything I'm struggling for now will be for nothing. I don't want to lose to myself or to the people who hurt me…" Westalia couldn't take it anymore and started sniffling and crying in earnest.

Leo sat down next to her and forced her to turn her face toward him with his hand. He wiped Westalia's tears away with his thumb and muttered wistfully, "If I see you crying like that, I might lose my composure. So…don't."

"What?"



Telling her not to cry because it made him lose his composure was *not* an appropriate consolation to someone who was clearly in distress.

"You must *really* be unpopular," Westalia said. Leo chuckled at her unwitty response.

It was the second time Westalia had ever cried in front of someone. The first time had been the day that boy had wandered into the royal villa. Yet, Leo was someone Westalia couldn't help but be herself around—even though it wasn't prudent for Westalia to have gotten drunk in front of a dangerous man who knew she was an illegal immigrant.

What's wrong with me today? The earring swung in Westalia's right ear. Even now, there were plenty of chances for Leo to take it back, but he didn't make a move for it. He didn't even seem to want to take it back. Westalia gave a small shrug and looked up through her eyelashes at him.

"I wonder if we would have been good friends if we had met in a different way. I've never had friends, though, so I don't really know what that's like," Westalia said.

Leo's eyes glistened in response to her words.

Westalia furrowed her brow, and then she let out her true feelings. "I want to be empress. I really, *really* want to be empress. It's been my dream ever since I was a child. I'm afraid that I won't be rewarded for my hard work..."

Why was she driven to expose her weaknesses in front of this man? Westalia wanted to be a strong and dignified person who would never be underestimated by anyone, and she should have been that way all along. It was so embarrassing for her to be seen like this, acting like a spoiled child.

Leo looked at her and then softly muttered, like he was comforting a crying baby, "Your efforts will eventually bear fruit in some form. You will become a good empress. I'm rooting for you."

Leo's words took Westalia's breath away. *Those words...* she thought. A long time ago, the little boy who'd wandered into the royal villa had encouraged her with those same words. At that moment, the image of the boy from the past and Leo in front of her overlapped, and Westalia turned pale and frowned. She bent forward and clamped a hand on her mouth, and Leo propped her up.

“Ughghgh…” Westalia groaned.

“What’s the matter?! Your face is so pale!”

“I’m gonna throw up…”

“Huh?! Wait, don’t grab my arm! I’m going to go grab a washbasin. Hey, you hear me? Cordata…!”

“Ooohhhh-gggh-ghhh…” Westalia, refreshed after vomiting all over Leo’s lap, fell asleep on the sofa as if nothing had happened. Leo, on the other hand, stiffened.

This is the worst…

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Westalia was dreaming about the boy she’d met almost a decade ago in the royal villa. They were sitting next to each other on a bench in a gazebo, staring out at the flowers in the garden.

“Are you always by yourself?” the boy asked.

“I have a number of teachers, and there’s the staff who bring me my meals. But…I don’t have anyone I trust. So, I’m alone in that sense, yes,” Westalia replied.

“I’m sorry…”

Westalia didn’t have any friends beside Lily. She confided in him that she wished she had a much larger group of friends to spend time with.

“Well then, I’ll be your new friend,” the boy said.

“But I’ll never see you again. I can’t leave this villa until I become queen.”

“A friend is someone you can be close to no matter how far apart you are or how many years it’s been since you’ve last seen each other. Didn’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t. Because I don’t have many friends.” Westalia pouted and the boy laughed. Westalia was to be the next queen, but she lacked connections with other people, meaning she lived in fear for her safety.

“Life here must be stifling. The palace is a place of intrigue and speculation, and you never know who might come to kill you at any moment,” the boy said. “But I don’t see any guards here.”

Although Westalia had several knights guarding her, they’d actually been loyal to the former queen Delphine. They were ordered to keep an eye on Westalia at all times and report her

every move back to the queen. Yet, though they feigned obedience in front of Delphine, they often skipped out on their duties, allowing outsiders such as this boy to enter the villa.

"They must be basking in the sun somewhere. The weather is lovely today," Westalia said.

"Basking... That's dereliction of duty!"

The villa's guards despised her and neglected their work, but since they were under Delphine's control, Westalia couldn't punish or replace them.

"I'm completely unprotected if an assassin comes for me. I think I should learn how to defend myself in order to survive here," Westalia said.

"Are you going to study self-defense or something?"

"Yes, I would rather train myself than rely on someone else to do it for me," Westalia said, clenching both her fists together and mimicking the stance of a bodyguard. She was thin and weak and had never exercised outside of dancing. The boy looked at Westalia and noted that she clearly had no talent for physical defense. He put a hand to his chin in contemplation.

"Even if you don't work out, there are other ways to defend yourself," the boy said.

"Other ways?" Westalia asked.

The boy plucked a cluster of the wisteria blossoms—the flower Westalia was named for—that were twined around the pillars and ceiling of the gazebo and placed them in her hand.

"Wisteria flowers are poisonous, and if ingested in large quantities they can cause abdominal pain and vomiting. Do you know why this beautiful flower is poisonous?"

"Maybe...to keep birds and animals from eating them?" Westalia guessed, tilting her head to the side. She wondered why he was asking her this.

"Clever," the boy said, patting her on the head. "The reasons vary from plant to plant, but your guess is one of the reasons. These flowers do not bloom for no reason. To protect themselves from outside enemies, they hide poison inside their beautiful petals. If you pick them carelessly, you will end up hurting yourself."

Westalia understood what he was trying to say. "You mean I should become poisonous myself! What a great idea!" Her eyes lit

up at the thought.

“Oh…no, this is a metaphor. I didn’t mean for you to take it so literally…” the boy said.

“I believe I found a book on poisons in the royal library. And I can easily get the ingredients by asking the apothecary. If I’m going to start studying, I need to do it in such a way that people around me won’t get suspicious…” Westalia continued.

“H-Hey, are you listening? I only said it as a joke…” the boy mumbled, hand still on chin, but his words were lost on Westalia.

Westalia took the boy’s joking words to heart and began studying poisons as self-defense under the guise of studying pharmaceuticals. She also felt it was a good way to distract herself from the tedious nature of life in the royal villa.

Little did she expect then that it would come in handy when she crossed over into the Archaites Empire.

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Leonardo carried Cordata, who’d fallen asleep, on his back until they got to the carriage. He managed to get an address from her and intended to take her back to her home. He shrugged his shoulders as he watched her sleeping peacefully in the carriage. He’d changed clothes from the ones Cordata had thrown up on, but now he had one more trauma to deal with. He’d never been pushed around like that by someone before. There must be something wrong with him, since he hadn’t hated it.

You’re sleeping so comfortably… You really are carefree, he thought. Cordata was sleeping defenselessly in front of a man and showed no sign of waking up. Steady breaths slipped out from between her full lips. Her sleeping face, surrounded by slightly disheveled hair, was vulnerable, alluring, and seductive.

“How can you be so unguarded?” Leonardo asked, leaning in closer and looking down at her. It would be so easy to take the earring back from her now, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

Cordata moved in her sleep, and something cylindrical rolled down her body and under the seat. Leonardo picked it up and found it was a tube of liquid with a needle on the end. It must have been the poison needle that had immobilized him the night they first met. He held the poison needle in one hand and reached

toward her with the other. He gently pushed aside a lock of her hair and stroked her cheek.

She had three moles in a row on the back of her neck. Leonardo remembered what Felix had said the other day about Westalia, who had supposedly met an untimely end.

Leonardo had asked his subordinate to look into Cordata. Although her citizenship in the Archaites Empire was genuine, the personal papers she had submitted for the empress selection were fake. When he'd had Dion visit her parents' home address, he had found that it had long since been uninhabited and deserted. Cordata had appeared just after the death of Westalia Lejainne. It had been long enough for her to move from the Kingdom of Lhumzia to the Archaites Empire.

Cordata was intelligent, brave, fluent in many languages, skilled in the arts, and full of all kinds of knowledge. It was as if she had been trained to be a queen. She had knowledge of poisons for self-defense, which was something she wouldn't need if she'd lived a normal life. Perhaps she'd spent some time in places where she'd been in danger.

Leonardo paused for a moment, then brushed aside the hair at the nape of Cordata's neck. There they were—three small moles in a line.

Leonardo looked down at the poison needle clenched in his hand. "Well, I suppose I was the one who put this idea into your head." He hadn't thought she'd take what he'd said in jest so seriously. But she was sometimes oddly genuine like that. Cordata had once told him that she protected herself with poison, as someone had told her to do, so it was probably his own words that were the catalyst for that choice. Perhaps there was even a fragment of that time in the villa left somewhere in her memory. It made him a little happy to think so.

"Hey, wake up. We've reached your house," Leonardo said, shaking her.

"Mmnnn" was the only response Cordata gave.

"You're a real handful," Leonardo muttered. He picked her up and carried her on his back toward the front door. A moment after he'd passed through the front gate, he felt a presence behind him and stopped. He was sure someone was there, and a moment

later he felt the touch of metal on his neck.

Leonardo glanced down and saw a wet soup ladle resting against his neck. It was still a little hot. Apparently, he'd interrupted some cooking.

"What did you do to her?" said the androgynous woman who'd appeared behind Leonardo. It was the same woman who'd illegally entered the empire with Cordata. She was strong and could easily subdue his knights. He thought he recalled her name was Paige.

The ladle against his neck was a cooking utensil, not a weapon, indicating that Paige held no hostile intentions.

"I think there's been a misunderstanding," Leonardo said. "I'm just bringing your intoxicated mistress home."

"Don't be silly. Why would a young lady who only went out to play the piano at church come back so late at night, drunk?"

"You don't seem to understand her nature at all. After she left the church, she went gambling," Leonardo said.

"Gambling?" Paige was stunned speechless, but she lowered the ladle at Leonardo's neck and apologized. Leonardo handed over the poisoned needle he'd taken from Cordata.

"Why didn't you take your earring back? It means a lot to you, right?" Paige asked.

"Because I'm curious about her. This gives me a chance to see her again," Leonardo replied.

"What?!"

If Leonardo really wanted it back, he could've reclaimed it at any point, but he no longer intended to take it from her. He was beginning to take a liking to Westalia and wanted to interact with her more.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that," Paige said. "Thank you for bringing my mistress home."

"Wait."

"What is it?"

"Do you know who she is? Where she's been, what she's done?" Leonardo asked.

"No, I don't know anything. I don't care what happened in her past. It doesn't change the fact that I owe her my life," Paige replied.

"Even if she was a criminal?"

Paige's eyebrows moved slightly at that. Cordata's true identity

was Westalia Lejainne, who had been publicly executed for attempting to assassinate the princess of Lhumzia. Any normal person would despise her and refuse to get involved.

"I don't care what kind of villain she is," Paige replied. "I would be loyal to her no matter her crimes. I want to support her and cheer for her as she climbs her way to the top. So…"—Paige glared at Leonardo—"…don't get in the way. I don't know if you're interested in her or not, but she's going to be empress. I can't have her falling in love with some random man. Besides, she's naive and completely unfamiliar with the ways of men. Please stop teasing her. Now, you're an eyesore, so I'm going to ask you to leave."

Paige seemed pretty smart and intuitive, but it was clear she had no idea who her mistress, or Leonardo, really was.

I'm really not "some random man"… Leonardo thought. He wondered why Paige bore such hostility toward him.

"What's with the attitude?" he asked. "I looked after your drunk mistress and brought her home."

"I hate"—Paige started, holding the ladle up to Leonardo's nose—"good-looking men like you. My last bastard of a master was good-looking too. You remind me of that piece of human trash. If you don't want me to toss you in the garbage, then you should get out of here."

Leonardo was silent.



Paige, with open hostility toward Leonardo, took Cordata from him and held her tightly in her arms as she walked into the mansion.

Leonardo, who had no idea what Paige was talking about in regards to her "former master," was left on the stoop in dismay, feeling that he was being treated with some prejudice. Still, Paige seemed to be loyal to Cordata without care for her true identity. Leonardo suddenly remembered that Cordata had sorely wanted a friend.

I guess you did it, huh? Made a friend, that is, he thought.

Smoke was rising from the mansion's chimney, and the smell of a delicious dinner snuck up Leonardo's nose. It made for an atmosphere of ordinary, cozy homeliness. He spared a single glance toward the illuminated window at the front before turning on his heel.

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Westalia was quietly embroidering a handkerchief in her living room on her day off. This was the embroidered handkerchief that would be evaluated by a noble lady in the second round of the competition. Candidates would gather in groups of ten at a designated venue for the tea parties. There, they would be judged on their dining manners and etiquette, and the noblewoman would choose just one handkerchief from each group. How well-liked they were by the ladies of the judging panel would be critical to their advancement. From there, the one hundred candidates for empress would be narrowed down to just ten.

There was a knock on the living room door, and at Westalia's reply, Paige entered pushing a tea cart. Paige prepared the tea in a practiced fashion. Westalia watched the white steam rising from the teapot's spout as Paige poured the tea.

"Thank you, you're very thoughtful," Westalia said as Paige handed her the cup.

"It's no problem. How is your embroidering?"

"It's going well. I'm almost done. What do you think?"

"Wow! It's like a painting!"

Westalia had embroidered the expensive lace fabric with colorful threads, and the edges were decorated with ruffles. The

exquisite pattern, the main motif being roses—the national flower of the Archaites Empire—spread out in a circular pattern across the fabric. Westalia had carefully sewn each stitch, filling it with the hope that she would be chosen, that she would be chosen, that she would be chosen. In reality, however, the quality of the embroidery wasn't that important. It was all about the impressions from the noble ladies judging the group, and inevitably there would be things like compatibility and other luck-based aspects that would come into play.

"Why two handkerchiefs?" Paige asked, seeing a second handkerchief resting near the edge of the table.

"I-It's a spare..."

"You're not really going to be giving it to that man, are you?"

Westalia's heart skipped a beat at Paige's pointed question. She clearly meant Leo when she said "that man." Westalia *had* embroidered the handkerchief for him. She knew that giving an embroidered handkerchief to a member of the opposite sex was considered a sign of affection.

"It's an...apology for causing him so much trouble," Westalia said.

"If it's just an apology, then it doesn't have to be handmade, does it? Do you like that suspicious man? You must have been very drunk to let your guard down so much around him. This is an important time for you, and you should refrain from rash behavior."

Paige had a point, and Westalia herself found it strange. She *should* be incredibly cautious right now, but with Leo, she found herself getting distracted.

"I suppose that's true. I was being thoughtless. Throw it away," Westalia said, handing the handkerchief over to Paige. What was she doing getting carried away with a man she might never see again?

As empress, I must be loyal to the nation, its people, and the emperor, she thought. Even if she had some kind of friendship with Leo, it wasn't something that was necessary for her to become empress. Rather, it might actually hinder her chances. Paige's words shook Westalia back to her senses, and she admonished herself. Leo knew the secret of her illegal entry into the country; he was too dangerous a person to be consorting with.

“I’m just worried. I don’t want you to attract any strange creatures.”

“I’ll be extra careful. By the way, can I see that newspaper you’re holding?” Westalia asked.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I forgot to give it to you. It’s this morning’s paper,” Paige said, handing it over before withdrawing from the room.

Westalia put her embroidery down on the table and unfolded the paper. She was interested in what was happening not in this country but in her homeland.

Since she’d come to Archaites, it had been reported that the evil Westalia Lejainne had been executed, but there’d been no mention of what had happened with the royal family after that. Today, however, appeared the name of the most promising candidate for the next fiancée of crown prince Felix.

Lily Nezeroa: the daughter of the former king and the one who had sent Westalia to the executioner’s block. It was no surprise that she was taking Westalia’s place.

How’s it feel to sit in a stolen seat, Lily? Westalia thought, a sneer forming on her lips as she tore up the paper.

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“How is the water, Lady Lily?”

“It’s perfect, thank you.”

Lily was in her private bathing chamber in the royal palace. She was cleansing her body in a white bathtub. Flower petals floated on the surface of the water, filling the air with their aromatic scent.

Lily looked up at the ceiling as a maid washed her hair. The air felt clearer now that the abominable woman was no longer in the royal palace. She breathed in deeply, feeling relieved.

What a lovely feeling, she thought. The crown prince’s former fiancée, Westalia Lejainne—the hidden daughter—was the perfect woman, not only gorgeous but also thoughtful and courteous. Lily remembered her working hard to become queen, not complaining even when she had been subjected to the harsh education necessary to achieve that goal.

If Westalia became queen one day, she would be a symbol of the country, beloved by the people. Lily hated that. *She* should be

the one whom the people loved most. Even if she became the crown prince's consort, Lily didn't like the fact that as long as Westalia was around, she would be treated as lesser and wouldn't be the true queen.

Now that she and the former queen had conspired to eliminate Westalia, Lily was the most likely candidate to become the next queen. With the recommendation from the former queen who was now in power, her position was likely secure.

Lily scooped up a handful of water and stroked her body as she spoke to the maid. "Hey, did you hear? Wes's body was stolen. I wonder what happened to it?"

"I've heard that stolen bodies usually get sold for medical research. After causing so much trouble for m'lady and the nation, it's nice she was able to be of service to medical science in the end," the maid replied.

"Don't speak like that," Lily chastised. "She had already atoned for her sins by drinking the poison. I can't bear the thought of her being dismembered after her death. Poor Wes…"

"M'lady, you are too kind. You should be more angry! That woman tried to kill you!" the maid replied.

Lily wasn't angry at all—after all, she was the one who'd framed Westalia. But just by pretending to feel sorry for her, Lily's popularity had oddly skyrocketed. It was easy to control people's minds.

After cleaning herself and warming up, Lily got out of the bathtub. The maid diligently dried her body and helped her into a dress. The dress had been made for the crown prince's fiancée, although Westalia had never gotten to wear it. All of Westalia's belongings had been given to Lily. She could have easily thrown them away, but she'd instead deliberately had this dress tailored down to her size. Since it had been made for the next queen, it would be a pity if she didn't wear it. Westalia had never been to a glamorous party before, so Lily was going to have a lot of fun in this dress.

Currently, there was a large-scale selection for empress happening in the Archaites Empire. Young women from all over the country were in fierce competition for the title of empress, but for Lily, the title of queen was as easily obtained as a child begging for a toy.

Yes, what a wonderful feeling. Everything has turned out just how I wanted it to, she thought.

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It was the day of the tea party. Westalia was traveling by carriage to the residence of Marquis Petrov, where the handkerchief event was to take place.

How worrying. I wasn't able to gather much information on Lady Petrov... Westalia thought. The Petrovs were prestigious and came from a long line of knights. The marquis had taken a young woman as his wife, but there hadn't been much information available about her when Westalia had asked around. Still, she had no choice but to do her best.

Westalia stared out the window of the carriage, her chin resting on her hand. The streets of the imperial capital were always bustling with life. She could occasionally hear people's footsteps and voices, even inside the carriage.

At that moment, Westalia spotted a scruffy-looking boy in the street. His arm was being held by a large man who was yelling aggressively at him. Westalia ordered the driver to stop as she saw the man strike the boy. She jumped out of the carriage and rushed over to stand protectively in front of the boy, who looked completely terrified, and glared at the large man.

"You! Stop your violence against this child," Westalia said.

"Get out of my way! He's a thief!"

"A thief?" Westalia looked back at the boy and noticed he was clutching a leather wallet. It probably belonged to the large man.

"*And* he stepped on my foot!" the man raged. There was indeed a mark left on his shoe. The man had been pressing the boy to return the wallet and pay for the shoes. And the price was exorbitant.

Westalia asked the boy to return the wallet, but the boy stubbornly shook his head.

"I need to buy medicine for my sister," the boy said, a serious look on his face when Westalia asked why he had stolen from the man.

"Is she sick?" Westalia asked.

"She's had a fever all day..." The boy looked like an orphan,

meaning he was probably too poor to buy even a single ointment.

"Listen, kid! Just give me my wallet and money for shoes! And you, lady, get out of my way! If you interfere, I'll make you pay too!"

"He'll return your wallet, but can't you forgive him for the shoes? He's a poor orphan, after all," Westalia said.

"I don't care about that! So will you pay for them instead?" The man raised his fist, and Westalia involuntarily moved to protect the boy, pulling him into a hug. She closed her eyes in anticipation of the blow that was about to come, but nothing happened.

"That's enough."

Instead, Westalia heard a familiar voice, and as she slowly opened her eyes, she saw Leo holding the man's arm.

"If you raise a hand against her, you'll be going to the police. She's a candidate for empress. Your violent actions toward her are tantamount to treason," Leo said.

"Candidate for empress?!" The man dropped his hand in a panic.

Leo crouched down in front of the boy and spoke softly. "Return what you have stolen and apologize to the man. You want to protect your sister, right?"

"Y-Yes, okay," the boy replied.

Leo's tone had been unexpectedly gentle, and Westalia felt that she'd seen a new side of his.

"I'm sorry I stole your wallet…and stepped on your foot," the boy said, handing over the wallet and apologizing as Leo had asked.

The man remained indignant but, thanks to Leo's intervention, backed down.

Westalia saw that the boy's arm was bleeding. He'd apparently scraped it on the cobblestones when the man had knocked him over, but Westalia didn't have anything to patch it up with. Then she remembered the embroidered handkerchief she was supposed to present to the noblewoman.

"You… Isn't that handkerchief essential for the empress selection?" Leo muttered, as he watched Westalia use it to wipe gravel and dirt from the boy's cut.

"Ouch!" the boy cried, wincing in pain.

"Bear with me. If you leave it covered in dirt it can get infected

and fester, and that would be even worse," Westalia said.

"Is it okay that your important handkerchief got dirty?" the boy asked.

"You don't need to worry about that," Westalia replied. She wrapped the handkerchief around the affected area and finished her simple treatment.

"I have to go to my sister now," the boy said.

"Yes, I know. And then I'll take you to a doctor," Westalia said. Daniel, the quirky owner of the shop where she worked part-time, was, while imperfect, still a famous apothecary, and had a wealth of medical knowledge as well. Daniel was the one to visit if the boy needed medicine.

Westalia looked up at the hands of the clock in the tall tower down the street and saw that the starting time for the next stage of the selection was fast approaching. Still, she couldn't just leave the boy to fend for himself.

Leo let out a sigh as Westalia started leading the boy away. "Cordata. Today's the day of the second stage of the selection. If you accompany that child you'll be late."

"Well, I can't just ignore him," Westalia responded.

"I really can't tell if you're a good person or a bad person," Leo muttered.

"Oh my, have I ever seemed like a good person to you? Don't you understand? I'm just waiting for you to say, 'Don't worry, I'll look after him for you.'" *You're not very perceptive, are you?* she wanted to add. She was indirectly hinting that he should be so kind as to do this for her, since she was in the running for empress.

Leo threw up his hands in exasperation and agreed to take the boy and his sister to the apothecary. As Westalia passed by him to return to her carriage, he said, "You seem like a pretty good person to me."

"Not really," Westalia replied, turning away with a blank expression on her face, as she wasn't being particularly honest.

Westalia arrived at Marquis Petrov's mansion just in time. She met the nine other candidates in the mansion's spacious drawing room. They were all beautifully dressed and smelling of perfume.

Soon after they got settled, sumptuous sweets were brought in.

The other ladies were busy talking and ate the sweets without regard to their manners as they were alone. However, Westalia was the only lady among them to show dignity as she indulged.

The hostess had not yet come into the room, and the atmosphere was becoming increasingly hostile.

“Hey, you, I told you to drop out!” one woman said.

“I will do no such thing!”

It was an hour after they had all gathered, and four of the women had been fighting the entire time. Apparently, the brother of one of the women had recently committed a scandal, and she, his sister, was being criticized as not being qualified for the empress selection. It seemed to Westalia that no matter where you went, people would try to tear each other down. In order to reduce the number of competitors, the other candidates were eager to pounce on this woman and drive her out of the competition.

“You’re just the impudent daughter of a low-ranking family,” one of the women said.

“Don’t talk to me like that…” the woman said.

Westalia was quietly watching from the sidelines, but when she saw the cornered woman start to cry, she let out a sigh. “It’s disgraceful to gang up on her like that,” she said.

“What?!”

“One less competitor won’t make much difference. Everyone here is your enemy. If you want to be chosen from among them, it would be more meaningful to think about how to make yourself more attractive. You all look very unseemly right now,” Westalia continued, smiling at them provocatively, holding a mirror up to their actions. The women’s faces turned bright red.

Lady Petrov had yet to make an appearance in the room and was likely in the adjoining salon, which had been unnaturally partitioned off by a curtain. She was keeping a close watch on the conversation of the other ladies and their behavior as they ate the sweets.

Westalia set down the teacup she was holding and narrowed her eyes. “The second round has already begun, isn’t that right, Lady Petrov?” As soon as Westalia said this, the curtains to the salon were opened. A young lady appeared from the back, accompanied by several attendants.

“You saw through it all, didn’t you, Lady Cordata?” Standing there was a girl who looked shockingly familiar to Westalia. Lady Petrov was Lyra, the escaped slave whom Westalia had rescued in the Kingdom of Slidd.

“What are you doing here?!” Westalia asked.

“It’s good to see you again. Thank you for everything you did for me,” Lyra replied. It was clear she didn’t want to talk about the details of what had happened right then. The tea party proceeded, with only question marks filling Westalia’s mind.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you all today. I will be fair in my selection of the one who one day may be empress,” Lady Petrov said. The young women quickly changed their attitudes and began trying to flatter Lyra and win her over.

Lyra suddenly turned to those who had been making snide remarks toward the one young woman. “Now I am a marchioness, but I, too, came from a low-ranking family. Am I also unworthy of this position?”

“Oh no! Not at all!” one of the girls said.

Lady Petrov must’ve been listening carefully to the earlier conversation. The girls’ faces turned bright red as their own words were turned back on them.

“Now, why don’t you show me your handkerchiefs?” Lady Petrov continued. “I’m looking forward to seeing what kind of embroidery you’ve done.”

One after another the candidates showed Lady Petrov their best works. There were all sorts of flowers and patterns, and all of them showed excellent workmanship. Lyra looked pleased as she observed them.

Then it came to Westalia’s turn. However, she didn’t have one, as she’d used it to treat the young boy’s injury earlier.

“I’m truly sorry, but I don’t have my handkerchief on hand.”

The young women began to murmur at Westalia’s words. The entire purpose of this tea party was to evaluate the embroidery on the handkerchiefs. Without a handkerchief, Westalia wasn’t even worth considering.

“You were talking so pompously earlier, it’s pathetic you can’t even prepare a single handkerchief,” one woman said.

“It’s *you* who doesn’t belong in this sacred selection process,” said another.

Lyra quickly raised a hand before the criticism of Westalia and talk of disqualification could get too far out of hand. At the same time, a lady's maid brought a handkerchief over to Westalia on a cloth-covered board.

"Lady Cordata's handkerchief has already been entrusted to me. Now, please show it to me," Lady Petrov said.

The handkerchief that the lady's maid brought over was indeed Westalia's. Though it had been stained with the boy's blood, it had now been washed clean—likely recently, as it was still wet. As soon as they saw Westalia's handkerchief, the other candidates were completely silent at its magnificent perfection.

How did my handkerchief get here...? Westalia wondered. Seeing the questioning look on her face, Lyra continued.

"This handkerchief was just recently delivered here by a young boy. He said you'd used it to tend to an injury of his, but he wanted to return it because it seemed like it was something important."

Westalia guessed that that boy had been the one she'd helped earlier. It seemed the boy had heard she was going to be at this mansion, asked for directions from people on the street, and then run all the way here to return it to her.

"The handkerchief I will be selecting is Lady Cordata's. As Marchioness Petrov, I will recommend you as the next empress."

Nobody objected to Lyra's decision.

"I will do the best I can not to make you regret your choice," Westalia said, handing the damp handkerchief over to Lyra.

"Thank you very much for selecting me," Westalia said.

"Please don't speak so formally with me. You saved my life. I should be the one being polite," Lyra replied.

"If that's what you want, then okay."

According to Lyra, she was the daughter of a lower-class nobleman, and she and the Marquis Petrov had fallen for each other. Because of the difference in their status, however, Lyra had refused to marry him, but when she'd gone missing and returned, the marquis had been overjoyed, and she'd gathered up the courage to go through with the marriage. It was rumored that the marchioness had a history of mental illness and criminality, but the criminal past in the rumors was different from the truth.

Lyra also diligently repaid all of the money Westalia had lent her

in the Kingdom of Slidd. Westalia had had no intention of asking for it back, but Lyra was a very sincere person and couldn't leave the debt unpaid.

"I hope you don't misunderstand me, but I didn't make my decision solely because I was indebted to you. I would have chosen you even if I wasn't," Lyra said. The selection process was, after all, based on courtesy, manners, personality, and beauty. "After evaluating everything, you were the best of the best."

"Thank you..." Westalia replied.

Lyra clapped her hands together as if she'd just remembered something and handed a letter over to Westalia. She quickly read through it and discovered it was an invitation to the third round of the selection process. In the third round, ten candidates gathered with their nominators to attend an evening soiree hosted by the emperor's mother, the dowager empress. There, the candidates would be judged on their ballroom dancing, etiquette, and behavior to decide who would be advancing to the final round.

Then, in the final round, held at Le Chantier Palace, the candidates would be asked to answer a series of questions in front of the emperor.

"But still, what a curious twist of fate. It's such a coincidence that you ended up being my judge for this round," Westalia said.

"It wasn't a coincidence at all," Lyra replied.

"Oh?"

Ever since her return to the Archaites Empire, Lyra had been looking for Westalia. Lyra hadn't really expected to see her again, but she had wanted to return the money she owed and give her thanks.

"It was at one of the social gatherings. I mentioned that I was looking for a woman by the name of Cordata, and the crown prince said he had an idea how to find you. He then qualified me as a nominator for the empress selection. It was His Imperial Highness who gave me the opportunity to repay my debt to you," Lyra explained.

But Westalia had never met the crown prince. She tilted her head to one side and mused aloud, "Does that mean that the crown prince knows who I am?"

"Are you not acquainted with him? He was speaking like he was quite familiar with you..." Lyra replied.

It was the crown prince who had arranged for Lyra to be one of the nominators. But Westalia had no idea why he would care about her, seeing as she'd never even met him. Westalia didn't know many people, and the ones she did amounted to Daniel, her boss, a few townspeople, Paige...and Leo.

What in the world is going on? Westalia thought. The only thing filling her mind was even more question marks.

After the tea party was over, Westalia left the mansion, taking with her the invitation to the third round she'd received from Lyra. She found Leo waiting for her outside the gate.

"It's over? How'd you do?"

"I passed. But what about the boy's sister?"

Leo explained the situation, looking ashamed. The girl was severely malnourished, and a temporary fix wasn't going to solve the problem. What she needed was not medicine but adequate food. There were plenty of other children in the same situation as the boy and his sister. Such was the plight of orphans. There was nothing Westalia could do about it.

"I see. Thank you for taking them to Daniel. I'm glad it helped them, even if just for a little while."

"It's deplorable," Leo said.

"What?"

"To see the plight of your people and not be able to do anything about it."

"It's not your fault," Westalia said.

"Yes, it is. The fault lies entirely with the imperial family." Leo looked terribly frustrated, as if he blamed himself for it.

Poverty and status disparities were inevitable, but Westalia became motivated when she saw such things, so Leo probably felt the same way.

"We can only do like you did in taking the boy to the apothecary and help those within our reach," Westalia said.

Leo remained silent, not seeming to believe her.

Westalia looked at him and smiled. "Hey, want to come with me for a bit?"

Westalia headed to work, this time with Leo in tow.

"Hello, Miss Cordata. And wasn't your friend here earlier...?"

Daniel, the suspicious-looking shop owner, said with a weighty expression. He disappeared into the back of the shop for a moment before reappearing quickly, carrying a vial of green liquid. He called Westalia over to a corner of the shop.

"Is that handsome man your beau? I'm so pleased. I was worried you might not be able to land one," Daniel teased, giving her a thumbs-up.

"N-No! We're just friends. And you don't need to worry about me," Westalia replied.

"Sure, okay, okay. Whatever you say. Anyway, please take this. No charge. It's a thank-you for all your hard work."

"And what is this suspicious substance?" Westalia asked.

"It's a love potion!"

Westalia suddenly recalled a love potion had been cooking in the cauldron that time it had blown up. She silently returned the bottle to Daniel, who was smiling like a mischievous child.

"I don't need it. Besides, it's not like drinking it would make a difference," Westalia said. This shop had a reputation, after all.

Daniel narrowed his eyes at her. "You *too*, Cordata? You work here!"

"It's the truth. I don't need that potion, but I do have some other things I would like to buy."

"What kind of herbs? I just got in a medicine that will make your nails grow three times faster—" Daniel started.

"I'll find them on my own, thank you," Westalia interrupted. She went behind the counter and began rummaging through the shelves. She gathered a bunch of different herbs together, purchased them, and then handed them over to Leo.

Westalia and Leo went to a lake near the shop and found a bench on the shore to sit on. They looked out at the lake that stretched before them. Westalia told Leo that these herbs, when boiled and drunk, would help him sleep better.

Leo often had dark circles under his eyes. It had been dark when they first met so Westalia hadn't really noticed them at the time.

"It's not poison, is it? It won't make me grow feathers all over my body or something?" Leo asked.

"Nope, this one will make horns sprout out of your head," Westalia replied, pointing to her own forehead. Leo gave her a

blank stare. “I’m kidding. It’s not poison.”

“So you *do* know medicine too, not just poisons,” he complimented. Westalia took the opportunity to ask if he had been sleeping poorly. “I’m used to it. I guess I’m an insomniac,” Leo replied.

Westalia wondered if he was under a lot of mental stress. She gently pulled on his arm and got him to lay his head in her lap.

“Rest a bit. You don’t look well. Close your eyes, listen to the water, and just breathe deeply. It should help you feel a bit better,” she said.

“Heh. Are you worried about me?”

“As if! I’m just ingratiating myself to you so you don’t reveal my illegal entry into the country.”

“Well, whatever you say,” Leo said. His face relaxed; he seemed to be enjoying himself.

The truth was, Westalia trusted Leo and knew that he intended to keep her secrets. If he really wanted to take his earring back he could, but she didn’t think he actually had any intention of doing so. Westalia figured she could’ve probably even *given* the earring back by now, but she didn’t really want to let it go. She felt like she would lose her connection to Leo if she did. Westalia enjoyed being with him and liked that she could act naturally in his presence. Even just talking with him was comforting.

“Recently, my feet have been carrying me into the streets of the imperial capital. I keep hoping to run into you by chance. If you…want me to stop, though, I will,” Leo said.

“I don’t…*dislike* it,” Westalia replied.

“I see. Good… But if you become empress, we won’t be able to see each other anymore.”

Westalia was silent. If she became empress, she would become limited in what she could do. On top of that, as the crown prince’s wife, there’s no way she’d be able to have a friendly relationship with another man without it being suspicious.

Leo looked up at her as he continued to speak. “Have you thought about it? What kind of hardships and things you’d face marrying a man you don’t know?”

“If I become empress then I will be able to handle it. And perhaps he is a wonderful man,” Westalia replied.

“No, the crown prince is a good-for-nothing. He’s heartless and

has hurt a lot of people."

"You speak as if you know His Imperial Highness well."

Leo was silent and Westalia looked up at the sky. She *had*, in fact, thought about it, plenty of times—what it would be like to become the wife of someone she knew nothing about. She was nervous and scared. Even if she didn't like him, she would have to devote the rest of her life to him. But she couldn't just throw her dream of becoming empress away. She thought of it as a reward for working so hard, even through her confinement. She couldn't even imagine a life that didn't involve being a consort.

"You can't always do what you want with your life. Sometimes terrible and frightening things happen. Everyone has to go through life facing their own weaknesses. And yet I don't think that life is ever totally hopeless," Westalia said. In the midst of despair, there was always an equal, or even far greater, hope that could be found. The colors of despair simply tended to make it hard to see.

Westalia continued, recalling a fond memory, "What you said to me before is the same thing an old friend once told me. 'Your efforts will eventually bear fruit, in one way or another.' So don't worry. I don't know what you're struggling with, but it will work out. I'm rooting for you."

"An old friend told you that?"

"Yes, I don't know what he's doing or where he is now, but he cheered me up when I was lonely," Westalia replied. She pulled one of her poisoned needles out of her pocket and held it up to the light, tilting it so she could see the liquid in the clear tube. She looked at the poison fondly as it glowed faintly in the sunlight. It was that boy's words that had made her want to study poisons.

"I'm sure your friend is still thinking about you and cheering you on," Leo said.

"It's been a long time since I last saw him. I'm sure he's forgotten me."

"A friend is someone you can be close to no matter how far apart you are or how many years it's been since you've last seen each other. Didn't you know that?" Leo said.

That was word for word what the boy who had wandered into the royal villa had said to her all those years ago.

A friend is someone you can be close to no matter how far apart

you are or how many years it's been since you've last seen each other. Didn't you know that?

No, I didn't. Because I don't have many friends.

Westalia's heart skipped a beat. The memory of the exchange came back to her, and she whispered her reply.

"N-No, I didn't. Because I don't really have many friends."

"Well, then you should keep it in mind," Leo responded. He closed his eyes and in a minute his body relaxed and he fell asleep with his head in Westalia's lap. He looked like a slumbering child.

"Sleep well, Leo," Westalia whispered, brushing his hair out of his face. Her action revealed a cut across his temple. It looked like it had possibly been made by a sword. It was almost scabbed over completely but was clearly fairly recent.

Leo had said he came into town fairly frequently. He'd hinted before that he was in the service of the imperial family, and perhaps there were situations where he would have to fight people. He always wore a sword belt and the skin on his hands was hardened from repeated blisters and calluses. They were the hands of a swordsman, just like Paige's were.

Westalia quickly shifted her gaze to the lake. Small birds were flapping at the edge of the water, causing it to ripple. The gentle sound of leaves rustling brushed against her eardrums.

Westalia had heard that the crown prince often traveled around the country on inspection tours and was a master swordsman. He was about the same age as Leo. Their appearance was also a perfect match. There were a number of suspiciously similar things between them. The crown prince was the one who had chosen Lyra as Cordata's nominator. Westalia had wondered why the crown prince was helping her when they had nothing to do with each other, but here, for the first time, she could feel the dots connecting.

"The crown prince's full name is Leonardo Orencia. Is that your name…?" Westalia asked. The man sleeping in her lap *was* the crown prince, wasn't he? And had she not met him in the royal villa long before she'd met him as Cordata?

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Leonardo, while experiencing the most comfortable sleep he'd

had in a long time, was dreaming. He was dreaming about many years ago, when he'd been a boy. He had accompanied a diplomatic mission to the royal palace of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. As expected, the peace negotiations had failed, but that happened every time. He had escaped from the boring royal palace and wandered around the gardens, getting lost and ending up in a secluded villa within the grounds.

"Oh my, what an unusual visitor!" The voice came from a pretty girl with silver hair.

Leonardo had a gut feeling that she was a beautiful person not only physically but on the inside as well, based on her dignified aura. It was the first time he'd been so impressed by someone, and for a moment he forgot how to breathe. He could feel an electric current running through his body. He was used to seeing beautiful people, thanks to all the dancers and young women that were invited to the imperial palace, but there was something different about this girl. It wasn't just the usual excitement over seeing something beautiful that he was feeling but something that made his heart ache.

As Leonardo stood there fascinated, the girl giggled. He looked away, feeling awkward.

"I was walking through the garden and got lost..." Leonardo mumbled.

"This is the next queen's royal villa. People who aren't directly involved aren't allowed to be here. Even a child like you would be thrown in the dungeon if you were discovered! But I'm the only one here right now, so you probably won't be found out," the girl said. Apparently she was unaware that Leonardo was foreign royalty.

Leonardo had heard many rumors about the confinement of the next queen. The rumors said that Westalia Lejainne, the fiancée of the country's crown prince, was locked up in a separate house under the guise of being raised properly.

He'd heard that Westalia was subjected to a rigorous education in a solitary villa, surrounded by trees, where no one was allowed to enter. He'd also heard that she was called the "hidden daughter" and that she had bright red hair. But the girl in front of him had silky, silver hair.

"Your hair isn't red?" Leonardo asked.

“I always dye it. I heard silver hair is despised in this country. I had just washed it out and was planning on redyeing it when you came along,” the girl muttered, scooping up a lock of her hair.

“I see. That seems like a pain to do.” He’d never heard of silver hair being despised before. He managed to keep himself from saying that it was a waste of such beautiful hair.

“You’ve stepped foot in a forbidden place and seen the secrets of the crown prince’s fiancée. So…”

“So…?” Leonardo asked.

The girl walked over to him and looked at him sharply. Leonardo waited with bated breath for what she was going to say next.

“So I won’t let you go easily. If you do what I say, I’ll overlook your crime,” she said.

“O-Okay…” Leonardo nodded reluctantly. He would create problems for his home country if he got involved in a scandal here, so he had no choice but to listen to her. *This has become a bit of a problem*, he thought.

Westalia asked for Leonardo’s help and pulled at his arm, leading him to a gazebo. The floor was dirtied in places with paint as red as blood. She brought over all her dyes and tools and spread them across the table. It appeared that what she needed help with was dyeing her hair.

Westalia explained that she was able to dye the front on her own, but because she couldn’t see the back very well it ended up patchy.

Leonardo—who’d never dyed hair before, let alone even touched the hair of a member of the opposite sex—began applying the dye to her hair even in his bewilderment.

“Are you always by yourself?” Leonardo asked.

“I have a number of teachers, and there’s the staff who bring me my meals. But…I don’t have anyone I trust. So, I’m alone in that sense, yes,” Westalia replied.

“I’m sorry…” Leonardo felt sympathy for the girl who’d gotten dragged into a political dispute. He was always alone too. He felt that if he ever let his guard down, he risked having the rug pulled out from under his feet by someone else, so he chose to be solitary. He was ready to take on the responsibility of the country one day as a crown prince, but he did not want to be a ruler.

Leonardo wanted to be free, and a position bound to the country would be too constricting for him.

"I have a special position too," he said. "But I don't feel confident that I can fulfill my duties."

"No one does. We all have times when we are unsure of what lies ahead and feel like running away. But we just have to do what we can with the circumstances we are given. We have to keep fighting and keeping our heads above water and simply believe that there will be a moment when we get scooped out of it," Westalia replied.

"What are your dreams?" Leonardo asked.

"All I desire is to be a wonderful queen…but it feels like I'm not doing anyone any good right now, not with how my life is going. It's painful. I cannot bear it," Westalia replied.

"Your efforts will eventually bear fruit, in one way or another. You will be a good queen."

"Oh! Thank you…" Her eyes grew soft as she spoke, and Leonardo felt his heart squeeze again at how fragile and dazzling she was.

What is this feeling…? he thought.

Westalia had already mastered multiple languages and had training in an extensive array of things from playing piano and violin to sewing. She also told Leonardo many stories about her daily life.

Westalia laughed as she told Leonardo that today was the first time in a long time that someone other than her parents or the crown prince had seen her natural hair.

"Forget everything you saw here today," Westalia said, holding a finger to her lips as Leonardo was leaving.

"I know. I won't tell anyone about you," Leonardo replied.

"Thank you. If you keep going straight, you'll get back to the main palace."

They'd talked openly for only a few hours, but it had felt comfortable, even fun. Leonardo had never been so sad to say goodbye to someone. He wanted to stay with her for a little longer. He wanted to talk to her more and learn more about her. But Westalia was going to be the next queen of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. He shouldn't want to have heart-to-heart talks with her.

"Thank you for the time we spent together. I know we won't see

each other again, but please…take care," Westalia said.

Leonardo saw her sad smile as she turned away from him, and words slipped from his mouth unbidden. "I'll get you out of here!"

"You…what?"

"I can't do it now, but someday I will. When you leave this country, there will be no one to torment you, and you'll be free," Leonardo said.

"I-Idiot! Kidnapping the next queen is high treason. You can't joke about that!" Westalia admonished him as a way to hide her discomposure.

"I will take responsibility for that crime as well. I'm serious," Leonardo replied. Westalia remained in shocked silence. Leonardo must've still been a real child at that time. As the crown prince of an enemy country, it was an insane and unthinkable plan. But he was so excited that he couldn't suppress his feelings. He wanted to rescue her from her loneliness. He wanted to *help* her. Even his own position had completely disappeared from his mind.

Westalia suddenly burst into tears. Even though she'd been composed the whole time they'd been talking, her face suddenly twisted and she began sobbing. Flustered by her tears, Leonardo quickly began patting her shoulder.

"I-I'm sorry. Did I offend you by saying irresponsible things? Please don't cry. I don't like to see girls crying."

"No, it's not that. I'm just…happy. No one has ever suggested that I get out of this cage before," Westalia replied. She'd crouched down as she cried, and Leonardo gently patted the top of her head.

She continued to cry for a little while longer and then said, "I want to be queen. So I don't want you to take me out of here. But thank you. Hearing that made me very happy."

"I see…" Leonardo responded. Having been so clearly rejected, he tucked his feelings away and smiled, trying to ensure he remembered everything that had happened that day. "I…will always support you."

What would her reaction be when she became queen and Leonardo met her somewhere and told her that he was actually the crown prince of an enemy country? Would she laugh and call him reckless and foolish? He was sure that by then she would have forgotten about the time she had spent with him. But to him it was

love at first sight—his first love.

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When Leonardo awoke from his dream, the only thing he could see was silver hair. This was followed by the beautiful, grown-up version of the girl that had captivated him so completely the first time they'd met. He met her gaze.

"Did you sleep well?" Cordata asked.

"Yes, I did. For the first time in a long time," Leonardo replied. It seemed he'd fallen asleep using Cordata's lap as a pillow. She'd stayed and kept him company so as not to wake him up. He suffered insomnia due to the pressures of being the crown prince, but he felt safe and slept well when he was with her.

I'm just glad you're still alive, he thought. He felt sorry for Westalia, who'd died such an untimely death. But somehow, she'd reappeared before him again under the name Cordata. Leonardo had wanted to talk to her more and get to know her better the first time he'd met her, and now, years later, that wish was coming true. Even in a life full of difficulties, miracles like that could happen from time to time.

Leonardo stroked a lock of her silvery hair, and Cordata didn't do anything to stop him.

"You were sleeping so comfortably. What kind of wonderful dreams did you have?" Cordata asked.

"I was dreaming of the past. Of a lonely princess." Leonardo then confided in her that he'd once met the hidden daughter of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. Cordata's eyes grew wide with surprise. She must've realized that she'd once again met the man she'd met a decade ago.

"Westalia Lejainne was an evil woman. She betrayed her nation and tried to kill a beloved princess," Cordata said.

"I never thought of her as evil. She had a noble heart and soul, and I think she was the most suitable woman to be queen," Leonardo replied. The words she had spoken to him at that time had encouraged him. The Westalia that Leonardo knew was an admirable, ordinary girl who was struggling to make her dreams come true all on her own.

"Her end was tragic. The people of her beloved country cursed

her and threw stones at her, the people she thought of as her best friends ridiculed her, and then she drank from a poisoned cup. It was a completely undeserved death. But…" Cordata said, laughing unhappily. "Your words might be the best thing that could ever happen to her."

"Will my words reach her?"

"Yes, they will."

Leonardo had realized that Cordata was really Westalia, who had survived the poisoning and fled Lhumzia, but since she was struggling to leave the past behind her, he would just pretend that he hadn't.

"She was my first love," Leonardo muttered softly as he sat up.

"What?!" Cordata was wide-eyed with shock.

Her reaction was a little funny, so Leonardo let out a small laugh. He looked above them to the wisteria flowers climbing a trellis by the bench, their flowers in full bloom. Wisteria flowers had been brought over as an ornamental flower from the Kingdom of Lhumzia over a hundred years ago, before the relationship between the two countries grew hostile. Leonardo reached out a hand and a purple blossom dropped into his palm.

Westalia's name meant wisteria. Leonardo wished he could spend forever looking up and admiring the noble blossoms. His heart was always, even now, held captive by the beautiful wisteria flower.

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Why did Leo tell me that story? Westalia wondered, thinking back to the conversation she'd had with Leo the other day. Why had he told her about his past meeting with the hidden daughter of the Kingdom of Lhumzia? On top of that, he'd seen her true hair color back then. Had he figured out "Cordata's" true identity?

I can't believe I was Leo's first love… Alone on the sofa, Westalia covered her red face with her hands. She remembered it well, the day a young boy had wandered into the royal villa where she'd been imprisoned. The boy had a mature sort of melancholy about him that didn't match his apparent age, and he seemed to lack self-confidence. He had left without telling her his name, and she could no longer recall his face, but that boy was definitely Leo.

When Westalia had spoken with him back then, she'd assumed he was a foreigner, based on his poor grasp of the Lhumzian language, and figured he must be the son of a foreign noble or diplomat. She had been curious about meeting someone else her own age so instead of sending him away immediately, she'd invited him in.

Westalia removed the earring she'd been wearing and looked at it. It was what connected her to Leo. *He was and continues to be an inspiration to me. Without Leo, I wouldn't be where I am today.*

They had their little skirmishes every time they met, but Westalia enjoyed every single one of them and felt safe when she was with him. Even when they were apart, she would end up thinking about and missing him, which made her heart race every time.

Do I... Her lips moved of their own accord as she looked at the earring. "Do I *love*—"

Her solitary confession was cut off by a voice from above. "You're looking at that earring again?"

"Gaaah! Paige?!"

Paige was standing behind Westalia, closely examining the expression on her face.

"Did I scare you? Let me guess what you're thinking about right now. It's that man, isn't it?"

Westalia responded with silence, indicating Paige was right on the money.

Paige let out a small, troubled sigh. "If you have feelings for that suspicious man, it will only make it harder for you. If you can't just dismiss him as a fleeting memory, then you shouldn't see him anymore."

"What if I were to marry that man?"

"What?! What do you mean?"

Westalia picked up a thick book from the table. It was an illustrated book of the coats of arms for all the nobility in the country. In the Archaites Empire, nobles usually registered their coats of arms and used them as identification. Therefore, by looking at the illustrated guide, one could immediately link a coat of arms to its specific family. Only members of the imperial family were allowed to have a coat of arms as an individual. Additionally, only the imperial family, the Orencias, were allowed to use the

horse and the sword. Leo's earring had both of those, in addition to the national flower, the rose.

So he really is... Westalia thought, tracing her fingers over the picture on the page she'd turned.

"This coat of arms is the same as what's on this earring. That means..." Westalia said. The coat of arms verified the next emperor. It was used by the crown prince. With just one earring, one could gain access to the palace archives, where classified documents were collected, and also move large sums of money around. It was only natural that Leo would be eager to get it back. Paige and Westalia looked at each other.

"That suspicious man is His Royal Highness, crown prince Leonardo Orencia, the first in line to the throne," Westalia said.

"What?!"

Leo was the crown prince of this country, and he was definitely the boy who'd wandered into the royal villa. She still held a soft spot in her heart for the fact that he had tried to get Westalia out of there so long ago. Looking back, Westalia thought it was both reckless and fearless for him, a crown prince, to say that he was going to kidnap the next queen of an enemy country. He had been willing to bear the burden of that crime to save Westalia, even though he'd only been a child.

Secretly, despite being obsessed with becoming queen, Westalia had wanted, just a little, to take his hand and follow him.

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Elizabeth Reyn was the daughter of a duke. She was beautiful to behold and skilled in many different areas of study. People of high society even said that she was the best candidate to be the next empress. And yet...

I came in second... Why? She was in second place after the first round of the selection process. She crumpled the notice of her results in her hand. Elizabeth's father had gotten the questions in advance so she'd been able to look them over before the examination, so she was supposed to be at the top of the group, with plenty of room between her and the next person. She was cheating, so how had someone managed to get a higher score than her?

The name of the candidate in first place was Cordata. Elizabeth had never heard of her before, but she was a normal person from a foreign country. She didn't even have a peerage. Being ordinary, Cordata couldn't have cheated like Elizabeth had, so she must've gotten that score based on her abilities alone. Elizabeth had heard that Cordata was working in a dubious apothecary to earn money while undergoing the empress selection process.

When Elizabeth had had a knight follow the woman, she'd found out that Cordata lived with a particularly beautiful attendant and was doing her own household chores, like a commoner.

Is she taking the empress selection lightly? I've worked hard to become empress ever since I was a child, Elizabeth thought, biting her lower lip. When she'd heard that Cordata was the silver-haired candidate, she'd remembered the woman she'd met at the first round of the competition. That woman had clearly been different from the other girls there, and when Elizabeth had approached her, the woman had introduced herself as Cordata.

Thinking her position was in danger, Elizabeth had plotted to have Cordata judged by a noblewoman from a family that had the Reyns' support. She'd hoped it would knock Cordata out of the competition, but someone had gotten in the way. In the end, Cordata's judge had been the Marchioness Petrov, an unimpressive provincial noble, pitting her against Elizabeth in the next round.

But there was nothing to worry about. At least two votes in the final round were already cast in her favor. The voting for the finalist was done by the emperor, the queen, the crown prince, the princess, and the second prince. That prince, along with the princess, was already hers.

Elizabeth had previously worked on behalf of the princess in order to help her win the person she had feelings for. The princess's love was the son of a high-ranking nobleman and had already had a fiancée, but the engagement had been broken off thanks to his affair with the princess. Since Elizabeth knew all of the details about what had happened, there was no way the princess would go against her.

The second prince was in over his head and owed the Reyns a large sum of money. Even in the worst-case scenario, he wouldn't vote for anyone but Elizabeth. She only needed one more vote to

become empress.

I will *be empress.* I *will be by his side.* Elizabeth was in love with Leonardo. It wasn't that she was really that interested in being empress; she just wanted to be with Leonardo. Even if he never gave her a second glance, Elizabeth couldn't imagine him with another woman. The reason she often visited Le Chantier Palace was in the hopes of running into him, although she always said it was because she was visiting the imperial library.

She'd gotten lucky today. Elizabeth bowed her head as Leonardo passed by her in the hallway.

I managed to see him today! On these occasions all she could do was offer him a polite bow, but she didn't mind.

You look wonderful today. You seem busy, but I hope you're not working too hard. Are you eating properly and getting enough rest? Elizabeth wondered.

Leonardo always had a composed expression on his face, but Elizabeth couldn't help but wonder if he ever got a day off. She'd noticed that he often had dark circles under his eyes.

Elizabeth remained in her bow until Leonardo had passed. Her spirits lifted and her heart began to race. But Elizabeth knew he wouldn't talk to her.

"Miss Elizabeth."

"HYEAH?!" She hadn't expected to be spoken to, so a weird sound escaped from her. She felt her face flush, but Leonardo didn't seem to care.

"I'm sorry I startled you. It's not very considerate to address someone so abruptly," Leonardo said.

"No, no, it's no bother at all. Is there something I can help you with?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, I just heard that you passed the first round of the selection process. Congratulations."

This was the first time Leonardo had complimented her, and Elizabeth's cheeks flushed even more. *I'm so happy! I can't believe he complimented me!*

"Is that what you hoped I would say?"

"Huh?" Elizabeth's high spirits were dashed by his words.

"You'd go so far as to *cheat* to get your family in power?"

Leonardo had seen through her dishonesty so easily. He also knew of Duke Reyn's intention to make Elizabeth the empress. It

was true that her father wanted the power afforded to relatives of the imperial family, but Elizabeth's desire to become empress had nothing to do with her family's plans.

Leonardo was a bitter enemy of the Reyns, and there were many whispers that the whole family was evil. Elizabeth's father was indeed a notorious and cunning man, but she herself wasn't nearly as evil as her father was.

No. All I wanted was to be close to you, she thought, but she swallowed those words back down.

Leonardo looked down at her with a cold gaze as he spoke. "It seems like you intended to rig the second round of the selection in order to eliminate your rivals, but I won't let you just do what you want. The final selection will be made by only three *impartial* people. My brother and sister won't be involved. That is what the Orencias plan to do. Don't think you can get away with these cowardly and dishonest acts. Tell your father that too." He left abruptly after finishing that statement.

That wasn't very nice of him... Elizabeth thought. She couldn't believe that Leonardo had figured out she'd been working to eliminate Cordata. It seemed like he'd figured out long ago that the second prince and princess were no match for the Reyns. Leonardo was well-informed about everything going on in the country. It was frightening. Besides, it seemed like Leonardo had personally chosen who would be Cordata's judge for the second round.

Why is he so devoted to that woman? Elizabeth lost the strength to stand after Leonardo left and she collapsed to the ground. She was only finally able to return home with the support of her attendants.

Later, however, Elizabeth was once again plunged straight into the depths of despair. During a carriage ride, she saw a man and a woman tucked away in a corner of the imperial city. They were on a bench by a lake, and the man was sleeping with his head in the woman's lap. But she recognized them immediately when she opened the window to get a better look. It was Cordata and Leonardo. They'd established an emotional bond without her even realizing it.

Jealousy raged through Elizabeth when she saw Cordata gently

patting Leonardo’s head. Elizabeth balled her fist in her skirt and bit her lip.

I hate you. I’ve yearned for him for such a long time. I hate you. I hate *you!*

Chapter 4: The Evil Woman's Busywork

It was two days before the third round of the selection when another incident occurred. Westalia's dress for the soiree arrived at the mansion, but when she opened the box, she was shocked to find that it had been ripped to shreds. It didn't even look like a dress anymore. The wrapping of the box was peeling off, so she could only assume that someone had done this deliberately during the shipping process.

"That's awful…" Paige's voice trailed off.

Westalia couldn't even speak. She picked up the remnants of the dress with trembling hands and took a closer look at it. She could tell that the person had used scissors on it, based on how neat and clean the cuts were.

Paige seemed like she was trying to guess who could've done something like this, but Westalia had an educated guess. It had to have been done by one of the nine other rival candidates for empress. She clutched the piece of cloth tightly. It would be impossible to have a new dress made before the day of the party.

Westalia was taller and thinner than the average woman, so it was difficult to find dresses that fit her. Even if she wanted to substitute another dress, and even if that dress was appropriate for the event, her appearance would still be a disgrace to the royal family.

Westalia wondered what she should do. If she were in the Kingdom of Lhumzia, she'd have plenty of dresses to choose from. Her mind went blank, and she began to lose feeling in her hands and feet.

"What are you going to do, my lady? We might not be able to do anything in time for the soiree… Please tell me the best way to get a new dress…"

Westalia could barely hear Paige speaking to her.

"Are you listening?" Paige asked.

"Shush! I know… I know better than anyone just how serious this situation is," Westalia snapped. Her panic startled Paige into silence. She couldn't remember the last time she'd raised her voice

like that.

Westalia quickly came to her senses. There was no reason to be taking her frustrations out on Paige.

“I’m sorry,” Westalia said. “I’m going to go cool off.”

Westalia left the house. She headed for a dress shop but, as she expected, she was unable to find one that fit her. Besides, she was an ordinary person now. She didn’t have the financial resources to buy a high-end dress like the ones worn by the nobility. Dresses that ordinary people could afford with a little bit of splurging were obviously still lower quality, and the nobles would laugh at her. She might have no choice but to drop out of the third round.

Westalia left the shopping district and trudged along next to the lake. She stopped and leaned against the stone railing, staring blankly out at the lapping waters of the lake.

I wonder if this is the end… Westalia thought. She felt she’d done well to make it all this way after Lily had trapped her, her country had abandoned her, and she’d had to travel so far away from home. But nothing had turned out the way she’d thought it would. Just when she’d felt she was getting a grip on everything, she’d been dragged down again. It was always, always, *always* like this. If Westalia had been from a distinguished family here, she wouldn’t be held back by such childish bullying. Maybe it was just pointless to try. Someone had interfered and now it was over. That was how things always worked for her.

I’m sick of this… I want to disappear. I don’t care anymore. I want to throw it all away… Westalia didn’t even cry. She just stood there in stunned silence. She felt it would be much easier if she could just fall into the lake and disappear like a bubble.

“Cordata…” said a familiar voice.

“You really do always appear at the perfect time, don’t you?” Westalia asked.

Leo looked at Westalia with his usual daring smile. It made her feel more at ease, like she was suddenly waking up from a terrible nightmare.

“You don’t look well. Did something happen?”

“The dress I bought for the third round of the competition arrived…all cut up. I’m really unlucky, aren’t I?” Westalia said, confiding in him that she wouldn’t be able to participate in the

final round.

"You're giving up just because of *that*?" he asked.

"Just"...? Westalia scowled at his insensitive comment. "What else can I do but give up? There's no way to continue. You want me to go before the royal family naked?"

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm just asking if that's all the resolve you've got."

"What?!"

Leo pointed to the border with the Kingdom of Slidd that was just visible in the distance. "You crossed that high wall to become empress. Is that a dream you can give up just because of one dress? No. You couldn't give up; that's why you're here. You've been trying so hard because you believe you can do it."

Westalia was silent. Those words stirred her heart. That was right. She'd been temporarily branded as an evil woman, had abuse hurled at her by the citizens she loved, and then been forced to drink poison while someone she'd considered a friend sneered at her. There was no greater ordeal than that. How *could* she be discouraged by just one dress?

"That's *not* all of the resolve I've got. I've worked too hard to get to this point. I can't back down now."

"That's right."

"Opportunities don't come around very often. That's why I want to make sure to grab them. Even if I don't make it, I have to work as hard as I can the whole time, or else I'll end up regretting it," Westalia said.

"Yes, you can do it. I believe in you. Now, get going."

Westalia looked up at Leo with a glare, lightly punching him in the stomach.

"Thank you. I'll be going now," she said quietly, looking miffed, and then turned on her heel.

I have to get back quickly. I don't have any time and I need to apologize to Paige, Westalia thought. There was no way she could give up. She decided she would crawl up from rock bottom. She would fulfill her childhood dream and become empress.

"That's the first time I've ever been hit by someone as they thanked me," Leo said, chuckling as he watched Westalia dash off. *Don't be discouraged. Seize the empress's throne, Westalia Lejainne*.

Westalia went all around to various seamstresses and tailors to buy expensive-looking fabrics, lace, and other materials. When she returned to the mansion after her shopping trip, she found Paige in the living room with sewing tools spread out around her, attempting to mend the destroyed dress. Paige had never sewn anything before.

"Oh, my lady, you're back," Paige said, looking up briefly and then returning to her work.

"Paige..." Westalia set the paper bag she'd been carrying down on the table and then sat down next to Paige. She took out her own sewing kit and began working on the dress as well. "I won't be getting any sleep for the next two days," she said.

"Ha ha, if that's what you want. Are you okay?" Paige asked.

"I'm fine. I've got a lot of endurance. And...thank you, Paige... You know, for all your help."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Paige replied.

Even though Westalia had been almost ready to give up, Paige had waited for her without even wavering in the slightest. Paige clearly believed Westalia would get back on her feet.

"I'll make an energy potion to thank you. It'll keep you awake too," Westalia said.

"No, thank you. I don't think I'd wake up again if I drank that," Paige replied. Westalia laughed at her quick rejection.

Two days later birds were chirping as the sun rose. Westalia was dozing on the sofa after pulling two all-nighters to fix the dress. The needle in her hand pricked her finger, and the pain woke her immediately.

"Ow! What time is it?!" Westalia looked at the clock and saw she'd been napping for two hours and hadn't gotten any more work done. *I don't have time to be napping!*

Westalia slapped her cheeks to rouse herself. She rubbed her eyes and returned to her work. At this rate she would probably make it in time for the evening's soiree.

Paige, who was supposed to be working next to her, was nowhere to be found. Instead, there was a large box on the table.

"A box?" Westalia looked at it questioningly.

Paige returned with a cup of coffee in her hands. "Would you like some coffee?"

“Please!”

Since Westalia hadn’t slept, Paige must not have slept either, but her face didn’t show any sign of fatigue. She was the strongest female gladiator in the world; it was no shock her stamina was off the charts.

Westalia took the steaming cup from Paige and asked, “What’s in this box?”

“It was left at the front entrance a little while ago. It’s addressed to you.”

“To me?”

The box came with a card that said, simply, “Thank you for the medicinal herbs.” Leo had been the recipient of those herbs. Westalia opened the box, knowing he was the sender, even though the letter was unsigned. Her eyes widened when she saw what was inside. It was a much finer dress than the one Westalia had originally purchased.

There were jewels sewn throughout the dress, and they had a beautiful, delicate shine to them in the sunlight coming through the windows. The lace that ran from the bust to the waist was embroidered with bold silver thread. The dress was a masterpiece, dyed deep red, and it fit Westalia perfectly.

Looking at the card again, Westalia saw that it continued on, reading “Blue earrings would go well with this dress.” She turned the paper over but there was nothing else on it. Westalia reached up and touched Leo’s blue earring in her right ear. He was usually begging her to give it back, so what had brought about his change of heart?

“That is an incredibly high-quality dress, my lady. When were you able to procure that?”

“Um, that’s…well…” Westalia stumbled over her words and didn’t make eye contact with Paige.

Paige looked like she immediately suspected Leo. Westalia thought Paige might say something meddlesome if she knew Westalia had gotten the dress from him, so she crumpled up the card and hid it behind her back.

“Um, yes, well—! I have a connection…” Westalia said.

“I would expect nothing less! I’m glad! I’m sure it will look very good on you,” Paige replied.

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

The dress wasn't all that was in the package—there were shoes and jewelry as well. How Leo had managed to prepare this in such a short period of time was a mystery, but now Westalia didn't have to worry about her evening gown. After the feeling of relief passed, she was overcome with sleepiness. Westalia collapsed onto the sofa, and Paige rushed over to her, clearly worried.

"I just...need a little...sleep..." Westalia was asleep by the time she finished her sentence. Paige covered her with a blanket.

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"We're almost to Le Chantier Palace. Are you ready?" Paige asked.

"I know, and yes," Westalia replied. As evening approached Westalia had gotten dressed up, and now she and Paige were making their way toward the palace. She was wearing the beautiful dress Leo had given her and had pinned her silver hair up.

This is my first soiree, Westalia thought. Not only was this the first social engagement of her life, but it was also a life-defining occasion. She couldn't let her nerves get the better of her.

"Are you nervous, my lady?" Paige asked.

"Not at all. I'm actually rather excited," Westalia replied. When she'd been hidden away she'd never been able to attend any social event, even though she'd learned dancing and etiquette. She remembered spending all that time yearning to attend a glamorous soiree.

"That dress really looks good on you," Paige said.

"And you look good in yours," Westalia replied.

"I don't really like skirts, though," Paige said with a laugh. While Paige usually preferred a button-down shirt and slacks for ease of movement, she still looked good in a dress despite her boyish appearance.

Le Chantier Palace was growing bigger and bigger outside the carriage window.

"I heard that there would be distinguished guests from other countries there tonight. I even heard that Lhumzia's crown prince was going to be in attendance. He's from an enemy country; I wonder why he's going to be there? It seems a little strange,"

Paige said.

“So, Prince Felix, huh?” Westalia said with a small laugh. “He is witty and kind. A little timid, though.”

“Oh, do you happen to know him?”

Westalia didn’t just know him, he’d been her former fiancé and someone she was indebted to.

“Hmm,” she replied, a meaningful smile on her face.

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Felix Nezeroa was the crown prince of the Kingdom of Lhumzia in name only. The former queen Delphine still held power, and the kingdom’s people were sick and impoverished. However, Felix turned a blind eye to his countrymen’s suffering out of self-pity and ingratiated himself to Delphine. He had been brilliant from an early age, but even though he was gifted, his timidness was overpowering.

One day, Felix had visited the royal villa and found his fiancée, Westalia, reading a thick book out on the terrace.

“What in the world are you reading?” he asked.

“It’s about medicinal herbs. Not the herbs that the former queen is buying up but something else that will cure the epidemic,” she said. “Oh, I’d better not talk about this in front of Your Highness, should I?” Westalia put a hand over her mouth in embarrassment. Avoiding the subject of buying up medicines was an unspoken agreement among the nobles that belonged to the former queen’s faction, and Westalia also knew that Felix obeyed the former queen.

“No, you don’t have to worry about it. You can talk about whatever you like in my presence,” Felix said.

“Okay…” Westalia flipped through the book and pointed at a section. “These two herbs in combination might work well. They are able to reduce fever and inflammation.”

Symptoms of the epidemic included fever and pain. Even though Westalia was confined to the royal villa and was clearly going through something awful herself, she was endeavoring to remain positive and had a sense of responsibility as the next queen. That’s what Felix liked about her. She had something that he didn’t have, and it dazzled him.

He liked her, but he couldn't tell her that, nor could he appeal to the former queen to let her out of the royal villa. He was just cowardly.

"I can't buy new medicinal herbs. The former queen would prevent me from doing so anyway. Every supplier I've tried to buy from has been shut down. There's nothing we can do about it," Felix said.

"Even so, we must do everything we can. Don't you want to protect your people?" Westalia asked, looking him straight in the eye. She was telling Felix that instead of just following the former queen's orders and protecting himself, he should be negotiating until their demands were met. Felix knew that. He also knew that Westalia had tried to send letters to many nobles and merchants with information about other medicinal herbs that could cure the epidemic. But all of them had been confiscated and torn up by the former queen.

Westalia had sent letters not only to the nobles and merchants but to the former queen herself. She was willing to put up with being confined in the royal villa without complaint, but when it came to the interests of the people, she would speak out. Westalia had said many times that it was her duty as the next queen to serve her people. Her sense of responsibility was really befitting of a queen.

Felix, on the other hand...

She's right, I am just trying to protect myself, he thought, but he was too ashamed and pathetic to say those words out loud.

Then, years later, Westalia was sent to the executioner's block for a crime she hadn't committed, and Felix faced a turning point.

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Le Chantier Palace had a grand magnificence to it that made Westalia's head spin. The hallways were filled with expensive-looking vases and figurines, and the walls and ceilings were painted with intricate patterns. Westalia could tell at a glance that skilled craftsmen had poured their hearts into the work.

Westalia paused and took a deep breath before the door that led to the main hall. She straightened her back and pulled her chin in slightly to look her most beautiful, then made her way to the

room.

As she descended the spiral staircase, the gazes of the people below instantly focused on her, captivated by her dignified bearing and composure. Every one of her gestures was perfect and refined, the result of her years of rigorous education. Looking down on everyone from her slightly elevated position on the staircase, she smiled gracefully.

Someone here is the criminal who cut up my dress, Westalia thought. She acted amiable to the attendees and observed the faces of those who were looking at her. Then, she noticed one lady in a bright pink dress who looked upset and couldn't meet her gaze.

So, it's you, Miss Elizabeth... Well, Westalia had no intention of blaming her or getting even with her now that she knew who the culprit was. After all, people who cheated and tore others down in order to get ahead never ended up winning. Westalia glared at Elizabeth, who grew pale and quickly turned away.

The bell rang to signal the beginning of the evening's festivities, and the ten finalists lined up to greet their hostess, the dowager empress. She had been seated on a raised dais and was now making her way toward the candidates. The candidates gave her their best curtsies.

"Thank you for coming here this evening. It is a pleasure to see you all," the dowager empress said, closing her folding fan with a snap and smiling elegantly at everyone. Her timeless beauty and elegant aura were overwhelming. She was as tall and slim as Westalia and had a striking presence.

So this is the dowager empress... Westalia thought. Even she, who had given birth to the current emperor, had been chosen by this same selection process. Westalia looked straight at her—the woman who held the position she was aiming to be in. The dowager empress looked over the ten candidates and spoke to Westalia first.

"You are very lovely," she said.

"You do me a great honor," Westalia replied.

"Where did you get that dress?" the dowager empress asked.

"It was a gift from...someone who is supporting me."

The dowager seemed to have connected some dots in her mind and whispered meaningfully, "I see. So that's why he came to get

the key to my dressing room…”

However, Westalia wasn’t able to catch her whispered words. The empress dowager looked at the earring shining on Westalia’s ear and arched her eyebrows.

“And is that earring a gift as well?”

“N-No…this was…borrowed…” Westalia said. She’d keep it a secret that it was plundered loot rather than borrowed.

“Well, it must be a good-luck charm. He’s become quite the considerate man, hasn’t he? Well, it seems you have quite the powerful ally,” the dowager replied. She clearly knew that the earring belonged to Leo.

I see… So that’s why Leo told me to wear the earring tonight, Westalia thought. The message card attached to the dress *had* told her to wear it, after all. The earring was proof of the crown prince’s identity. To entrust such a thing to her meant that he trusted her and implied to those who knew what the earring meant that she had the crown prince’s support. Westalia knew that this earring was proof that Leo really was rooting for her.

The dowager empress looked satisfied and went to speak to the other candidates. The last person she spoke to was Elizabeth.

“Oh dear, Miss Elizabeth! You’ve been looking quite unwell for a little while now. Did something happen?” the dowager asked.

“N-No… It’s just that Miss Cordata is wearing the same dress you wore to the Founding Day Festival…”

“And it suits her better, I think,” the dowager replied with a little laugh.

Westalia’s eyes widened with shock as she overheard this exchange. She’d had no idea. She’d certainly known it was a high-quality dress, but she’d had no idea it was something the dowager empress herself had worn. But, as their body types were very similar, it fit Westalia without any alterations. Sweat rolled down Westalia’s back at the knowledge of just who had worn this beautiful dress.

After the dowager empress finished greeting them all and returned to her seat, the candidates relaxed. Most of them broke out into loud chatter.

“I was so nervous! I just talked to the dowager empress!” one said.

“My legs are still shaking,” another one added.

Conversely, Elizabeth and Westalia were in a tense standoff.

"Miss Cordata, why are you wearing that dress? Answer me!" Elizabeth finally said.

"I will not. And why should I?"

"Because..."

Normally, when a woman of higher standing asked a question, it was common courtesy to answer her without complaint. Westalia took on a provocative attitude.

"Actually, I think you should go take a rest somewhere. As the dowager empress said, you don't look well," Westalia said.

"I told you to answer my question!" Elizabeth said. The room around them grew silent as Elizabeth's composure evaporated.

These emotional types of people are easy to understand and deal with, Westalia thought. Lily had been wise in that respect. She'd never let anyone know her true intentions, which she kept hidden behind a gentle smile, even as she was scheming to realize her own ambitions.

Westalia narrowed her eyes and whispered in Elizabeth's ear. "I think what's really bothering you isn't the dress I'm wearing but the one you cut up."

Elizabeth backed up a few steps and began trembling. Westalia had guessed from Elizabeth's open lack of eye contact that she had been the perpetrator.

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about!" Elizabeth stammered.

"You're not meeting my gaze. There was a hair in the box. It was the same color and length as yours," Westalia replied.

"Did you tell anyone it was me?!"

"I can keep a secret," Westalia responded, but what she really meant was that she hadn't told anyone yet because she'd just found out the truth herself. But Westalia had no intention of revealing it to anyone or taking any sort of revenge on her in the future.

Even though the bit about the hair was a lie... Westalia had laid a trap for Elizabeth and she'd fallen for it easily.

Elizabeth, overcome with anger, raised a hand to slap Westalia. "What a cheeky thing to say! Who do you think you are? Know your place!" she said, raising her voice. Even though Elizabeth's hand was about to strike her, Westalia didn't flinch or look away.

Paige appeared at that moment and quickly grabbed Elizabeth's arm.

"Wh-What are you doing? Don't interrupt me!" Elizabeth cried.

"Excuse me. I'm sorry to touch a lady without her consent, but I think it would be detrimental to you to make any more of an uproar while the sacred selection is taking place," Paige replied. Elizabeth gritted her teeth and slowly lowered her arm.

"Let me give you this advice," Westalia said. "If you try to win by tearing someone else down...it usually doesn't work out."

"Shut up!"

Elizabeth was usually highly respected, and the other attendees began whispering about her outburst. A group of ladies' maids attempted to calm the young noble while her body continued to quake with rage.

"Please calm down, miss!" one of her maids said.

"There are many eyes on us. Let's go outside," said another.

Lyra, who was in attendance as Westalia's nominator, rushed to her candidate's side. Westalia told both Paige and Lyra that Elizabeth was the one who had ruined her dress, and she'd simply warned the other woman not to do something like that again.

"I understand your feelings, but you scared me half to death, my lady!" Paige said. "With a tantrum like that, Miss Elizabeth is not likely to make it to the finals, huh?"

"I wonder. She's from an important family. Society is sometimes powerless against that kind of influence," Westalia responded. If Elizabeth did make it, then that would mean there was some bias toward her.

"What do you know about Elizabeth?" Westalia asked Lyra.

Lyra prefaced her answer by stating that she wasn't very familiar with the higher nobility, but she knew that Elizabeth was well-behaved, had a wide circle of friends, and had a good reputation. She was also said to be the best candidate for empress in the entire country.

"And there's one more thing... Her feelings for the crown prince are quite...well-known," Lyra said.

Westalia could understand why Elizabeth wanted to be empress, but she couldn't understand why the woman was so hostile toward her. As a foreigner without any social standing, Westalia shouldn't even register as an enemy.

Did I do something to make her resent me? Westalia wondered. She never even thought of the fact that someone might've seen her with the crown prince's head in her lap.

Shortly thereafter, the orchestra began to play a waltz, and the candidates began dancing with their partners.

Westalia was partnerless. She urged Paige to quickly find her someone to dance with. Even now the dowager empress was watching the candidates closely from her dais. Even as they were chatting like this, they were all being evaluated.

But there was no need for Westalia to worry about having no one to dance with. The men in the hall were constantly glancing at her, wanting to establish a connection with the future empress. It was best for her to wait patiently for someone to ask her to dance.

"Would you like to dance, my lady?" The man who elegantly extended his hand to her was none other than the crown prince of Lhumzia, and Westalia's former fiancé, Felix. He'd known Westalia was planning to participate in the empress selection process, and it had been with his help that Westalia had survived her execution.

"I would be happy to, Your Highness," Westalia replied. Behind her, Lyra and Paige let out small gasps of surprise that a crown prince had spoken to her.



The two danced together comfortably in the center of the hall, perfectly in sync. The people around them looked at them strangely, likely wondering why a member of the royal family of an enemy country was so at ease in Archaites.

Westalia had been Felix's fiancée, and yet they had never once danced together, all because she'd been hidden away and confined to the royal villa.

"I was sure you would be here today. You survived," Felix said.

"Thanks to you," Westalia replied.

"Is this your first time dancing in public?"

"You know well enough that it is."

"Your hands are cold. You must be nervous," Felix said.

"It's because I'm dancing with the man of my dreams, Your Highness."

"I'm honored you feel that way." Felix smiled as he continued, "It's okay. Just surrender yourself to me."

"Yes, Your Highness..."

Felix was a true gentleman as a lead. Westalia felt as if she'd been practicing her whole life to one day dance with him as his queen. Although it was not in the way she had imagined when she was confined in the royal villa, her dream of dancing in a beautiful hall like this was finally coming true. Westalia had no romantic feelings for Felix, and really thought of him like a brother, but he had always been dear to her heart. She looked up at Felix, full of emotion, and he looked down and met her gaze.

"You go by Cordata now, don't you?" Felix asked. "Why did you choose that name?"

"I chose it with the hope that even a weed growing quietly on the side of the road could one day outshine the beauty and brilliance of lilies," Westalia responded.

"That's very you. I think you shine brighter than any other flower ever could," Felix said.

"You flatter me," Westalia said, unaccustomed to his compliments.

"I mean it," he said with a bitter smile.

The orchestra finished playing and applause poured in for the two of them. Felix's eyes turned sharp. He whispered in her ear, so softly it was almost drowned out by the applause. "When the evening is over, come to my room. I have something important to

talk to you about. About the people who framed you."

"I understand."

The soiree ended and attendees began to leave. Westalia remained at the palace and headed to the room that Felix had told her to meet him in. She had Paige wait outside and then entered the room. The room was empty of people, except for Felix, who was sitting on a sofa.

Westalia sat down across from him and immediately spoke. "I didn't expect you to be here."

"I'm dealing with some circumstances of my own right now, and I figured today would be the only chance I had to speak with you, so I asked the crown prince to help me out," Felix said. "To put it simply, you may soon regain the name of Westalia Lejainne."

Westalia was silent.

"I have identified the trading company from which the former queen and princess purchased the poison, and I have seized written records of the transactions. I have also seized some other evidence, and I intend to file charges against them upon my return to Lhumzia."

Westalia let out a small sigh, not particularly surprised. "I see. So it went well."

The day before Westalia's execution, Felix had come to her in the dungeon and she had asked him to prove her innocence. Westalia was prepared for the possibility that Felix might not be able to do so, despite his best efforts, because Delphine, the former queen, was a powerful and cunning woman. But he finally might stand a chance against her.

"This is quite the collection you've gathered," Westalia said as Felix handed over a list of goods and witnesses. It was a significant piece of evidence.

"I will stake everything on this trial. I will make sure that the former queen is banished from the palace as a criminal. I need your help to do that, Westalia."

It felt like a long time since she'd last been called that name.

No matter how strong the evidence against her, Delphine was a powerful adversary. She would likely counter with false evidence and witnesses, and she might even try to bribe the judge. Lily was smart too, and her acting skills were good enough to impress even

Westalia. In no time at all, she would win the sympathy of the audience and get them on her side. If Westalia lost, she would also lose her life—this time for real. And Felix, who had helped her escape the first time, would be charged with a crime.

But…even so, if we are to win against the former queen and princess, we can't let this opportunity pass us by, Westalia thought. She nodded to Felix. "Of course, we will fight together. I will give my statement as a victim at the trial. Now is the time to claim victory over these women and let the pus of the royal palace drain out."

"Do you think we can really do it?"

"It's not a matter of whether we can do it or not; it's something we *must* do. There are things we have to prepare, but I will return to our home country soon." In addition to saying she'd help prove her innocence, Westalia made another promise. After her name was cleared and she became empress, she would help bring peace between Lhumzia and Archaites and help trade resume between the two countries.

The Kingdom of Lhumzia had been suffering from an epidemic for quite some time, but they lacked the materials needed to make medicines to treat the disease, and the main source of the medicinal herbs was the Archaites Empire. Peace negotiations had continued to falter because of Delphine's tight hold on the importation of medicines from foreign countries, but the resumption of trade was a necessity for the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

"Lhumzia must not be weak. Many people are suffering from diseases because of the former queen. We absolutely have to bring her down," Westalia said.

"Yes, we will fight this together," Felix replied.

Westalia let out a small laugh at his serious expression. "You've changed a lot since I last saw you."

Felix, too, had been concerned about the situation in the country under Delphine's control, but he had been afraid of her and just gone along. To put it in the worst way, he'd been a crown prince in name only, with no presence of his own. He was the one who'd said nothing when his fiancée was imprisoned. But now he was trying to fight for Westalia's innocence and to fulfill his responsibilities as crown prince, even if that meant turning Delphine's forces against him.

“It’s too late. I did nothing until you were given the poison. But when you pointed out my faults, I was finally able to make up my mind and do something,” Felix said.

“It’s not too late. I’m still alive,” Westalia replied.

“You are very kind.” Felix looked slightly remorseful.

After hearing what he had to say, Westalia decided it was time to leave. Felix called out to her again just before she left the room.

“I’ll tell you this just in case. The former queen was doing business with the Archaites Empire’s Devorah Trading Company. They’re in the business of selling dangerous drugs and weapons to the nobility.”

“To the nobility? That’s terrifying…”

“Next time I see you will be back in Lhumzia,” Felix said.

“Yes. Take care of yourself,” Westalia replied as she was leaving.

“Thank you. You as well.”

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A few months earlier, on the day before her execution, Westalia Lejainne had been locked up in a cell, alone, after being convicted at trial for a plot to assassinate the princess. No sunlight reached her, and she couldn’t tell if it was day or night.

I’ve been locked up my whole life, and now the end of it will be no different, she thought. Tomorrow, Westalia would be put to death for a crime she hadn’t committed. That fact amplified the deep despair within her.

“How could this have happened…?” Westalia asked, but no one heard her words. She’d been forbidden from seeing anyone and told that the next time she would be allowed to see the sun would be when she was brought out to die. She’d endured many hardships on the road to becoming queen, but this was too much.

Westalia was frustrated and bitter after having spent many days unable to eat or sleep well. Westalia had thought that Lily was her sole confidant. She was the only one who had been sympathetic to Westalia’s circumstances—being hidden away in the royal villa and cut off from everyone as she was. Their friendship had started when Lily had spoken to the king directly, asking to be Westalia’s confidant.

Lily had visited Westalia in the royal villa frequently and they

would eat sweets together; talk about popular novels, their dreams, their families; and share everything with each other. Westalia had many happy memories of their time together, but apparently she was the only one who'd thought they were friends.

It was nothing more than part of the plot to paint Westalia as the evil woman who grew jealous of the kind princess and tried to kill her. Lily had told her all that as she'd raised a glass of poison to her lips, laughing loudly the whole time.

Westalia suddenly heard footsteps echoing down the stairs to the dungeon, but they weren't the familiar footsteps of the guard. She looked up into the light of a lantern being held aloft.

"You're really having a rough time..."

"Felix... Your Highness..."

Felix looked at Westalia, his face full of grief. Then he bowed deeply to her. "I'm sorry. It's all because I wasn't strong enough."

"Please raise your head," Westalia said. "Your Highness has done nothing wrong. I have always been prepared for this kind of situation. In a palace where all kinds of conflicting motives and desires intersect, something like this could have happened at any moment."

"No, it was my fault for not fulfilling my duty and protecting you as my fiancée. I don't know what I can say to you..."

Westalia could only shake her head. "Don't blame yourself."

Delphine's power was immense. No matter what kind of tyranny she committed, everyone had to turn a blind eye to it. To protect himself, Felix had no choice but to follow the former queen's lead. He had only done so to protect his position.

Westalia had been convicted and, on Delphine's recommendation, Lily's name had been put forward as a candidate for the next queen. She was Delphine's daughter, so if she became queen and had an heir, Delphine's power would only grow. The former queen regretted that she'd never produced an heir, but she was more than eager for her daughter to fulfill that task.

"I'm sorry I couldn't do anything for you, Westalia," Felix said.

"No, there is still something you could do for me. Can I ask one favor?" Westalia asked the dejected man.

"Y-Yes, anything."

About half a day later, Felix returned to the dungeon.

“Is this what you wanted?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” Westalia replied. She’d asked Felix to prepare a small pill, about the size of her pinkie fingernail, that was a mix of a few different medicinal herbs. The herbs would work to counteract the poison of the agisakuragi. Agisakuragi itself was a rare poison that was difficult to obtain, so there wasn’t much known about how to counteract it.

“Wait, don’t hand that over just yet,” Westalia said, handing the antidote back to Felix. Her execution was to be done not by beheading but by poisoning, which was said to be more painful. It was only a guess, but Westalia assumed the poisoning would be done with the same one that Lily had drunk.

“The poison of the agisakuragi, when ingested in lethal doses, causes death after a period of agony. However, this medicine will put its victim into a temporary coma indistinguishable from death,” Westalia explained. If she swallowed the antidote pill along with the poison, there was a chance that she would escape death…but the odds were fifty-fifty.

“If I stay alive, there’s a chance Your Highness will be charged as a criminal for helping me. But on the other hand, this could be a huge boon in any effort to overthrow Delphine. It’s a big gamble,” Westalia continued.

“Wh-What do you mean?” Felix asked.

“I will drink the poisoned cup and survive, escape this country, and flee to the Archaites Empire. Then I will regain everything I have lost and take revenge,” Westalia explained. “The former queen must have obtained the agisakuragi poison, which isn’t available in Lhumzia, from somewhere. If I can find out how the former queen and princess did that, and get proof and witnesses, I’ll be able to get them before a trial.”

She continued, “Did you know, Your Highness, that the selection of the next empress will soon take place in the Archaites Empire? The empress will be chosen based solely on her abilities, without regard to her family, age, or background.”

“W-Wait a minute! You’re not going to tell me that you’ll be applying for that, are you? It’s too dangerous to be so out in the open. If they find out who you are, then you really will die!” Felix replied.

“Please hear me out. There’s more than six months before the

selection process ends, so…" Westalia looked directly at Felix. "In the meantime, I would like you to help me prove my innocence so I can call myself Westalia Lejainne again. If I become empress as Westalia, then I promise you will be suitably compensated."

"Compensated?" Felix asked.

Westalia told him that she would act as a bridge between the Kingdom of Lhumzia and the Archaites Empire. She'd also work to eventually create an environment where Lhumzia could buy the herbs they needed directly from Archaites. Then, Lhumzia would have a fighting chance against the raging epidemic.

"I am still proud to be a former queen-elect of Lhumzia. I want to save as many people as possible from wrongdoers and disease," Westalia said. The people of the Kingdom of Lhumzia would probably condemn the innocent Westalia as evil and loathe her. Still, their ignorance was no reason for them to suffer.

"I always thought you didn't like the position of queen-elect. You're smart—you could live a different, more peaceful life. Are you sure you want to go down this road?" Felix asked.

"I have lived and learned only to be a queen. But I haven't been of any use to anyone yet. That's the same as being dead. I want to be a leader," Westalia replied. It wouldn't be in the Kingdom of Lhumzia, which had abandoned her, but somewhere else. No matter where she went, her dream would remain the same. And she definitely didn't want to remain in the same place Lily was.

"Felix, do you intend to remain a powerless king? Will you continue to turn a blind eye to your ailing people? If you will fight this battle with me, then give me that pill."

Felix didn't hesitate. "I understand. I will do everything in my power to clear your name. And I have my responsibilities as a member of the royal family. I don't want anyone to get hurt, and I don't want to be crown prince in name only anymore."

If her innocence weren't proven, it would mean that Westalia would remain stigmatized forever and unable to use her real name. Felix could be stripped of his position as crown prince for his complicity in the crime she was about to commit. But he'd answered without a second thought and placed the antidote in Westalia's hand. In that dark dungeon the two of them made a promise that they would never again allow the former queen or the princess to do as they pleased.

Westalia smiled gracefully and took the antidote from Felix. “When I die, I want you to fill my coffin with lots of beautiful jewelry and put my favorite ring on my finger. This is my last request to you, Your Highness.” That would greatly increase the chances of being targeted by thieves after she was buried. Besides, her favorite ring contained a hidden needle that was coated in an anesthetic poison, for self-defense. She then told Felix not to help her any more than that. If it came out that he was involved in her plans, he would be accused of treason.

“I’ll grant your last request,” Felix said.

Alone in the dungeon again, Westalia held the antidote tightly, telling herself to look to the future.

If any poison other than agisakuragi was used for her execution, she would die. If the antidote failed to neutralize the poison, she would die. If she was kidnapped by thieves during her coma she might end up being dissected and die, or she could be caught by the guards while trying to make her escape and be sent back to the dungeon. Still, there was nothing she could do other than cling to the glimmer of hope that she had.

Before her execution, Westalia slipped the antidote pill under her tongue. Luck was on her side. As she’d guessed, agisakuragi was used for her execution. She gulped the antidote down along with the poison.

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Felix was in his office in the Lhumzian royal palace.

“Oh, Your Highness! Would you like to have tea outside with me? It’s a beautiful day,” Lily asked.

“No, I will not. Why don’t you ask one of the ladies’ maids?” Felix replied.

“Well, please don’t speak so coldly to me. If you’re working all the time, you’ll get sick.”

After Westalia’s death, Lily had become the top contender to take Felix’s hand. If she got the council’s approval, she would officially become his fiancée, and so it would be nice if Felix could be a little more accommodating toward her, she figured.

Lily was the daughter of the former king. The king had married Delphine, who was quite a bit younger than him, and had three

other wives as well. Delphine had never given birth to a prince, but the king's long-awaited first child had finally been born—Lily. She'd had everything handed to her from the time she was born, and although she'd been doted on as she grew, she knew she wouldn't remain like that for her whole life. Once she married and left the palace, she would become just an ordinary person, and she would no longer be in the same environment where she had always been treated so well.

In Lily's case, there had been talk of marrying into a particular family who lived on some barren land for the sake of political ties, and she hated the idea tremendously. So, she had plotted to trick Westalia into staying in the royal villa. Lily wanted to become the queen and the most beloved woman in the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

Lily looked down at Felix, who was sitting at his desk. "I see that you're still heartbroken about Wes. I feel the same way. I still can't believe she was jealous of me and tried to kill me."

Felix stopped writing and looked up at her. Lily thought she'd gotten his attention, and so she continued, a trembling hand over her mouth and her eyes slightly moistened.

"It was so hard. I loved Wes so much," she said. "But since you were her fiancé, your emotional wounds must be much deeper. That's why I gathered up my courage and invited you to have tea with me."

The ladies' maids and knights standing at the back of the room were moved to tears by Lily's kindness. She knew most people would be sympathetic toward her if she behaved like this.

"You're being annoying," Felix replied.

Lily was shocked by his unexpected response, but she wasn't deterred by it. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interfere with your busy schedule. I'll come back later," she said, looking apologetic.

"No. I'm uncomfortable with the very idea of you asking me out."

"Wha—" Lily gasped out. His response was too direct and too impolite.

"I'm sure Westalia wouldn't like to hear her nickname out of the mouth of a traitor like you," Felix said with a smile that didn't match his words at all. Him speaking such blunt words with such a kind expression on his face irritated Lily.

"*You're* the one who was jealous," Felix continued. "Westalia was

a brilliant, beautiful, and lovely woman, and you envied the beloved queen she could become. I know all about what you and the former queen instigated."

Lily's eyes widened involuntarily. Felix pulled out a document from his desk and showed it to her. It was a legal suit stating that the former queen and the princess had conspired together to disgrace Westalia and send her to her death.

"Y-You intend to take my mother and me to court?!"

"That's right."

"You're… You're joking, right? My mother is the most powerful person in this country. You wouldn't want to make an enemy of her, would you?" Lily picked up the document, her hand trembling. If he did this and disgraced the former queen, he likely wouldn't get away with it.

"Still, I'd rather gamble on this battle than install you as queen, as you seem to think only of yourself," Felix replied.

Lily's plan should have been perfect. She had acted as the perfect lady in front of everyone, but Felix had seen through it to her true nature.

Don't get upset, Lily, she reminded herself. She calmly returned the document and said, "I have no memory of this crime. Surely you must have misunderstood something. It's not in your best interest to engage in this meaningless battle. I trust that you will make the right decision."

Lily left the office, her hands still trembling.

Felix must have a very good reason for taking such a bold step. I'm scared… There's something very unpleasant about all of this… she thought. Felix had always been a man without initiative, sympathetic to Delphine for the sake of self-preservation. And yet, his expression was different from before. It was the face of a man who had made up his mind. It was the same expression that had been on Westalia's face the day of her execution.

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After Lily left, an aide approached Felix. "She's quite formidable, isn't she? But even after all that, you didn't lose your composure."

"Yes. She did deceive Westalia for years, after all," Felix replied. He had no intention of rescinding the legal suit and would fight to

drive the corruption out of the royal court, even if it meant risking everything. It was his duty as the crown prince to at least try and make amends for the fact that he had been unable to do anything until Westalia was executed.

"I want this suit filed and the trial started immediately," Felix said.

"Yes, sir," the aide replied.

Felix had obtained several pieces of evidence, including the transaction history of Delphine's poison purchases. There were just a few last things he needed to prepare for the trial.

"At the same time, have the press write about the fact that the former queen was buying medicinal herbs and reselling them at a higher price."

"Yes, sir."

He had to keep Delphine's reputation with the people as bad as possible. That would be the strategy that would give Westalia an upper hand during the trial. Delphine had amassed a huge fortune by purchasing medicinal herbs, which were hard to find in Lhumzia, from several foreign countries, then selling them at high prices. She had been meddling in diplomacy to make the peace talks with the Archaites Empire fall through in order to monopolize the profits of medicinal herbs from there.

Presently, the common people were suffering from the ravages of an epidemic. If it became known that the former queen was doing such a thing for the sake of making money, she would surely face great criticism. If a new trial was held amid public condemnation, the people would be inclined to want Delphine to be convicted.

Felix already knew which reporter to speak to. He told his aide to make contact with a man who'd been fired from a major newspaper for writing an article that criticized Delphine and now worked at a smaller paper. His aide left and one of the ladies' maids who waited on Lily hand and foot entered. Felix had called her here.

"You wanted to speak with me, sir?" she asked.

"I'm glad you came. You're always by Lily's side, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes... Is there something you need from me?"

Felix looked at her and then narrowed his eyes elegantly. He gave her a beautiful, refined smile, and when he saw that she was

completely entranced, he whispered to her seductively. “I heard that your family is heavily in debt. It’s admirable that you work at the royal court for your father who is bed bound with illness. I have so much respect for you.”

“Oh…you honor me with your words…” the lady’s maid replied, her cheeks blushing.

“Shall I pay all of your debts for you?”

“Wh-What?”

“In exchange, I want you to bring me the diary that Lily writes in every day,” Felix said.

“Is that all I need to do? And you’ll repay *all* the debt…?”

“Yes, I promise.”

The lady’s maid agreed to do what he asked and left his office smiling. Westalia had said that if they could obtain Lily’s diary, it would be a powerful piece of evidence in the trial.

“What a heartless woman, to betray her mistress for money,” Felix muttered. But it was true that her family was in debt, and perhaps he couldn’t blame her for being driven into a corner.

Westalia… I did what I could. How will you fight on the witness stand? Felix had done everything he could to help. He was kind of looking forward to seeing how Westalia, who’d been hidden away for so long, would stand up to the world of political power.

Felix wondered how she’d spent the months since crossing over into the Archaites Empire. How had she grown? He hoped that the next time they met, they’d get to spend a lot of time reminiscing.

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Shortly after the soiree, two letters arrived at Westalia’s home. The first was from the royal family, stating that she had been short-listed for the final round. The second was from Felix. Felix’s letter included a newspaper clipping from the Kingdom of Lhumzia which stated that the former queen Delphine had been profiting from the resale of medicinal herbs and that riots were breaking out all over the country due to the people’s opposition to her. It also mentioned the dates of the trials of the former queen and the princess.

“Paige. There’s…something I need to talk to you about,” Westalia said.

“What is it? If you’re trying to negotiate buying yet more cooking utensils, you can forget about it. You haven’t improved at all,” Paige replied from the living room table, where she was polishing silverware.

Now that Westalia would have to attend the trials to prove her innocence, she was ready to tell Paige who she really was. Paige had always been loyal to Westalia, even though the woman didn’t know her true identity. It would be dishonest for Westalia to continue to conceal it from her. But if she told Paige her real name, Paige would surely look down on her—angry that she’d been deceived by a criminal.

“My name isn’t Cordata. It’s…Westalia Lejainne,” Westalia said, forcing out the words.

Paige dropped the fork she was holding to the floor in shock. There was no one who didn’t recognize the name of the most evil woman to be executed in a century.

Westalia went on to tell Paige the truth about the events leading up to the execution and that there would now be a trial in the Kingdom of Lhumzia to prove her innocence. “The world thinks that I died in a public execution after poisoning a much-beloved princess in an attempt to assassinate her.”

Paige had certainly had no idea that Westalia truly was the evil woman who’d been executed. Her shock had apparently rendered her silent.

“I’m sorry I’ve been deceiving you all this time. I won’t ask you to believe my story. If you’re disappointed, that’s fine. I won’t even try to force you to stay…” The truth was, Westalia wanted Paige to stay with her through the finals and beyond. That had been her idea when she’d bought the woman from the slavers, but now that they’d become friends, Westalia preferred to respect Paige’s wishes.

“It must’ve been very hard,” Paige said, and a moment later tears began streaming down her face. It was the first time she’d ever cried in front of Westalia; she was always so aloof. Westalia was thrown off by this reaction. She’d been expecting to be cursed at and shunned more than anything else.

“I can’t believe you were having such a hard time and I didn’t realize it at all…”

“You’re crying…for me?” Westalia was shocked that the woman’s

tears were out of sympathy. Westalia stood there, stunned, when the other suddenly wrapped her in a hug. “P-Paige?!”

“If you intend to return to your home country, please allow me to accompany you. I will follow you wherever you go,” Paige said.

“Are you sure? I’m the most hated person in all of Lhumzia…”

“What are you talking about? I’m indebted to you. You’re my dearest friend.”

“Oh!” When Westalia was alone in the royal villa, Lily, in whom she thought she’d finally found a friend, had betrayed her so badly that she’d since closed herself to the idea of trusting anyone ever again. But the days she spent with Paige were so fun they had melted the ice around her frozen heart.

“You… You think of me as a friend? *Me*?”

“Of course I do!”

Here before her stood someone who was crying for her, someone who was trying to help her. “I have always wanted a friend. This is a dream come true…” Westalia whispered. A smile bloomed on Westalia’s face, and Paige’s eyes softened.

“Well then, tonight I must make dinner for my dearest friend,” Westalia added.

“*Please* don’t.”

Sadly, Westalia *still* wasn’t trusted in the kitchen. This ongoing bit was so funny to them that when they met each other’s gaze they burst out laughing.

“You’re the worst! Why are you so bitter about my cooking?!” Westalia asked, still laughing.

“I trust neither your cooking nor your financial decisions as you have a propensity for incurring debt. Although that makes sense now that I know your history, right, little lady?”

After making her plans to leave the Archaites Empire, Westalia headed out of the house to walk around town. She figured if she went into the city, she might bump into Leo. The start time for her part-time job had already passed, so she really shouldn’t have just been wandering around hoping to run into the man, but she wanted to see him at least once more before returning to her home country. She took the long way around to the apothecary, where she sat on the bench on the lakeshore and looked out at the sun glinting off the water.

What am I doing, skipping work like this? she wondered. This was the first time Westalia had ever abandoned something. The last time she'd seen Leo was before the third round of the selection. Every day since then, she'd found herself coming here. Every time someone passed by on the street in front of her, she would check their face, only to be disappointed when she realized it wasn't the person she was hoping for.

What on earth *was* she doing? Westalia sighed, somewhat dismayed at her own behavior. She figured there was no sense in wasting more time here and was about to get up and walk away when a voice stopped her.

"Who are you waiting for?"

She whipped around and saw her beloved Leo standing there. Her mood brightened immediately. Leo was walking briskly toward her, eyes on her face and a fearless smile on his lips.

"Was it me?" he asked.

"N-No..." Westalia blushed and fell silent. After a brief moment of hesitation, Leo nodded, looking somewhat pleased.

They walked along the lakeside path together.

"You once told me that if I become empress I will belong to the crown prince, and we wouldn't be able to meet anymore," Westalia said.

"Yes, that's right."

"That was a lie." Westalia stopped and looked up at him. "Because you're the crown prince. Your name is Leonardo Orencia and you will be emperor of the Archaites Empire."

"Yes," Leo answered simply, not looking surprised at all.

Westalia took off the blue earring and offered it to the crown prince, bowing her head deeply. "I cannot apologize enough for all the rudeness I have shown you in the past. I had no idea that you were the crown prince. No, regardless of that, my rudeness was unforgivable."

Leonardo took the proffered earring in silence. Westalia readied herself for whatever he was about to say. She thought back to all of the disrespectful things she'd done to him, starting with sticking him with a poisoned needle and knocking him out when he'd tried to help her at their first meeting, to taking him to the casino and then vomiting on his lap, to making him eat cookies that were basically charcoal.

Leonardo raised a hand and Westalia shook violently. *He's going to hit me?!* she thought. He would never raise a hand to a woman, but what if what Westalia had done was not something that could be forgiven with just a slap? She closed her eyes tightly.

Her eyes sprung open again at the touch of cold metal on her right ear. Leonardo had taken the earring and put it right back on her ear. He spoke before she could ask why.

"You've given me absolute hell this whole time. You're going to have to atone for it."

"A-Atone?"

"Yes, you're going to hang on to this earring until I forgive you. That's your punishment."

"But... But this earring is very important to you!" *The coat of arms is basically his ID! I could get into the palace and read banned books or look at secret documents with it!*

"That's right. So I'll have to check in with you periodically to make sure you haven't lost it."

It was like he was trying to create an excuse to see her again. Westalia understood his intention and giggled, her eyes twinkling. Then, like a child who had thought up a great prank, she said, "But I might sell it off for money. Oh, I might even accidentally drop it on the floor and step on it!"

"H-Hey! Give it back then."

"No." Westalia quickly dodged the hand that was reaching for her and covered her ear protectively. "You have to promise. Promise that you'll come see that I'm taking good care of this earring." It was the best thing she could come up with to convey her desire to see him again, even if it was a little roundabout.

Leonardo lowered his hand. "Have you ever shot a bow and arrow?"

"Um...no?"

"There's going to be a hunting festival going on at the imperial palace soon. I go every year for a bit of a change of pace. Do you...want to come?"

"I'd love to go!"

The date for the festival was shortly before the final selection and just after the trial for the former queen and princess. If Westalia won that trial, she'd be able to use her real name again. On the other hand, if she lost, she would never regain her honor

and probably be executed for real.

I might never see him again… Westalia thought. When she was executed, she hadn't been given any chance to defend herself, her conviction suddenly set in stone. But now she finally had that chance. This time, she was determined to prove her innocence on her own, even if it meant taking risks. Though she might never see Leo again, she kept her loneliness to herself and smiled softly.

"So, it will be a while before we see each other," Westalia said.

"Seems that way. Can I ask for one thing before our next meeting?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"I would like you to embroider a handkerchief—for me."

An embroidered handkerchief given to a member of the opposite sex was considered a sign of affection. During the hunting festival, Archaitian culture dictated that women send handkerchiefs along with their lovers and husbands, wishing for their safety. The fact that Leonardo wished for a handkerchief for himself meant that he wanted a token of Westalia's affection.

Westalia blushed and turned away. "Okay," she said quietly. "I'll have it ready by the day of the festival. What kind of flower would you like?"

"A wisteria flower."

It was the calling card of Lhumzia's Westalia Lejainne.

Leo must know who I really am, Westalia thought. Nevertheless, it was probably out of consideration for her that he dared not to ask for her true name directly. It was well-known that a trial would be held in Lhumzia in the near future. He might have assumed that Westalia had something planned.

Westalia followed Leonardo's gaze, and her eyes fell on a wisteria trellis in full bloom. "I like wisteria flowers too," she said. "When I give you the handkerchief, will you listen to my secret?"

"I'd listen to anything *you* have to say."

"Thank you, Leonardo."

"Just Leo. In private you will treat me as you have always treated me."

"B-But…"

Leonardo brought his face closer to hers and murmured, "That is what I want you to do." His expression was bewitching and tender and made Westalia's heart beat faster.

“Okay, Leo,” Westalia replied, setting up their first “next meeting.”

“Well, see you…” she said as she waved and turned on her heel. She walked away, painfully reluctant to leave, but stopped a little farther down the path and looked back. Leonardo remained standing there, watching her go.

Then, they ran toward each other and embraced. Leonardo leaned down and whispered in her ear. “It’s okay to run away. I’ll protect you so that you may live freely.”

A life without a name and with the fear of being discovered at any moment was not freedom. Westalia answered as he held her close. “I’m not going to run away. Surely you know that best. So just believe in me, and wait for me. I will do my best to see you again.” Westalia’s words were squeezed out of her as Leonardo held her tight. He stroked her long, silver hair, and the warmth of his hands and the gentleness of his touch made the corners of her eyes prick with tears. It was hard to stay away from him. She wanted him to keep touching her like this.

“I promise. You can do what you need to do. I’ll be waiting for you.”

His words gave her strength and propelled her forward.



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Westalia had to return once more to Lhumzia in preparation for the trial. Since it would be too long for a vacation, she'd decided to quit her part-time job at the apothecary. If she was exonerated in her home country, she would regain her status as a duchess and would no longer need to hold such a job anyway.

"Embroidery again? Are you planning to use it in the selection?" Paige asked.

"I was thinking of giving this to Leo," Westalia replied.

"I see, no wonder it's so elaborate."

Westalia spread out her embroidery tools inside the carriage as it trundled along. She was very excited to give Leonardo a handkerchief, but she wanted him to like it, so she was much more focused on the design than she had been during the second round of the selection.

"Don't make fun of me," Westalia said.

"I'm not making fun of you. It's good to be friends with someone who might be your husband in the future. Even though *I* still don't really like the man," Paige replied.

"'The man'? You do realize he's the crown prince, right?"

"His status is impeccable, but his personality is another matter. I don't like that condescending, pompous attitude," Paige replied. It seemed that Leo hadn't grown on her at all.

He's still a royal, no matter how pompous he may be, Westalia thought. "Why don't you like him?" she asked without thinking her question through.

"I've always hated good-looking men. My master before... He was a bastard whose only redeeming quality was a pretty face. It's basically a given that a man with good looks is a scumbag. So when I see the crown prince, I get so disgusted it's a wonder I don't kick the feet out from under him or accidentally let my hand slip and cut him in two with my sword," Paige replied.

"It doesn't sound like there's anything 'accidental' about any of that. Please keep that part to yourself," Westalia said.

"So it's okay if it's imaginary?"

Westalia was just poking fun at her friend, but there were times when Paige herself could be seen as a "good-looking man." But

Westalia refrained from mentioning anything about that, as she didn't want to offend her.

"I know I'm biased but...well, I know how you feel," Westalia said. When she'd first met Elizabeth, she'd been somewhat disgusted by her seemingly amiable and good-natured manner, which reminded her of Lily. Westalia figured that her dislike for the woman was probably due to the trauma of her past. Everyone had things they had difficulties in dealing with; you just had to come to terms with them.

"By the way," Westalia continued. "I also have a handkerchief for you, Paige." Westalia took out a handkerchief that she had finished embroidering already from her sewing box. She'd made it as a thank-you gift for Paige for all of the help the woman had provided. It depicted a sword and a wisteria flower.

"You made this for me? Are you sure?" Paige asked.

"Yes. Thank you for everything. It's really just a small token of my appreciation."

"I will take good care of it," Paige said, taking the handkerchief, her face breaking into a smile.

Westalia almost told Paige it was designed to match Leo's, but that would probably sour the woman's mood, so she kept that bit to herself.

"When we return to my home country, you will be Westalia Lejainne's knight. People might speak poorly of you. I'm sorry..." Westalia said.

"I'm prepared for all of that. I will protect Lady Westalia, my one and only mistress," Paige replied. She *was*, after all, Westalia's sole, trustworthy knight.

Westalia returned to Lhumzia and stayed in a mansion that Felix had prepared for her. Felix had sued Delphine and Lily, and the world was in an uproar.

Westalia was positioned on a large sofa in the living room, reading a newspaper article about the trial, as Paige made a pot of tea.

"The former queen is a tricky opponent because she is cunning and powerful. Couldn't she easily overturn a ruling?" Paige asked. The former queen could bribe or intimidate the judge, prepare false witnesses, or fabricate and falsify evidence. Even though

Felix was in possession of the evidence, it wasn't going to be an easy win.

"That's why it's important for me to stand up and appeal my innocence to the audience," Westalia replied. This was the only way for her to live with dignity. If the former queen and princess were acquitted at trial, Westalia would no longer have a chance to prove her innocence. She had to be cleared of the false accusations and gain power over Lily. There was no choice but to go to trial for the revenge she'd decided to take from the start.

"So you've returned to your home country but not to your parents' house?" Paige asked.

Westalia's hand stopped as it reached for her teacup. "I've already cut them off. I don't want them to know I'm alive." Westalia's parents had a lust for power but showed no interest in their daughter. If they'd had any love at all for her, they would have tried to get her out of the palace when she was confined there as a candidate for queen. But they hadn't. Westalia's parents loved the honor of having their daughter engaged to the crown prince, and they didn't sympathize one bit with her situation. When Westalia was executed, they hadn't stood up for her against the false allegations, nor had they even visited the execution site. They were such superficial people.

"I'm sorry I made you talk about it," Paige said apologetically.

"Don't worry about it. After all, we're basically family now, right?" Westalia replied. Paige's brows knit together in admiration.

Felix's messenger had arrived at the house at the same time Westalia had, delivering the materials that would be used during the trial. Now, Westalia picked a pen and a piece of paper out of a drawer and began to make plans for what would happen next.

"What's that list?" Paige asked.

"People I have to meet before the trial. I must be very discerning, as they may already be on the former queen's side," Westalia replied. What she needed to gather were witnesses who would accuse the former queen of wrongdoing. Anything would be fine. The more the former queen's wickedness stood out, the more convincing it would be that she had wronged Westalia. Many would be present at the trial and it would be important to win the public's favor. If the supposedly deceased Westalia Lejainne were to suddenly take the stand, it would create quite an uproar.

Westalia had already asked Felix to help gather the witnesses, and together they would scrutinize the list and determine who would be of use to their side.

"You really are a woman of action, huh?" Paige said.

"I feel like I'm already living on tenacity alone. I want to prove it. I want to prove that everyone has the strength to overcome political influence, even when it threatens to crush them. And I hope it will lead to a bit of small courage in someone. Like 'I can do it, even though I was stuck in the royal villa, so I know you can too' sort of idea," Westalia replied. At the very least, she wanted to stop lamenting over the ridiculousness of the whole situation.

Westalia worked silently for a little bit and then spoke up again. "We're going to the palace tomorrow, so go to bed early."

"I'll follow your lead, but please don't overdo it."

"I won't. Oh, by the way," Westalia called out again as Paige was leaving the living room. She was staying in one of the guest rooms.

"Paige, are you good with a bow and arrow?"

"About average. Why do you ask?"

"This house has an archery range, so if we have time, could you please teach me? I'll be going to the hunting festival soon, and I want to surprise Leo."

"So that's what it's about. Well, all right. Good night."

"'Night."

Alone in the room after Paige left, Westalia opened a book from the evidence pile.

This is... It was Lily's diary, which Felix had seized. He'd convinced one of Lily's ladies' maids to steal it for him. The familiar, girly handwriting unfurled before Westalia's eyes.

"So these are your true feelings, Lily..." Westalia whispered.

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The next day, Westalia and Paige visited the royal palace. Westalia wore thick makeup, freckles, a wig, and a cloak with a hood to hide her figure as much as possible. Few people would recognize her as the executed villainess.

"Is there really a witness here we can use?" Paige asked. The pair were visiting the punishment chamber of the royal palace.

The person Westalia was looking for worked here as a cleaner. She found a man sweeping in front of the prison cells and called out to him.

“Hello! Are you Tonio Hugo, the husband of the late Carolina?”

“Y-Yes, that’s right…”

“I would like to hear more about how your wife was poisoned by the former queen,” Westalia said.

“You wh-wha…” Tonio dropped the broom he was holding in shock. He was pale as he approached the two women. “Someone may be able to hear us here. Let’s head into the back.”

They moved into the management office. The room was empty and smelled of old wood and dust. Tonio prepared some tea and asked who the pair of them were.

“I am the attorney for the victim in the trial against the former queen and princess,” Westalia said.

“Princess Westalia’s attorney?”

“That’s right. We are gathering testimonies related to the former queen and we need your help. The chance to fight for your wife isn’t something that comes along very often.”

Tonio grasped his teacup tightly and began to speak of his late wife. Carolina had been a servant in the royal court. But one day, while cleaning the royal palace, she’d seen Delphine talking with a foreigner and, guessing that she had seen something she shouldn’t have, Carolina had fled the scene. However, she had dropped her scarf, and the former queen had soon tracked down its owner. It had been raining that day, and Tonio, who had happened to be working near the royal palace, had delivered an umbrella to Carolina and asked her what had happened. Tonio had then had to return to work, but he had told his dismayed wife that they would talk about it later, when he got home from work. That evening, Carolina had been summoned to a tea party and interrogated. She had sworn an oath to keep quiet about what she had seen and heard, but the paranoid Delphine had not believed her.

“When I next saw her, she was…cold,” Tonio continued. “According to those who were present, the moment she drank what was served to her by the former queen, she fell ill, foaming at the mouth…”

“But the death certificate was doctored to say she died from

illness, when it was, in fact, death by poisoning," Westalia said.

"Yes, you're correct."

"Did you see your wife's body in person?"

"Y-Yes. Her lips, palms, and back were dark."

"So there was postmortem lividity. Anything else?"

"I think she had blisters around her joints."

Westalia took note of all the man was saying. She put her hand on her chin and thought about it. Carolina's postmortem condition brought to mind several poisonous plants. All of them were poisons that were difficult to come by in this country, just like the agisakuragi used in her own execution.

"I'm sure this is a classic case of death by poison, not by illness," Westalia said out loud. Carolina had been killed to keep her mouth shut. And her husband, Tonio, had been laboring in secret in the royal palace, hoping to get a chance to reveal his wife's death and retaliate against Delphine.

"So, what exactly did your wife see and hear?" Westalia asked.

"She saw Delphine negotiating with foreigners and heard the word 'Devorah.' I have no idea what that is..."

Interesting. Westalia wondered if this was where all the dots connected. "Devorah is the name of a trading company in the Archaites Empire. They're a business that will sell you anything illegal if you pay them enough money. The former queen was a client of Devorah, and she obtained weapons and poisons from them without the royal court knowing about it."

"*That's* what my wife was killed for? For...such a filthy secret?" Tonio's voice shook and tears began to spill from his eyes.

Westalia asked the man to take the stand in the trial. She prefaced her request by saying that if they lost the trial, he might face retaliation.

"By all means, let me help you. I have nothing to lose anyway. Let this be my last act of mourning for my wife," Tonio replied.

"I admire your determination," Westalia said. She'd gained her first witness.

"Paige, go see the doctor who issued the postmortem certificate for Carolina as soon as possible. Do not come back until they admit that the death certificate was wrong."

"What?!" Paige was stunned by Westalia's reckless request.

After parting with Tonio, Westalia went around negotiating with the maidservants, servants, and court officials who had histories with Delphine, proceeding cautiously so that the former queen and her supporters wouldn't be aware of her movements. Those who held deep grudges against Delphine were willing to negotiate.

"I'm surprised. You knew so well who had connections to the former queen," Paige said.

"I didn't just live in secret. I listened to the gossip and rumors of the people in the palace and tried to understand what was going on," Westalia replied. Back then, she'd been gathering information when she could because she didn't want to be ignorant of anything. But it wasn't only her own strength that enabled her to gather powerful witnesses.

Thank you, Felix, Westalia thought. She clutched the list that Felix had made. It was thanks to him that she was able to do this.

"However...we haven't heard a single bad thing about the princess," Paige said.

"She conducts herself very well. At least she won't do anything to ruin her reputation until she becomes queen," Westalia replied. Lily was always smiling, amiable, and popular—everyone's beloved princess. She didn't seem like the kind of person who would deceive others. Yet Westalia herself had been deceived by that smile.

Westalia and Paige were inside the grounds of the royal palace. A dainty young woman passed in front of them. Her straight, platinum blonde hair swayed in the breeze, and at the same time, her white hat blew off and flew toward the two women. Westalia picked up the hat that had fallen at her feet and the young woman ran up to her.

"Thank you for picking it up!" Lily took the hat back and smiled like a blooming flower.

It was the first time they had seen each other since the day of the execution. For Westalia, this was a fateful encounter. She had changed her hair color and hidden her face with makeup, but she still tried to avoid eye contact as much as possible.

"Have we met somewhere before?" Lily asked, looking at Westalia.

Westalia feared that Lily might recognize her voice, so she

intentionally made it sound old. “I-I don’t believe so.”

“You have a really low voice, huh?”

“I have a bit of a cold,” Westalia replied, coughing to sell the lie.

“I really feel like you look familiar. Can you pull your hood back a bit?”

Westalia’s heart skipped a beat at the sudden command. No matter how many disguises she wore, if someone were to look at her face close-up, they would know she was Westalia. As she hesitated to remove her hood, Paige stepped in to help.

“I’m sorry, but she can’t do that. She has a dreadful scar on her forehead. Now, we’re in a hurry, so please excuse us,” Paige said.

The lady’s maid following Lily frowned at Paige’s protest. “Hey, you! She’s a princess!” the woman said.

“So?” Paige replied.

“You can’t speak to her that…” The lady’s maid trailed off as she was drawn in by Paige’s handsome features.

“It’s fine, stop. I’m sorry,” Lily said. “That wasn’t very considerate of me. But you do look *really* familiar…” She tilted her head to the side but another lady’s maid called her from farther down the path.

“I’ve got to go. Hope to see you again sometime,” Lily said, waving at Westalia and Paige as she rushed off.

“That was terrifying. Thank you, Paige. That was Princess Lily,” Westalia said.

“Oh, *her*? She seems very relaxed for someone being put on trial,” Paige replied.

“I’m sure the former queen is pulling some strings.” Westalia had known Lily for a very long time, and yet she hadn’t been able to discern the woman’s true feelings about her. A chill ran down Westalia’s spine as she recalled the nasty smile Lily had shown her at the execution.

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Lily was on her way to the former queen’s room in the royal palace. It was one of the most luxurious rooms in the main palace. The door was decorated with exquisitely curved carvings, and a pair of imposing knights were standing by the door.

“Can you let me in?”

The knights conferred with Delphine, and Lily was allowed into the room. Before entering the room, Lily smiled at them. “Thank you for all your hard work. It must be difficult being on your feet all the time.”

“O-Oh, no, we work in shifts!”

“Oh, really? Well, thank you for always protecting the former queen. I appreciate it.”

The knights’ cheeks flushed at Lily’s compliments. The ladies’ maids Lily had with her were also impressed by their lady’s kindness.

They really are very simple people. Will this make me more likeable in the royal court again? Lily wondered.

It wasn’t until the door to Delphine’s room was shut again that Lily lost the graceful and ladylike smile that had been plastered on her face. Delphine was sitting on a large one-seater sofa, enjoying some daytime aperitifs and sweets. Her favorite chocolates were lined up on the table.

“Would you care to join me? These chocolates are the newest items from that famous chocolate shop,” Delphine said.

“No, thank you. I’m more interested in something else,” Lily replied. She strode over to Delphine with a cold look on her face and looked down at the woman. “I’ve come to warn you not to do anything rash.”

“Oh? *You’re* telling *me*?” Delphine’s calm look changed to a testy one. Lily, however, was completely unperturbed. Someone was spreading information to the public that Delphine had been buying up medicines to cure the epidemic from a foreign country and then reselling them at a higher price. This had caused a public outcry that tarnished Delphine’s reputation.

I’m sure Felix is behind this somehow, Lily thought.

“What are you so worried about? There’s no need to be upset. The herb buying was a hoax. The person who wrote the article will be punished. That’s the solution, isn’t it?” Delphine said.

“The problem is that we’re losing our cohesive power. We’re being sued right now!” Lily retorted.

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve created false evidence and prepared witnesses. The judge is under my control. Besides, there is no way they will be able to trace the poison back to us.”

They had been buying from the Archaites Empire’s Devorah

Trading Company, which the Kingdom of Lhumzia was forbidden to trade with. Lily didn't think Felix would turn his investigation there, but something didn't seem right.

"Do you really think it's not a problem?" Lily asked. Certainly it had worked up until now. Delphine had used her power to cover up her crimes time and again. But this time, Lily had a bad feeling. She felt that someone was pulling the rug out from under her without her even noticing.

"Don't you think it's strange? The crown prince, who had been pandering to you until now, suddenly rebels against us? I don't think there is any advantage in doing such a thing just to exonerate a dead person," Lily continued. And it was strange that the body of Westalia Lejainne, having been taken from her grave, hadn't been found anywhere yet.

"You don't think she's alive, do you?" Delphine asked with a laugh. "You saw with your own eyes the moment she died, coughing up blood, didn't you?"

"I... I guess so..." On the day of the execution, Lily had indeed seen Westalia's final moments. However, although she'd heard that the poison was agonizing, Westalia had easily lost consciousness. It was as if she'd just fallen asleep. Lily had expected to see her writhing in agony, but it had been too easy. But there had been nothing suspicious before Westalia was buried. Except for the fact that Felix had filled the coffin with jewelry that was disgustingly extravagant for a criminal. There was one more thing that stuck out to Lily. Westalia had had a look of complacency on her face before she drank the poisoned cup. It wasn't just a look of strength, but her eyes had been filled with a burning, fighting spirit. Westalia had always been a woman without an ego. She was smart and capable, but it was all wasted on her. But what if Lily's betrayal had opened a door for her? She might have survived somewhere and gone into hiding to take revenge on Lily.

I'm overthinking this. That's a crazy idea. Wes isn't the rebellious type. I know her better than anyone, Lily thought. She was probably just tired. She needed to not get such stupid ideas stuck in her head.

"I am just afraid that you and I will be prevented from being happy, mother. I want to live with you in good health and happiness forever," Lily said.

“Oh, Lily, you’re still such a mother’s girl,” Delphine responded.

“Yes! I love you more than anything in the world!” Lily was sure that Delphine would make everything turn out all right. Lily just had to act like this to make her mother like her, just like she’d always been doing. Lily put on a lovely smile and rubbed her face sweetly against Delphine’s shoulder.

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Under orders from Westalia, Paige immediately paid a visit to a rural village far outside of the capital. The sky was perfectly clear, and Paige could hear birds flapping in the nearby trees.

The royal physician lives out here? Paige wondered. She was looking for the doctor who had filled out Carolina’s death certificate, a man named Alzett. There was nothing but undeveloped nature, as far as the eye could see. There were a few pastures and houses here and there, but they were all shabby and showed the poverty of the area. Alzett had quit his job as a court physician several years earlier and returned to his hometown—on paper, that was. His hometown was quite near the royal capital. However, he had actually been hiding out in this remote area, far from the capital. Felix had helped Westalia find him.

I can’t believe my mistress is such a hard-ass. She told me to threaten *the doctor to get him to confess that Carolina died by poison!* Paige shuddered. She imagined living the rest of her days in a rural place like this. *Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, living a carefree life out here…* she thought, but then she shook her head. Westalia was working really hard, so Paige had to do what she could to support the woman.

Paige walked into the village and finally found a resident.

“Excuse me. Do you know a man named Alzett?” she called out to the woman.

“Oh, aren’t you handsome! You mean Mr. Alzett who runs the clinic?” the woman replied.

“Huh?”

“Hey, everyone! A handsome knight is here!” the woman shouted, and other women from the village began flocking to Paige in droves. Paige was puzzled when they asked where she was from and if she was married.

“Well, I appreciate you asking, ladies, but I’m a woman,” Paige said.

“What?!”

After explaining herself and freeing herself from the gaggle of women, Paige finally made it to Alzett’s clinic. Unexpectedly exhausted and battered, she rolled into the small building.

“Hello. How are you today? You look a little pale…” A friendly-looking man in a white coat greeted Paige, as did the two nurses. Paige immediately pulled out her sword and pointed it at the doctor’s neck.

The man flinched.

“Dr. Alzett, yes? I’m here to talk to you about a falsified death certificate that you issued for your wife, Carolina. Tell me the truth,” Paige said.

The doctor’s eyes widened at Paige’s words and he raised his hands over his head in a gesture of surrender. The two nurses, who had been admiring Paige, shrieked.

Alzett spoke after a moment of hesitation. “I was waiting for this day to come… I will tell you everything. I will tell you the crimes I committed on the orders of the former queen.” He went into the back room and brought out a stack of papers. Paige picked up the documents he spread out on the table and found that they were the death certificates for multiple people, including Carolina. Each one had both an authentic and a forged version.

“So it wasn’t just the one death certificate you forged?” Paige asked.

“That’s right. I was forced to forge many death certificates on the former queen’s orders. All the deceased, including Carolina, showed symptoms of poisoning.”

Alzett was aware that all of the people had been poisoned by the former queen, but he’d had no choice but to listen to her because he hadn’t known what would happen if he’d disobeyed. However, whenever Alzett was ordered to forge a death certificate, he would write several copies under the pretext that they would be needed for various formalities. There would be a forged certificate to be submitted to the royal court, and a legitimate death certificate to be burned and disposed of in front of Delphine for staging purposes. He had secretly kept a copy of each of them, pretending that he had written only the number of copies required

for the proceedings. He had then fled to the countryside with the evidence of the death certificate forgery. The reason he had taken such actions, even though his life would be threatened by the former queen if he was discovered, was because he felt remorse for his complicity in the crimes.

"I will give you all of these documents," Dr. Alzett said.

"Are you sure? If this gets out, things might go badly for you," Paige said.

"I'm sure. I brought up the evidence with that intention. The former queen was looking for me when I suddenly disappeared from the court. The only difference is what will happen first: her getting rid of me or me disappearing from society," Dr. Alzett replied.

Paige took the documents and thanked Dr. Alzett for his resolution.

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It had been a week since Westalia's return to the Kingdom of Lhumzia. The former queen's reputation had been further damaged, and the trial was coming up the next day. Westalia and Paige had put up notices all over the city about the actions of the former queen, the details of which they had garnered by asking around in the palace. The notices stated that Delphine often terrorized workers in the palace and that she spent the taxpayers' hard-earned money on luxuries for herself, including her favorite foods and chocolates, which regular people would never be able to afford even once in their lives.

The notices were highly inflammatory because Felix had already written an article criticizing Delphine for buying up all of the medicinal herbs that were used to treat the epidemic. Voices calling for the former queen's banishment were coming from all over.

With public opinion swayed this much, everything should be set! Westalia thought. It was thanks in part to Felix's careful research. He had already secured on his side the nobles that had been at odds with the former queen, and several of the judges were concealing them.

I doubt Delphine has ever been cornered like this before. Lily must

be getting anxious too…

Westalia and Paige were on the archery range in the royal palace. Westalia lined her bow up with the target and released her arrow. With a thud, the tip of the arrow hit the target slightly off-center.

“That was close. But still, you’re improving very quickly,” Felix said.

“Not that much,” Westalia replied. For the past week, in addition to preparing for the trial, she’d been studying archery under Paige’s tutelage. Westalia picked it up easily and improved quickly. Today, Felix had come along with her. He shot his arrow so beautifully that Westalia couldn’t help but admire it. It flew straight and hit the center of the target dead-on.

“If the former queen were to disappear from the palace, would the air here be a little cleaner?” Westalia asked.

“Yes, certainly,” Felix replied.

Delphine had used her power to commit all kinds of crimes. Her wickedness would be rewarded with misfortune. That was the providence of the world. Westalia would never forget that, and she used it as a reminder for herself, as well.

“You need to aim a little higher up,” Felix said. He placed his own bow down and went over to correct Westalia’s form. “Yes, like that.” As he supported her arm he whispered in her ear. “Westalia, would you be willing to return to your home country? Would you be willing to become the queen of this country once again? You have that right.”

“How funny. I also have the right to choose,” Westalia replied, cutting him off and shooting her arrow without any hesitation.

Felix was silent.

“I was once cast aside as an evil woman by this place. I was relegated to the fringes of the royal palace, and yet I still worked hard for the country, but the country did not protect me,” Westalia said. The public execution wasn’t the first time she hadn’t been protected. While Westalia had been imprisoned in the royal villa, no one had spoken up to help her. She couldn’t forget that she had been publicly shamed, nor could she forget the faces of the people who had cursed at her on the execution block.

Westalia looked up at Felix as she answered. “I will decide for myself which country I am loyal to. I am grateful to you, of course,

Felix, but I intend to do my best in my new place. Let me assist in removing the festering corruption from the royal palace, and let that be my final service to this country."

"I see. If that is what you want, then I will support you."

"I'm sorry for being selfish."

"I don't think you're being selfish."

Westalia was sick of being subjected to inconvenience and formalities. Felix looked a little disappointed at her firm refusal. Westalia knew he thought highly of her abilities.

"And honestly... I've found someone I like in the Archaites Empire," Westalia said. Felix's arrow missed the mark for the first time that day when she said that. His eyes widened as he looked her way.

"It's the crown prince," Westalia continued.

"Leo? I see. So that's another reason to stay there then."

Felix and Leonardo had studied abroad in the same place, and they remained friends despite being from the royal families of enemy nations.

Westalia nodded, embarrassed.

"Then I will simply pray for your happiness," Felix said, a wistful smile on his face.

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Finally, the day of the trial arrived.

Westalia's hair, which she'd dyed the day before, was now the same red it had been during her life in Lhumzia. She looked identical to the day she'd been executed as a villainess. Paige was shocked by Westalia's change in hair color.

"Silver hair is disliked here because it's seen as a sign of old age," Westalia explained.

"I've never heard of such a thing. And no matter how much you want to hide it, to dye it red seems so..." Paige started before cutting herself off.

"My red hair was a symbol of friendship to me. At least, it used to be," Westalia muttered a little sadly. "But never mind. You look great like that."

Paige was wearing knight's garb. She looked stately, like she belonged to a noble house. Paige placed her hand lightly on her

chest and performed a knight's salute. Her beauty in that outfit was breathtaking, like she'd just stepped out of a painting.

"It is a great honor for me to escort you, Your Highness," Paige said.

"How wonderful!" Westalia said. "If you were a man I'd surely fall for you."

With that, they headed to court.

The king, queen, and crown prince were all present at the trial. There was also a large number of people in the audience. Westalia was sitting on the side of the prosecution, with her hood drawn low over her face.

First, the accused, Delphine and Lily, began their arguments. When the judge read the charges, the two denied them all outright. Each of the two women pleaded their innocence so skillfully that it seemed as if they had been prepared by a novelist. They even had fake evidence and witnesses.

But then the tide began to turn. The first allegation was that Delphine was the one who had obtained the poison that Westalia had supposedly dosed Lily with. The prosecution presented documents showing Delphine's dealings with the trading company from the Archaites Empire and the transaction with the poison. Delphine's face, which up until then had been relaxed, grew pale.

"Th-That's a lie! It's some kind of conspiracy! There is no way I would let my precious daughter, Lily, drink even a trace amount of poison! And that company selling poisons in Archaites…Devorah? I've never heard of them before," Delphine said.

Next, there was the allegation that Lily's poisoning was an act of her own making in order to frame Westalia and take her out of the running for queen. The moment Lily stood up to present her case, she burst into tears.

"Th-There's no way I would've done that to myself! Wes and I were best friends! I was the only one who kept encouraging her through all her years of isolation and education. I still can't believe this happened," Lily cried, taking out a handkerchief and wiping away her tears. Even the audience, moved by her performance, expressed sympathy. Only Westalia remained unmoved as she listened to Lily's defense. The witnesses Lily had prepared, the ladies' maids and daughters of other upstanding families, were

also desperately defending her. They seemed to have no doubt that Lily was innocent, and all of their words seemed to come from their hearts. However, among Lily's witnesses were a number of fakes as well. These ladies' maids testified that they had served Westalia, but she had been cold and heartless toward her servants, and that she had been jealous of Princess Lily and spoken ill of her. Westalia had never met any of these women before.

They can say whatever they want because the dead can't stand up for themselves, Westalia thought.

"I have never wanted to be queen. I had no motive to bring Wes down. She is still my best friend!" Lily said finally, appealing to the judge and the audience. She had sworn an oath not to lie when she took the stand, but that was all her words were.

But even as Lily won over the audience, Westalia laughed out loud.

"You really are something!" Westalia managed to get out between fits of laughter. It was the ultimate comedy. Both Lily's crying face and her sullen demeanor were ridiculous to Westalia. People around her were bewildered by the sudden burst of laughter. Westalia quickly stood up from the prosecution's side and took off her hood. Everyone could see her deep crimson hair, which looked as if it had been soaked in bright red blood. Lily's gaze, when it met hers, was shocked.

"How are you…?" Lily stammered.

"I've come back from the depths of hell…or something. It's been a long time. I'm impressed with your acting skills, as always. Why don't you take to the stage?" Westalia asked, applauding Lily. Lily raised her eyebrows in displeasure. Westalia stepped closer to the other woman.

What's the matter, Lily? You've grown pale and you're starting to shake. You've been reunited with your dearest friend. You should be crying with happiness, Westalia thought.

Lily backed up one step, two steps and then spoke, as if she couldn't believe what she was seeing. "You…survived, Wes?"

Felix was the one who answered her. "I was the one who helped her survive. She's an important witness for this trial. Presiding judge, on my word as the crown prince, I would like everyone to hear the victim Westalia Lejainne's statement."

“Wait!” Delphine shouted, pounding on the witness box with her fist, her brow furrowed. “I won’t allow that! To ignore the sentence issued by law and let the guilty live… That’s treason! Somebody get those two out of here!”

The guards started to move to obey Delphine’s order, but Felix held up his hand to stop them. “If Westalia is found guilty again, I will take the blame for disobeying the law and can be put to death by poisoning,” he said. The audience was stunned by his proclamation, and an immediate buzz broke out. Felix glared at Delphine as he continued speaking. “But if she were to be declared innocent, are you prepared to pay that same price?”

Delphine clenched her fists. Blood dripped onto the floor as her fingernails dug into her skin.

“Of course,” she said. “At that time I will drink whatever it is, be it poison or needles. Let’s hear what she has to say in her statement. But you know what happens if you aren’t innocent, right, Westalia Lejainne?!” Delphine’s angry shout echoed around the room, and the chattering crowd silenced. Even the judges cowered, overwhelmed by Delphine’s intimidating aura.

The corners of Westalia’s mouth turned upward in a pleasant smile. “You can do whatever you like with me. Presiding judge, the former queen has had her moment to speak. Will you allow me to present my arguments?”

“I-I’ll allow it.” The presiding judge was under Delphine’s thumb, but thanks to Felix’s help, Delphine had been provoked, as Westalia had hoped, and she was given the right to speak. The stage was set. All that remained was to convince the king, the queen, and the large audience of her innocence.

The trial is now in full swing. Are you ready, Lily? Westalia took the witness stand under the rapt eyes of the entire audience.

The first to come after Westalia was Delphine. The woman seemed to think Westalia had been dead and was quite surprised at her reappearance. Westalia could sense that Delphine was both surprised and terrified at the same time.

“N-Now is the time to turn back. You should think carefully about who it is you’re dealing with. You hid yourself in the royal villa for so long that your argument won’t amount to much,” Delphine spat at her.

“Is that a threat? And I didn’t hide there, I was imprisoned,”

Westalia replied. She didn't feel as threatened by the former queen's power anymore. Her influence had been weakened by the herb hoarding scandal and the numerous gossip articles that were circulating in the royal court. Westalia brushed aside Delphine's last attempts at intimidation and held up her hand to signal for the first witness to enter the room. It was Tonio, the janitor for the castle's prison.

"Wh-Who is that…?" Delphine trembled as she spoke.

"This is my first witness, Tonio Hugo. Surely you remember him, Your Majesty?" Westalia spoke matter-of-factly.

"I-I don't know any dirty men like that," Delphine replied.

"My, I don't know how you could say something like that after murdering his wife," Westalia replied.

The audience became noisy again at the revelation of Delphine's cruel deed.

"In her defense earlier, the former queen said that she had never heard of the Devorah Trading Company from Archaites. But five years ago, Tonio's wife witnessed a transaction between the former queen and a representative of the company, and because she heard Delphine mutter the word 'Devorah,' she was killed to keep her mouth shut. Is that correct?" Westalia asked Tonio.

"Y-Yes, th-that's right," Tonio replied. He spoke passionately about what had occurred, as he had with Westalia previously. His wife, Carolina, had been poisoned to keep her quiet because she had merely overheard the word "Devorah."

"Is there anything else you wanted to say, Tonio?" Westalia asked.

"I-I hate you! G-Give me back my wife!" Tonio finally began to cry. Westalia could feel the bitterness and regret he had been keeping inside for years.

"That's a lie! That maidservant had a chronic disease and died of a stroke. I had nothing to do with it!" Delphine cried.

"No! Carolina was in perfect health; she never even got colds!" Tonio shouted back.

"Silence, silence, silence!" Delphine said.

"I think it is *you* who should be silent," Westalia said, looking at Delphine. "Can you look at this and still call it a lie?" Westalia then presented two death certificates. One was the forgery that had been created on the orders of the former queen that said the

cause of death was illness. The other was the official death certificate, which stated the real cause of death—poisoning.

The royal palace was overseen entirely by Delphine, so whenever there was a death in the royal court, she always looked over the death certificate and put her seal on it. In this case too, the death certificates had been signed by Alzett, the court physician, and stamped by Delphine. The fact that she had stamped both the forgery and the real certificate proved that she was complicit in the falsification.

“Here are five more death certificates falsified by the former queen. Five other people appear to have suffered the same fate as Tonio’s wife,” Westalia said.

Delphine remained silent.

“I don’t understand,” Westalia said, “how you can look at Tonio, who is clearly grieving, and think nothing of it. Do you not have a human heart?”

“You are trying to pin the crime of buying poison from the Devorah Trading Company on me, but it would’ve been impossible for me to do so. As you said at the beginning, I was isolated in the royal villa and under your watchful gaze the whole time,” Westalia continued.

Next to appear as witnesses were several men who had once served as Westalia’s guard. They testified that they constantly monitored her activities and reported back to Delphine at every turn. They had readily agreed to take the stand for Westalia when offered a large reward.

“Your Majesty, can you still say that you are innocent?” Westalia asked.

“Yes! I’m innocent! I’m… I’m…” Delphine was furious, but in her shock she fainted on the spot. The attendants dragged her out of the room.

Westalia stepped back and turned to Lily. The woman’s slender shoulders shook as Westalia’s look told her that she was about to be next.

“I didn’t want to confront you like this, Lily,” Westalia said.

“Hey, Wes… Let’s take a moment to calm down, okay? There’s something scary about you today. I know! There must be some misunderstanding. We’ll talk and work it all out! Because we’re best friends!” Lily said.

“Best friends, hmm? Wasn’t I the only one who thought that?” Westalia asked.

“What?!”

Westalia let out a small breath and informed the judges that she would begin questioning the defendant. She narrowed her eyes at Lily.

“From the very beginning, you never thought of me as your friend.”

“That’s not true!” Lily cried.

Westalia motioned to Paige, who stood just behind her, to get a bucket of water ready and then to dump it over her head.

The water rushed over Westalia’s body, cleansing the red dye from her hair and returning it to its natural silver color.

“You told me, when we first started getting to know each other, that silver hair was a symbol of old age in this country. And you recommended bright red dye to me because it would look good on me,” Westalia said.

Lily remained silent.

The truth was, however, that silver hair wasn’t a despised symbol of old age. No matter how isolated and naive she was, Westalia knew that. On the other hand, red hair was the object of scorn. It was considered to be reminiscent of blood and was sometimes called “the devil’s color.”

“I dyed my hair red because Lily recommended it to me because it looked good on me. It was the first time someone had done something for me, and it made me happy,” Westalia explained. She had thought that Lily had recommended red hair to her out of pure goodwill, not knowing what red hair meant. But she had probably been doing it out of meanness, to humiliate Westalia. Now, Westalia knew better.

Her eyes met Paige’s as the woman offered her a towel. Paige had wondered why Westalia had dyed her hair red again, and she had an indescribable expression on her face when she learned the truth.

“I kept my red hair, a token of our friendship, until you betrayed me and sent me to my death. What more proof do you need that I believed in you?” Westalia asked as she dried her hair with the towel. “But you don’t usually push red hair on someone you consider your best friend, knowing that they’ll be discriminated

against. Now I realize I was the only one who got carried away with our friendship."

Lily clamped her mouth shut and clenched her fists.

"And Lily, you just said that you never wanted to be queen, but you lied about that too," Westalia continued.

"I didn't lie! That at least was true! Trust me, Wes!"

By adding "at least" to that sentence, Lily was admitting that she had deliberately recommended the red hair to Westalia.

Westalia produced a book as the next piece of evidence. It was a thick book that was clearly showing its age. When Lily saw it, she somehow became even paler.

"Th-That's..."

"This is the diary Lily kept. It contains her desire to become queen and her deepest hatred of me. Shall I read some of it aloud to you here?" Westalia asked.

"I don't know anything about that. You have no proof that it is my diary, do you?"

"I do."

Westalia gave another order to Paige, who produced two pieces of paper and held them up for all to see. The first was a letter, written on paper stamped with the royal coat of arms, to the people at the Founding Day Festival. The other was a handwriting analysis of the letter and the diary.

"This is the letter Lily wrote to the people at a previous Founding Day Festival. It was posted in town, so some of you here may have seen it. When we submitted it to a handwriting analysis, the results showed that Lily's handwriting in this letter and the handwriting in the diary match with almost one hundred percent certainty," Westalia explained.

"This is a mistake! Everyone cover your ears! Don't listen!" Lily said, a sad expression on her face as she tried to appeal to the audience. Westalia could tell that her heart was actually in it that time and that it wasn't an act.

"It says here 'I must get rid of that woman as soon as possible, because I am the one who deserves to be queen.'"

"No, no, no, no, no! I didn't write that!"

"'Wes is so stupid! I tricked her into thinking I was her best friend. I hate you. Oh my God, I hope you die soon,'" Westalia continued reading from the diary.

“No, stop! That’s not me! It’s not me!!!”

“‘Everyone loves me, but that’s just too bad for them. I don’t think of them as anything other than stepping stones. They’re all incompetent.’”

“I said that’s not mine!” Lily screeched. She grabbed the handwriting analysis from Paige and tore it to shreds before throwing the pieces on the ground and stomping on them. “That’s all untrue!”

The king and queen, who had adored Lily, were shocked and appalled. The audience was also taken aback by the naked truth of the princess, whose image of purity was betrayed by the words in the diary.

Westalia approached Lily and looked down at her face, whispering to her in words that practically slithered across the ground—just like Lily had on the day of Westalia’s execution.

“You’re not a good person, Lily. React like that, and everyone will *know* that you’re the owner of the diary. You need to work on your acting after all.”

Lily was silent.

A long time ago, when the pair were still good friends, Lily had told Westalia she kept a diary, which was why Westalia had asked Felix to secretly confiscate it. However, Westalia hadn’t expected just how many of Lily’s secret thoughts would be scribbled across the pages.

“You’ve been playing the perfect princess your whole life, so this diary was the only place you could tell me the truth, wasn’t it?” Westalia asked.

Lily remained silent. She glared at Westalia and clenched her fists. “Yeah, so?!” she burst out. “I had to lie! Otherwise no one would like me! I was desperate too. You don’t know that’s like, Wes! You didn’t know that I was about to be married off to the barren land of Rezal!”

“Rezal? When did that happen?” Westalia asked. Covered in snow for most of the year, the Kingdom of Rezal hadn’t much in the way of crops and its people had been broken down by the ravages of war. The king of Rezal was said to be a fat, lustful man.

Lily explained that according to the king of Lhumzia’s plan, she was to be married off to Rezal for the sake of developing friendly relations with the country. In order to prevent that from

happening, she had devised her scheme to become queen of Lhumzia. She had wanted to become a well-mannered princess, loved by all, so that she could be naturally installed as queen after Westalia was eliminated.

“I always hated you, Wes. I would have loved to have been able to live in the quiet royal villa and not have to worry about what everyone around me thought of me. I would have given it all up if I could have, and just lived a carefree, easygoing life!” Lily cried.

It was Westalia’s turn to remain silent.



“I didn’t *just* want to be pampered. I didn’t *just* want status. I had my own cause, and I have no regrets,” Lily said.

Westalia had had no idea that Lily was suffering so deeply. They had known each other for a significant amount of time, and yet Lily had never told her. Maybe that was part of her strategy.

“It would have been nice if you’d talked to me about it…” Westalia said.

“Sure…”

“Why didn’t you tell me about it earlier? I would’ve tried to help you…” It was too late to say anything now, really. After all, Lily had chosen to kill Westalia out of self-preservation. And she didn’t seem to feel the slightest bit guilty about it.

“I guess I was the only one who really believed that we were friends. That’s really too bad,” Westalia said sadly. With that, she ended her arguments on the stand.

Chapter 5: The Evil Woman Seizes the Throne

After the trial, Westalia hurried back to the Archaites Empire as Westalia Lejainne. It had taken a lot of time and effort, but she had finally regained her true name.

Delphine was sentenced to death by poison for her many crimes. Lily, on the other hand, was only expelled from high society after petitions from her admirers came in from all over the place.

For Lily, it might be hell just to live with the loss of her credibility, Westalia thought. Lily had a strong desire for the approval of others above all else and needed to be liked and recognized. The loss of the position she had built up over the years must have been quite hard on her. She would probably be scorned, ridiculed, and criticized instead of adored by people, and she would have to suffer for the first time in her life.

Westalia returned to the Archaites Empire and first and foremost submitted a new personal statement. She stated that the name she had submitted her candidacy under, Cordata, was a fake name and that her real name was Westalia Lejainne. She was prepared to be punished in some way, but she wasn't, either because of the circumstances that had led up to this point or because of Leonardo's help.

"How would you like to accessorize today?"

"What kind of hair style and ornamentation would you like?"

"Would you like to wear perfume?"

The house was suddenly bustling with activity, as Westalia had hired several new ladies' maids, cooks, and servants. She missed the days when she and Paige lived alone together in the sprawling mansion.

"I'm going to the hunting festival today, so I'll leave it up to you all to decide what I should wear," Westalia said as she sat in front of her mirror.

"Very well," her ladies' maids answered in unison. They chose a

shirt and a pair of slacks for ease of movement and did her hair up in a simple bun.

She would finally be seeing Leonardo again after a long time apart. She'd been counting down the days. Needless to say, she was very excited, and she had been practicing her bow in order to surprise him. And today she was finally going to tell him that she was Westalia, whom he'd met so long ago when she'd been hidden away. Although, she got the sense that maybe he already knew that.

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The hunting pavilion where the annual hunting festival was held was located far from the imperial capital. For Leonardo, attending the festival was one of his annual pleasures. Rather than the hunting of animals, he found it more meaningful to spend time relaxing in the rich natural surroundings outside of the city. The air was clean and refreshing, and it was soothing just to walk around and look at the different kinds of trees. And this year, she would be joining him.

"'How nice to meet you. I am your goddess,' sheesh," Leonardo muttered. "She" was Westalia Lejainne, the once would-be queen of Lhumzia, and someone who was currently causing quite the stir. She was a cheerful woman, who'd joked the night they'd met, but just a few days ago, she'd submitted a corrected personal statement to the palace, which had caused a bit of a controversy.

Some people held the opinion that she should be disqualified for misrepresenting her background, but the emperor had the final say and he had allowed her to continue participating. As for the opinion that she might have entered the country illegally, Leonardo took personal responsibility, stating that he had allowed her to enter the country. He'd even said he was the one who'd allowed her to slip through the night they'd met. It wasn't a complete lie. When he'd met her, he'd intended to punish her, but he'd never thought he'd end up protecting her.

"What should I call you today?" Leonardo asked.

"Whatever you like."

"Very well then, Westalia," Leonardo said. She looked a little embarrassed to be called by her real name, and she pushed a lock

of her long, silver hair behind her ear as she looked down.

"It feels kind of weird for you to call me that," she said.

"I think it suits you," Leonardo replied. Westalia had once been disgraced and supposedly executed for attempting to assassinate the princess, but she had, in fact, survived and had finally proven her innocence thanks to her strong will. People were excited by the reversal of fortune from adversity. In particular, the people of the Kingdom of Lhumzia, who had been exhausted by an epidemic, were especially thrilled by the fact that the former queen, whom they'd resented for the herb-hoarding incident, had been defeated, and they were loudly calling for Westalia to be regarded as a hero.

Westalia had no intention of returning to her position as the fiancée of Lhumzia's crown prince and had crossed over to the enemy nation of Archaites. Even this was speculated to be in order to build a bridge for peace negotiations, which had been broken down for a long time. One of the reasons for the breakdown was that Delphine and her family, the Wynds, who had made a large profit from importing medicinal herbs from foreign countries, had interfered in diplomatic policy and prevented peace talks from taking place. However, there were also forces within the Archaites Empire that did not want peace because of their own interests.

If Westalia, who had defeated the former queen of Lhumzia, became empress of Archaites, the unsettled spat between these nations might finally turn the corner. People were hoping that Lhumzia might even be able to obtain the medicinal herbs necessary to heal the sick, which were native to Archaites.

"You really don't want to go back to your home country? You've been cleared of the false accusations. You could certainly become queen without coming all the way here," Leonardo said. Besides, Felix was in Lhumzia. He'd worked hard on Westalia's case because he cared for her, and he clearly needed her.

"I'm not going back to my home country. I don't have good memories there and I want to make a fresh start in a new place. I've only been here a short time, but I like this country and the people here," Westalia replied. She explained to him that the image of the people of Lhumzia as they sent her to the executioner's block was burned into her mind. She looked up at Leonardo and laughed. "Besides, I think it would be fun to be your

empress. So you should let me do that."

"What's with that attitude?" were the words that came out of Leonardo's mouth, but he really didn't mind the idea.

Westalia herself might have held the lofty goal of making peace in some corner of her mind, but she had just given Leonardo her answer, and, after all, her motive in the first selection questionnaire was "I wish to have all the power, honor, and wealth and to reign at the top of the empire." In summary, Westalia's participation in the empress selection process, regardless of her own intentions, had shocked both countries, and everyone was excited by the possibility of improving diplomatic relations.

"In any case, I'm glad you were able to reclaim your real name," Leonardo said.

"It was all thanks to you, wasn't it, Leo? Felix told me that you had a hand in seizing the Devorah Trading Company's transaction history," Westalia replied.

"My help was trivial. You did all the hard work."

"I looked into it, you know, and Devorah's no ordinary organization. I can't believe you got a history of its business dealings… Are you working on something in the criminal underworld?"

"A little." Leonardo frequently went into the city undercover to maintain security in the imperial capital and was working in secret to bring wrongdoers to justice. That was also the reason he often ran into Westalia in the city. This time though, he'd helped out because his friend Felix had asked him to.

In this instance, the Devorah Trading Company, which had been exposed for selling poisons and weapons, had gone out of business, and the person who had been running the trading company had been caught. Leonardo had known that he'd have to bring it down at some point, so the timing of Westalia's case was perfect. The Reyn family had also been involved in the management of the Devorah Trading Company, but the evidence of that had been destroyed by the time Leonardo started his investigations.

"I don't want you to get involved in anything too risky," Westalia said. "I worry about you…"

"Yes, I know."

"Do you really? Oh, that's right!" Westalia took a handkerchief

from her pocket and handed it to Leonardo. It was a white handkerchief embroidered with wisteria flowers. “Here, it’s the handkerchief I promised you. Take it.”

“Thank you. I will take good care of it,” Leonardo said.

“Please, *please* don’t get hurt,” Westalia said. She folded the handkerchief and put it in Leonardo’s breast pocket.

The hunting festival began and everyone went out to hunt. Most of the people who liked to hunt were men, but there were also some women hunting with bows and falcons. Westalia had said she’d never hunted before, but she was enthusiastic nonetheless.

Westalia and Leonardo rode horses deep into the forest.

“The wind feels great,” Westalia said. Feeling relaxed, she closed her eyes as she rode. As Leonardo gazed at her intelligent face in profile, Westalia turned to him, tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and said, “You’re staring. Is there something on my face?”

“No…I just think you’re beautiful.”

“Cheap flattery gets you nowhere!” Westalia said, her cheeks flushing.

Leonardo wanted to be the only one who knew the girlish side of her that she had suddenly revealed to him. He didn’t want any other man to see it. He was perplexed by the feelings he’d never had before that the thought provoked in him.

Am I feeling…possessive? he thought.

Westalia suddenly took five poison needles out of her breast pocket. She held them out to Leonardo, looking embarrassed, as if asking him to take them, but he didn’t really want to. She seemed to offer poison needles in response to flattery. She was certainly unique.

Westalia spotted a rabbit behind some bushes along their route and dismounted her horse. As she dismounted, her foot caught in the stirrups and she stumbled. Leonardo caught her quickly, and they both went tumbling to the ground.

Leonardo fell on his back and Westalia landed on top of him. His face was just a few inches away from hers, and he reached out to touch her soft skin. Just before he touched her face, he came to his senses and pulled his hand back.

“Are you hurt?” Leonardo asked.

“N-No, I’m okay. What about you?”

“I’m fine.”

The two awkwardly looked away from each other quickly and stood up.

Westalia stated she was going to finish off the rabbit she had found and she readied her bow, but just before she released her arrow, she shifted her target and deliberately missed. The arrow tip grazed the rabbit’s ear and pierced a tree trunk. Startled, the rabbit ran off.

“I can’t do it. I just feel too bad for the poor little thing,” Westalia said. She kept missing her targets on purpose each time she found her prey. Leonardo thought it was kind of cute how she kept sulking about it, saying she had no guts.

When Westalia confided in Leonardo that she had been practicing in order to show him how good she was, he was moved by her previous high spirits and, at the same time, charmed by her.

Westalia aimed her bow toward a flying hawk, but she still couldn’t release it and lowered her arm.

“Don’t be so down. You don’t have to try to show off for me. I like…”

“You like…?” Westalia asked.

“Nothing.” Leonardo had almost confessed that he liked her. It would have been fine if he’d said it, but he was embarrassed when it came time to express his feelings. Westalia raised an eyebrow as if she had seen right through Leonardo and laughed teasingly.

At that moment, they heard a shout from behind the bushes. Westalia was about to run through the bushes when Leonardo stopped her and told her to stay where she was. It could be dangerous, he said, so he was going to check it out first.

Behind the bushes was a man who’d come face-to-face with a large boar. He was cowering in fear. Leonardo swiftly unsheathed and raised his sword. He stabbed the boar in a vital spot and killed it, but then another boar appeared.

Another?!

The boar rushed toward him, its fur bristling. Boars were docile unless provoked, but these seemed to have been worked up by the sudden encounter with humans. Leonardo knew it would be extremely bad to be wounded by its tusks.

Before Leonardo’s sword could reach it, the boar fell to the ground in pain, then fell into a stupor. Its pain looked different

from animals that were wounded by ordinary arrows.

Leonardo looked to the side and saw Westalia, bow in hand, observing the boar from a steady archer's stance. She lowered her bow and walked over.

"A poisoned arrow, huh? Is it dead?" Leonardo asked.

"It will be soon," Westalia replied. The poison she'd applied to her arrows was said to have been used as arrow poison by people in colder regions when hunting. Westalia, who'd hesitated to kill earlier, had no hesitation when it came to helping others.

She took one sad glance at the boar and extended her hand to the hunched man. "Are you hurt?"

"N-No, I'm fine," the man said.

"That's good," Westalia replied.

When the man saw Westalia's courage, his cheeks flushed and he tried to grab her hand. Leonardo pulled her back by the waist to prevent his reach. The man glared in frustration.

"I'll help you up," Leonardo said, holding out his own hand with an intimidating glare.

The man refused and stood up on his own.

"You take care of the boars. Let's go, Westalia."

"Don't pull so hard, Leo!"

Leonardo walked through the forest, pulling Westalia by the hand. He didn't like the idea of her being touched by another man.

Sheesh. What a troublesome emotion, Leonardo thought. He'd always thought of himself as having few emotional ups and downs, but ever since he'd met Westalia, he'd been going off the rails.

Westalia, oblivious to his feelings of possessiveness, suddenly spoke up. "That day you wandered into the royal villa... Why did you say you were going to get me out? You're the crown prince of an enemy country."

"I genuinely wanted to help you. I wanted to help you so much that even my own position disappeared from my mind. Looking back, I was just a child. But I meant it," Leonardo replied.

"It was a very emotional statement, which is hard to imagine from the calm and collected man you are now," Westalia said.

"Aren't you the one who's changed more? You used to be more ladylike and serious," Leonardo shot back.

"Oh, no, this is the real me. I've just stopped hiding it. Did you

like me better before?”

Leonardo shook his head. “It’s best when you can be yourself.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you tried to reach out to me then. And thank you for helping me the night I entered the country illegally. If you hadn’t caught me back then, I might not be here now. You’ve been encouraging me ever since too. Thank you so much. I’m glad I came to the Archaites Empire and met you,” Westalia said, standing in front of Leonardo and looking up into his eyes. “I love you, Leo.” Her eyes were as serious as they’d been the night she’d told him she was going to become empress.

Her brilliant smile made his heart skip a beat. She was hesitant to shoot an animal, but she seemed to be very skilled at shooting the heart of the crown prince.

“I…didn’t want to be born to be emperor. It’s a life without freedom, always bound to the country. But now I think it might not be so bad. Because of you,” Leonardo said. Looking up at the sky, he saw small birds flying between the dense foliage. He had wished many times that he could fly freely like that, but now he wished he could stay here on the ground.

Westalia was Leonardo’s complete opposite. She wanted to jump into that inconvenient world willingly. She desired power, status, and honor, all of which Leonardo considered unnecessary. Although they were polar opposites, Westalia always dazzled him with her earnest pursuit of her dreams.

It had been the same when they’d met the first time, back in the royal villa in Lhumzia. Westalia had dreamed of being queen with a sparkle in her eye. Since then, every time he’d looked at her, she’d shown him a new expression and taught him a new emotion.

“You were the one encouraging me,” Leonardo whispered. Westalia was like a ray of light that had burst through his dark world.

I guess it really was *a goddess that fell from the sky that night*, Leonardo thought. He must’ve become addicted to Westalia’s sweet poison the night she landed in his arms.

“I love you too.”

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The last stage of the empress selection was finally beginning.

Westalia woke up at her usual time and got ready. Then, she left her mansion accompanied by Paige and a few ladies' maids.

The final selection was set to take place in the audience room of Le Chantier Palace. The only people who would be allowed in that room were those who had permission. There, the emperor would pose a question to each candidate that they had to answer.

Westalia waited in the anteroom for a little while before an attendant came to retrieve her.

"Guess it's time," Westalia said. "You all wait here, please."

"Will you really be okay by yourself? I can see you at least to the audience room," Paige offered.

"When did you become so overprotective, Paige? I'll be fine," Westalia reassured Paige. "I'm going to give it my best. So you're just going to have to trust me."

"Okay," Paige said.

Westalia walked down the long corridor. When she finally reached the door for the audience chamber, Elizabeth was standing in front of it. She was the other one of the two finalists. Dressed in a bright pink dress, she stood resolute. The two should've been uncomfortable with each other after the dress-cutting incident, but they gracefully bowed to each other as if nothing had happened.

"Let's do our best and not let any bad feelings remain between us, Westalia," Elizabeth said.

Westalia was glad the other woman didn't hold any animosity toward her, but then Elizabeth leaned in and whispered, "You seem to be in a good position, but I won't be defeated so easily." She continued, "Why do you even want to be empress? The Kingdom of Lhumzia has collapsed because of you. What's the point of taking this country too?"

She was insinuating to Westalia that if she wanted to rule, she should go back to her own country.

"Any woman in the Archaites Empire is allowed to participate in the empress selection so long as she is a citizen here. The fact that I am standing here like this means that there is no problem with my qualifications," Westalia replied. Sparks flew between them as they held each other's gaze. Elizabeth had no right to complain about her.

The large doors leading to the audience chamber slowly

opened in front of them. They both blinked in the bright light of the chandelier, and when their eyes adjusted they saw the empress, the emperor, and Leonardo in the spacious audience chamber. Westalia had thought that the princess and the other prince were supposed to be in attendance as well, but it seemed like they'd been excluded from the final selection for some reason.

Empress Canela had always been fond of Elizabeth and the look in her eye made it clear she was rooting for her. Leonardo, on the other hand, gave Westalia a worried glance.

I wish he didn't look more worried than I feel, Westalia thought.

Elizabeth and Westalia stepped into the room and curtsied to the royal family.

"I am Elizabeth Reyn, daughter of the Reyn family."

"My name is Westalia Lejainne. I came from the Kingdom of Lhumzia."

They both spoke with their heads down.

"Please, raise your heads," the emperor said.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty," they both replied.

The emperor had an attendant bring him a scroll. It held the question the two would need to answer. He looked down at the pair of them.

"We will now begin the final selection," the emperor said. His stern and dignified appearance created an unprecedented sense of tension in the room. He cleared his throat once before reading from the scroll.

"Please tell us what should be done to end hunger among the poor. This question is your final test. Elizabeth, please answer first."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty. I think it would be good if the rich could share their food. We nobles have a duty to give charity to the weak. If we all have compassion, there will be no one who suffers from poverty. I would like to be an empress who can be a role model for the nobles and teach them virtue," Elizabeth said.

It was an exemplary answer, as if she had prepared it beforehand. Elizabeth then spoke enthusiastically about how best to make the nobles helping those lesser than them the norm.

A real honor student's answer, Westalia thought. If it had been an exam, Elizabeth would have received full marks.

After the emperor heard Elizabeth's answer, he looked at

Westalia and urged her to answer. She didn't hesitate.

"I think it is clear that sharing food is not the answer to hunger."

"Oh, are you criticizing the previous answer?" the emperor asked, cocking his head. Elizabeth frowned.

"Tens of thousands of people are starving in this country. Can the nobility continue to feed them endlessly? No, they cannot." Providing food would only be a makeshift solution—a fleeting relief. It was just like Daniel had said to the little thief boy about his malnourished sister: Without access to food, medicine would only be a temporary measure.

"As the question suggested," she continued, "to fundamentally solve hunger, we need to develop and implement policies that will help the poor find food on their own. Allow me to elaborate. The first focus is education." Westalia mentioned the low literacy rate she had learned about when she arrived in the country.

Because of its large size and population, the Archaites Empire was not very literate. A huge amount of the paper used in the written examination for the empress selection would just be thrown away if the women taking it couldn't read. If a woman could read and write, she would have a better chance of finding a job. The first solution was to provide education not only to the aristocracy but also to the poor so that they could escape poverty and gain the economic power to buy food.

"The second point is health care," Westalia said, moving on. She cited the example of her home country of Lhumzia, where many lives were still being lost due to epidemics. When people were sick, the population would eventually shrink and the labor force would become smaller. So, she stated, creating an environment where medicines were easily accessible would also improve productivity in farming and other activities. In the Kingdom of Lhumzia, medicines for epidemic diseases were exorbitantly priced, and only the wealthy could afford them. However, as the disease reduced the working population, the aristocracy's territorial income was reduced, and as a result, the country as a whole became poorer.

"The poor, who have no access to medicine, grasp at straws and even end up drinking toxic things that have no effect on their illnesses and kill them. It is the foolish aristocrats who have a monopoly on the medicine who should really be drinking

something toxic," Westalia said. Delphine was one of those foolish nobles. However, she was not the only one who was profiting from reselling the medicine in that way. There were others who had come up with the same idea.

In this country, it was the Devorah Trading Company. They sold their goods at high prices, giving priority to the aristocrats and other wealthy people, and did not deal with poor customers even if they were really in need.

Furthermore, in the Kingdom of Slidd, there were those who earned their money not only through the medicine but also by trafficking in human beings for the nobility. Westalia remembered well Lyra's sorrowful face as she begged for help while bound in chains and Paige's cold expression, like she'd merely given up, when she was locked up under that filthy arena. Wasn't it the responsibility of the state to crack down on those kinds of businesses?

"It will take a lot of money and effort to do these things," Westalia said. "But I believe that supporting and laying the groundwork for self-reliance is what will truly save the people from crisis."

"So you believe the current policies are wrong?" the emperor asked.

Honestly, Westalia thought there would always be problems. It was normal for a country to be less than perfect. But here, to answer that the policies were wrong could be taken as a criticism of the beloved emperor. It would clearly be an inappropriate response for the empress selection, but Westalia couldn't utter a sycophantic remark just to boost the emperor's opinion of her.

"If I had to choose between right and wrong, I would say wrong," Westalia said, conviction behind every word.

As she voiced her answer, Leonardo looked at her like he couldn't believe what she was saying, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. Empress Canela's mouth hung open with shock.

The emperor didn't react; he merely made a noncommittal noise and set the scroll down. "I would like to ask you personally. Why do you want to be empress? I have heard of the treatment you received in the Kingdom of Lhumzia. Even so, why do you still want to take the position of empress? Even in a different country, there are still evils that you may want to run away from."

Westalia looked the emperor straight in the eye as she answered. “The empress is intrinsically supposed to serve the prosperity and peace of the nation, but in some countries, wicked people have sought the position only for their own desires and convenience.”

By wicked people she meant, of course, Lily and Delphine. Westalia thought back on everything from her execution to the final selection. She thought of how Felix blamed himself for pandering to the former queen and how Tonio wept for his wife, whose life had been taken from her. Westalia was well aware that many people had suffered at the mercy of power.

“I understand. I know the folly of those in power. I know the vileness of those who are willing to harm others to satisfy their own greed. That is why I came here. I hit rock bottom once, but I am now convinced that it was a necessary experience for me to be empress. I want to save people like me from tyranny because I, myself, have known that unspeakable pain.” The dream Westalia had been chasing had been within her grasp, then escaped it, then again been within her grasp, and then been lost again. Still, she kept reaching for it. Westalia believed in it as if she were looking up at a small light in the distance. It didn’t matter if it was pathetic. It didn’t matter if she took it slow, rested, or sometimes fell and got covered in mud. If she kept moving forward in any way, a tailwind would start blowing, and it might push her all the way to the place she wanted to reach.

And now, all the experiences had become her blood, her body, and her driving force. In truth, there might have been nothing that was wasted in order to become a great empress. If she had lacked any of them, she wouldn’t be where she was today. No, she would grab the position of empress and prove that it was not all in vain.

If Westalia was needed by someone, if she could be of use to someone, then surely it would feel as though she had been rewarded for having fallen, sunk, and lived through those dark days. Even if she wasn’t rewarded though, it would be much better than lying around doing nothing.

“By nature, the rights of nobles and commoners should be equally protected. When I become empress, I will wipe out all the wickedness in the aristocratic society. It would be better to have no nobles who interfered with the rights of the people,” Westalia

said. She glanced at Elizabeth briefly and saw that her expression was hard. Her family, the Reyns, had a lot of wrongs to be judged.

I have been involved in royal politics my whole life but I've been of no use to anyone. It frustrates me to no end. Choose me*. Take* my *hand*, Westalia thought.

Westalia looked up at the emperor, seated high above her, and said forcefully, "I will expose the crimes of those nobles and remove their titles. No one will be left behind; no one will be left to the will of a villain. I shall do so for as long as I am able." The Westalia who'd sat quietly in the royal villa, listening to others, was no more. No matter who betrayed her, she wouldn't be defeated, and no matter how many times she was trampled, she would rise up and live how she wanted to.

Even the emperor gasped at Westalia's bold statement. Her words had weight, as she had confronted and successfully defeated the former queen of her home country, who had been a powerful figure. The emperor looked amused and stroked his long beard, then turned his attention back to Elizabeth.

"Is there anything you want to say in response?" he asked.

"No, there isn't..." Elizabeth replied. She'd completely lost her swagger after hearing Westalia's answer and her shoulders had slumped.

With that, the final selection examination was over. Westalia performed her beautiful curtsy, then left the audience chamber.

The moment they left the chamber, Elizabeth fell to her knees and started crying. Her maids gathered around her.

"I'm no good at this! There's no way I'll be chosen!"

"That's not true! It will surely turn out okay. After all, my lady, you're the most promising candidate!" one of her maids said.

"I don't need your pity! Let go of me!" Elizabeth said, shaking the woman off her. The woman fell backward with a small scream.

Westalia was about to make her way back to the waiting room when Elizabeth called out from behind her.

"It serves me right, doesn't it? That you beat me just based on merit when I cheated again and again," Elizabeth said.

"We don't know the results yet," Westalia replied.

"No, His Imperial Majesty showed interest in you. It's all over. You cleared your name all on your own, and you achieved a lot coming from a foreign country and overcoming everything. I was

just a candidate boosted to the top by my family name," Elizabeth said.

Westalia turned around and walked back to Elizabeth. "We did the best we could, that was all," she said.

Elizabeth had tried to win the title of empress by cheating and tearing others down, but that just showed how serious she'd been about it. Even Westalia wasn't completely innocent. She'd entered the country illegally and done everything in her power to climb up the ladder, just like Elizabeth.

"Did I really do the best I could? No matter how hard you try, it's all in vain if you don't get rewarded."

"Crying like that won't make anyone give you what you want," Westalia replied.

"I-I didn't cheat because I wanted to! I was told that I was the best candidate in the entire country, but if I didn't live up to expectations, I would be a disgrace to my family! My father's going to scold me so badly..." Elizabeth's face paled at the thought of her father. Then she said, in a voice that sounded as if she had given up on everything, "Why won't you blame me? Taunt me. Mock me! You hate me, don't you? Why don't you tell Leonardo what I did to you?!"

Elizabeth was clearly venting now. Westalia sighed and placed a hand gently on the woman's shoulder.

"I understand what you're going through. It's your guilt that's tormenting you," Westalia said. Elizabeth had done bad things because she hadn't had confidence that she could live up to the expectations of those around her and because she wanted to be close to Leonardo. But there was still the possibility of redemption for her, since she was aware of what she'd done wrong and felt guilt over it.

"I'm..."

"If you still feel bad, you can change how you act from now on," Westalia said. The former queen Delphine had died as a result of her unrepentant evil ways. But Elizabeth was young and had plenty of chances to start over.

Westalia put aside her anger at Elizabeth for the moment and smiled at the woman, as if to calm her down. "I don't blame you."

"But I... Your dress..."

Westalia put a finger up to cut her off. She shook her head,

telling Elizabeth to let bygones be bygones.

"I haven't told anyone what you did," Westalia said. "I swear to you that I will never speak of it again. Let's not have any more hate between us. No hard feelings, no matter which one of us gets chosen."

Elizabeth remained silent. Westalia handed her a handkerchief and told her to wipe his tears with it, then turned away again.

Why is she so generous? Elizabeth wondered. "I'm no match for you," she said out loud.

◆◆◆

Leonardo, Empress Canela, and the emperor were gathered in a conference room in Le Chantier Palace. The final screening was over, and the meeting was to decide who would be chosen as empress. The emperor, seated in the chair in the center of the room, cleared his throat, and the atmosphere in the room became tense.

Who will the emperor pick? Leonardo wondered. He was in favor of Westalia, but Canela had a history with Elizabeth, being partial toward her since she'd been a small child, so it was likely that the vote would be split.

The prince and princess, who were devoted to the Reyn family, had been excluded from the final discussion by Leonardo's direct appeal to the Assembly, and the final selection would be decided by the emperor's vote.

The case of the trial in the Kingdom of Lhumzia was well known in the Archaites Empire. There was some dissatisfaction with Westalia's participation in the final stage, since she was responsible for causing a major incident that incited a stir in the country, but that dissatisfaction had disappeared with the emperor's approval of her participation. So it was certain that the emperor also considered her a solid contender.

"Empress Canela, who did you think was the more suitable candidate?" the emperor asked.

"I thought that Miss Elizabeth was the better candidate," Canela responded as Leonardo had expected her to.

"And Leonardo? What do you think?"

"I think Westalia Lejainne is the correct choice."

“Hmm, I see,” the emperor said. “I thought Elizabeth Reyn was the one more suited to be empress.”

Leonardo’s heart sank at those words. In response to the emperor’s question, Elizabeth had given an answer from the point of view of the aristocratic norm, the way the royal family should be. Westalia, on the other hand, had offered concrete ideas from a political perspective, such as education and disease control.

“I posed my question for the next empress. The proper role of empress is to support the emperor from the shadows and to love her people. I was not asking for policymakers. In that sense, I would say that it was Elizabeth who interpreted what was being asked appropriately,” the emperor said.

Westalia’s answer had been a criticism of the current policies. That was to say, it could be taken as a criticism of the emperor, who was in charge of the policies. Even Leonardo had been somewhat taken aback by the challenge in Westalia’s final statement.

“Westalia Lejainne is very wise, has a strong sense of justice, and is very logical. But she is too straightforward,” the emperor continued.

It was a fair observation. Westalia was stubborn and would not change her mind about what she thought was right. Leonardo liked that about her, but depending on the recipient, it could be taken as cockiness.

“So you have decided on Elizabeth Reyn as empress?” Leonardo asked.

“You seem dissatisfied.”

“No…” Leonardo said. If Westalia wasn’t chosen here, it only meant that she wasn’t up to the task. Leonardo couldn’t do anything more to speak on her behalf.

But then Canela spoke up. “I said that Miss Elizabeth was more suited to be empress, but…I liked Miss Westalia. I think a woman like that could change the world,” Canela said.

“You make a good point. I’m interested in her too. If I choose her, the Reyn family will be very much against it, but perhaps she can be a trump card against them.”

The most influential family in the country was Elizabeth’s own family, the Reyns. Many whispered that they were corrupt, and their darkness ran deeper and darker than even Delphine’s. It was

true that the Orencia family had managed to resist having the Reyn family hold power over them, but until now, no daughter with qualities like Elizabeth's had appeared.

"Even as she stood before me, she showed no fear. Her eyes were saying, 'Choose me!' It has been a long time since I was moved by someone's enthusiasm. Leonardo, what do you think of her?"

"I believe she was born to be empress," Leonardo replied.

"You'd go that far?"

They continued discussing for a little while and then the emperor clapped his hands together. "Very well then, how about this?"

◇◇◇

One month later, Westalia awoke in the westernmost corner room of Le Chantier Palace. The room was filled with tasteful white furnishings. Her ladies' maids opened the curtains to let sunlight into the room, quickly prepared breakfast, and got Westalia ready for the day.

While she was eating her bread and vegetable soup, one of her maids held out an envelope and said, "There's a letter for you, Lady Westalia."

"From whom?" Westalia asked.

"Felix Nezeroa, crown prince of the Kingdom of Lhumzia."

"I see. Thank you, you can leave it on the table."

Westalia had plans for the day. After finishing breakfast quickly, she put Felix's letter in her pocket and left the room.

Westalia walked through the large garden. Past the rose beds soaked with morning dew, she found Leonardo in a stone gazebo. It was still early for their rendezvous, but he had probably arrived ahead of Westalia so as not to keep her waiting. She quietly approached him from behind as he read a book and, with just a hint of mischief, she covered his eyes with her hands and whispered, "Guess who?"

Leonardo turned around on the bench he was seated on and pulled her closer to the railing of the gazebo. She let out a shriek.

"That voice... It must be my empress," Leonardo replied, a

charmed look in his eye as he closed the distance between them and brought their faces close together. Westalia brusquely pushed his forehead away with her index finger.

“I’m still just a candidate!” Westalia corrected him. She walked into the gazebo and sat down next to him. As it turned out, no final selection had been made for empress. Instead, Westalia and Elizabeth had become the two official candidates for the position as recognized by the emperor.

On the day of the final screening, after a discussion among the royal family members, Westalia and Elizabeth had been summoned back to the audience chamber and told that the decision on who was to be empress had been put on hold and that the pair of them would be reevaluated in six months. In summary, Westalia was to be Elizabeth’s rival for another half year. The decision was more than unprecedented.

The Reyn family had strongly protested and pressured the royal family, having naturally assumed that Elizabeth would be chosen. They’d unilaterally denied Westalia’s candidacy and were apparently furious, wondering what was lacking in Elizabeth. But the emperor had been adamant and would not reverse his decision.

The next hurdle is taking on the corrupt Reyn family, Westalia thought. She was being tested. She had to prove that she was worthy of being empress. The Reyn family would not back down unless she could convince more people that she had something more than Elizabeth, the daughter of the most powerful man in the country.

Westalia interpreted the next six months as an opportunity to silence the Reyn family and their forces. If they didn’t accept her, she would be hindered and not allowed to operate freely, even if she became empress. It would be just like when she was imprisoned in the royal villa.

However, it was also rumored that the Reyn family was completely ruthless, and that they would do anything for power. Would they really stand by and do nothing during the six months of the candidacy period? Although Westalia now lived in the coveted Le Chantier Palace, she was still on her guard.

“Don’t get too down about that,” Leonardo said.

“Why should I be depressed? I still have a chance. My dream

isn’t over. I’m grateful just for that.”

“I heard from your knight that you were crying in private.”

“Paige!” Westalia stood up angrily. She couldn’t believe Paige had betrayed her secret to him. Her confident face turned bright red.

This isn’t a good look for me at all, Westalia thought. Just when her dream was about to come true, it had once again slipped out of her reach. It was understandable to be shocked at being put off for six months and to feel anxious about the uncertain future. It was acceptable to feel depressed in the privacy of one’s room.

“And then she grabbed me, assuming *I* had done something to make you cry,” Leonardo continued.

“Paige…” Westalia whispered. Paige hated Leonardo because he was a good-looking man, and even when she found out that he was the crown prince, her attitude remained the same.

I’ll talk to Paige about this later, Westalia thought. She gave a polite cough and sat back down.

“I was only depressed for a little while. But I’m already looking ahead, so don’t worry!” Westalia guessed that the decision meant that she still had to grow and develop to become a person worthy of the position of empress. She intended to take this ordeal as an opportunity and to work hard, greedily, and sometimes even in an unrefined way to make her dream come true.

“Well then, good.”

Westalia averted her eyes from Leonardo’s worried look and pulled out the letter from Felix from her pocket. She’d been too busy in the morning to read it, but it might be urgent, so she asked Leonardo if he didn’t mind if she looked through it.

First of all, it contained a thank-you, followed by the compensation requests for Felix’s help in proving Westalia’s innocence. Ultimately, the goal was peace between the Kingdom of Lhumzia and the Archaites Empire, but Westalia hadn’t even become empress yet. However, Westalia *had* purchased the medicinal herbs for the epidemic—by throwing away all the private fortune she’d once had as the Duchess of Lejainne. It had been fortunate that she hadn’t told anyone where she’d deposited her money so that her family couldn’t take it from her. Felix expressed his gratitude that this had saved many lives.

“I admire your philanthropy with your private fortune, but I see

that your cooking skills are the same as ever. You've made something terrible again. What's this supposed to be?" Leonardo asked.

"It's chiffon cake, for all intents and purposes," Westalia replied.

Looking down at the dark object on the table, Leonardo let out a sigh. Westalia was still not very good at cooking, and she still turned all her creations into charcoal.

"It's looking quite pitiful. Wait a minute. You're not going to make me eat it, are you?" Leonardo asked.

Westalia had baked it last night for Leonardo, but, well, it had ended up looking pretty pathetic. She forced him to take a bite anyway, and as expected, his face turned pale as he choked the piece down. Leonardo covered his mouth with his hand and said with a doubtful look, "This is going to be a new kind of chemical weapon."

Westalia pretended not to hear him and looked back down at Felix's letter. It also contained the latest news. Lily, who had been the next candidate to be his fiancée, had fallen out of favor, and so he had been looking for a new fiancée.

"I wish him happiness," Westalia said.

Leonardo noticed the change in her expression and muttered, "Do you have feelings for Felix?"

"Not like that. Why?"

"You were engaged for a long time. It wouldn't be strange that some kind of affection developed between you two. I've been concerned about it for a long time," Leonardo said, his face serious.

"He's like an older brother. There's nothing for you to be concerned about. Are you jealous?"

"Of course. I want the person I love to only have eyes for me. Even if you don't feel that way, I wonder how he feels?"

"Oh please, he never thought of me like that."

Leonardo cornered her against a pillar with a sullen look on his face. "I'm not sure if you're smart, obtuse, or an idiot."

"An idiot?! What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said."

"I swear..." But Westalia was just teasing him because he was jealous, and with a small laugh, she put her hand on Leonardo's cheek and brought his face close to hers. She stroked his

porcelain-smooth cheek with her thumb.

"Look closely. You're the only reflection in my eyes, aren't you?" Westalia asked.

Leonardo's own face *was* the only thing he could see in her eyes. He intertwined his fingers with Westalia's and pulled her even closer.

"I can't tell. You'll have to come closer."



Leonardo’s green eyes pierced through Westalia as if she’d been swallowed up by a deep forest, and her chest tightened sweetly. As soon as Westalia’s eyes closed, Leonardo pressed his lips against hers. The feel of his lips, moist and gentle, was unlike the feel of any other patch of skin, and it made her heart beat faster. They kissed for a long time.

Wisteria flowers bloomed on the pillars of the gazebo, and their faint, sweet scent prickled Westalia’s nose. She had been imprisoned in the royal villa for a long time and then wrongly accused and executed as an evil woman. Westalia had risen from the depths of hell and would become empress of the most respected nation on the continent.

This is only the beginning of her story.

Afterword

Hello, I am Tsuta Sonehara.

Thank you for reading *The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress! Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End*!

I was inspired to write this story after watching an audition program. I wondered what it would be like if a group of girls were competing for the title of empress, and I wanted to write a story about a heroine who was working hard to achieve her dream.

Despite her suffering, Westalia still kept moving forward, driven by her desire to become empress. We all have to endure the unendurable and bear the unbearable from time to time, don't we? But I believe that if we keep fighting, there will come a moment when we will be scooped up out of our troubles. I hope Westalia's story will lead to someone's small act of courage.

Thank you to my editor for always responding promptly. Thank you, Yukio Qumoya, for your beautiful, dazzling illustrations. I was impressed every time I received a rough sketch. I truly salute you. I would also like to thank all the people who worked so hard to make this book possible. Finally, I would like to thank all the readers who took their precious time to read this far. I hope that everyone who picks up a copy will enjoy it as much as possible.

I hope to see you again in the next volume!

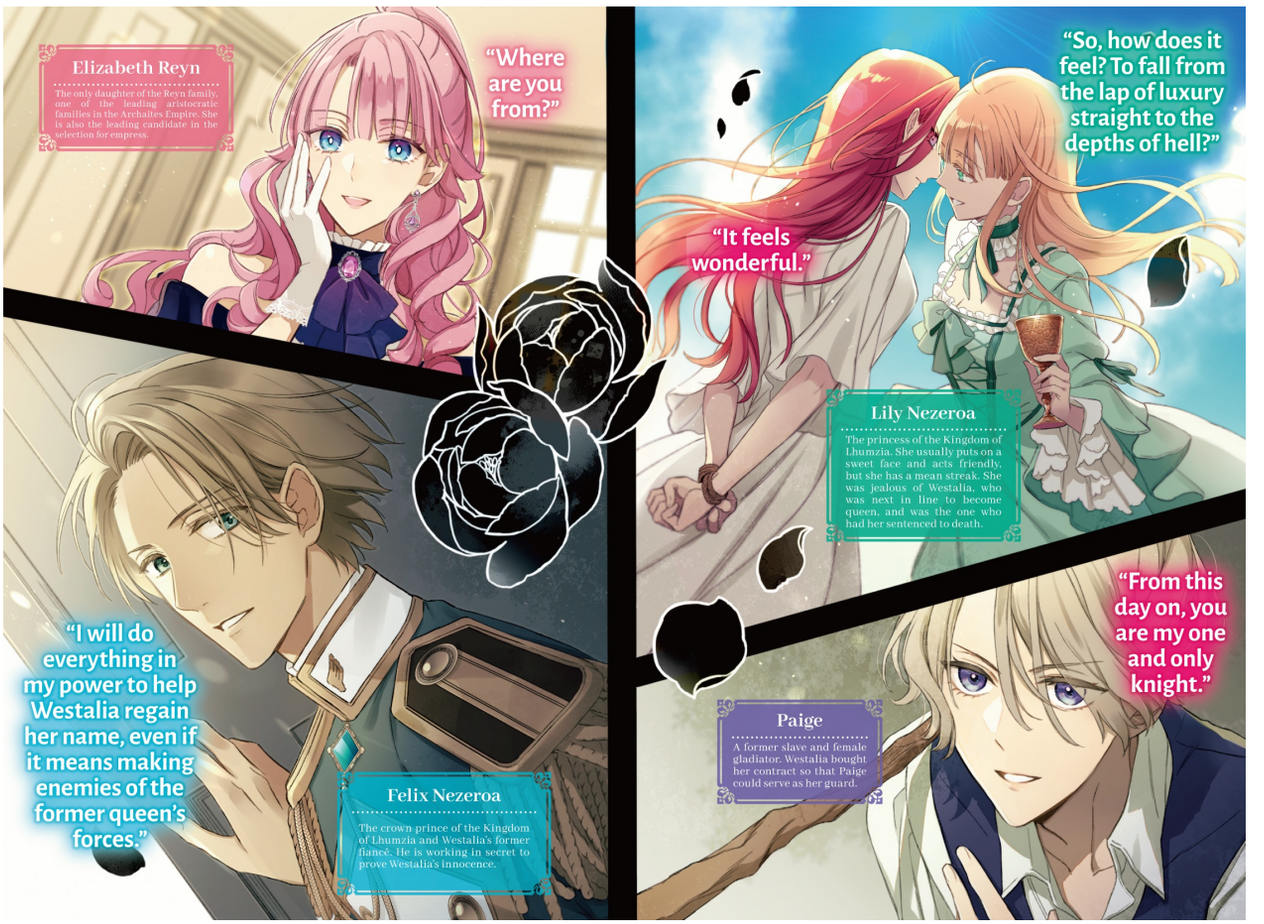
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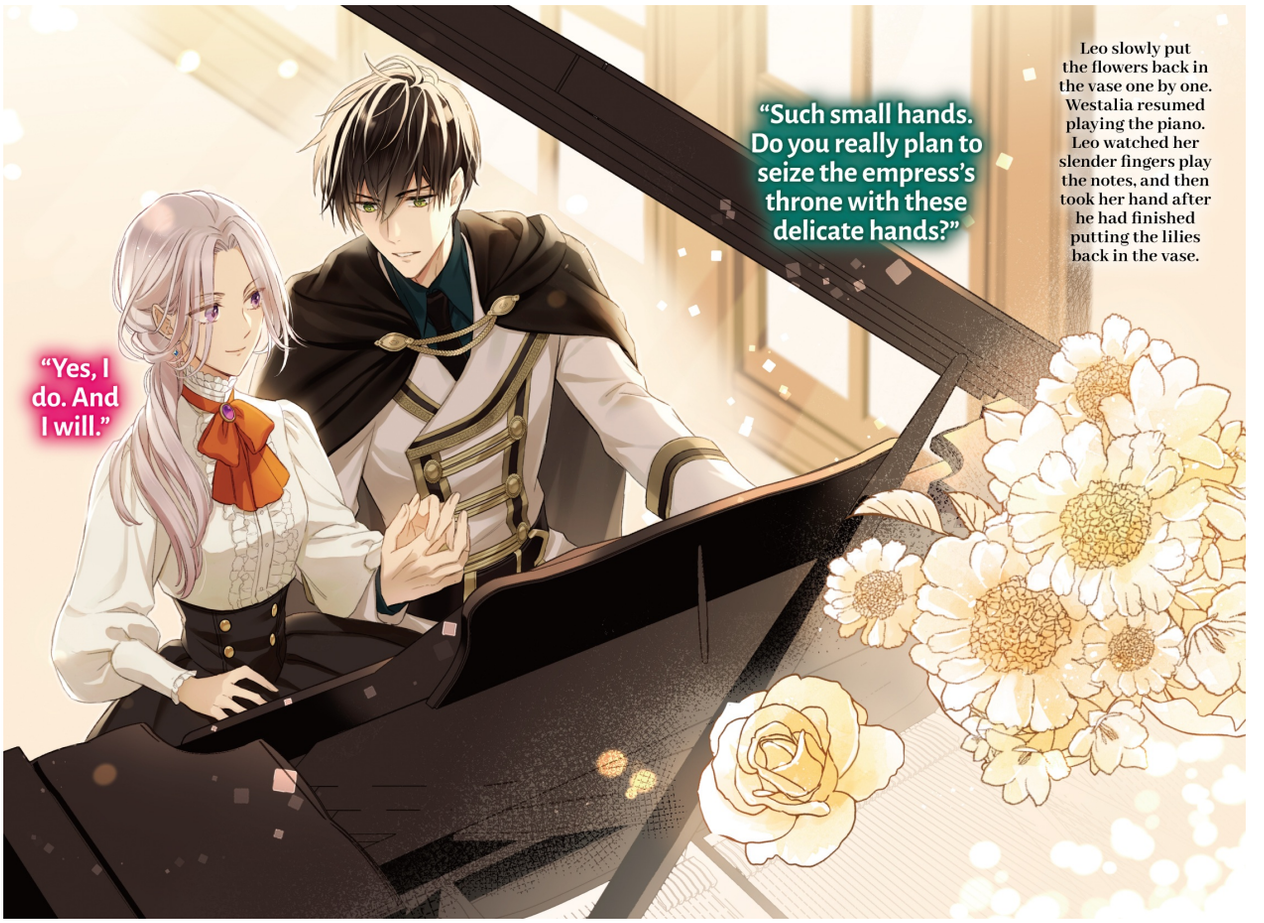


The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress!

Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End


“Is that supposed to be a joke?”
Leonardo Orencia
The current crown prince of the Archaites Empire. He’s beautiful, but his expressions are always cold. He has a great sense of responsibility, but low self-esteem. On his way back from a trip abroad, he meets Westalia, who steals an earring that is proof of his status as the next emperor.
Although the pair could not have gotten off on any more of a wrong foot, Leonardo has ended up being concerned about Westalia ever since.
“How nice to meet you. I am your goddess, descended from the heavens.”
Westalia Lejainne
A candidate for the next queen of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. Thanks to a scheme by the princess, she was convicted of treason and sentenced to die by poison. She escaped death with an antidote and now aims to become the empress of a neighboring country under the name “Cordata.”
By suppressing her true self, she has lived a peaceful life, but in reality she is strong-willed and arrogant.


Elizabeth Reyn
The only daughter of the Reyn family, one of the leading aristocratic families in the Archaites Empire. She is also the leading candidate in the selection for empress.
"Where are you from?"
"I will do everything in my power to help Westalia regain her name, even if it means making enemies of the former queen's forces."
Felix Nezeroa
The crown prince of the Kingdom of Lhumzia and Westalia's former fiancé. He is working in secret to prove Westalia's innocence.
"So, how does it feel? To fall from the lap of luxury straight to the depths of hell?"
"It feels wonderful."
Lily Nezeroa
The princess of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. She usually puts on a sweet face and acts friendly, but she has a mean streak. She was jealous of Westalia, who was next in line to become queen, and was the one who had her sentenced to death.
"From this day on, you are my one and only knight."
Paige
A former slave and female gladiator. Westalia bought her contract so that Paige could serve as her guard.



Leo slowly put the flowers back in the vase one by one. Westalia resumed playing the piano. Leo watched her slender fingers play the notes, and then took her hand after he had finished putting the lilies back in the vase.



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The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress! Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End: Volume 1
by Tsuta Sonehara

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2025