Author: Tsuta Sonehara
Illustrator: Yukio Qumoya

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The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress!

Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End


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Redoing the Story


After a Poisonous End


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Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End




Westalia Lejainne
The evil woman who's aiming to be the next empress.
"Of course."
"Yes, of course I am."
Elizabeth Reyn
Daughter of the ducal Reyn family and the leading candidate for next empress.
"Are the two of you prepared?"
Augusto
Emperor of the Archaites Empire


Dion
Leonardo's aide
"My boss is prone to overworking me."
"Ha, I know that feeling."
Paige Lanchester
Westalia's knight
"Tell me once again what your role is."
Tiberio Reyn
Elizabeth's father and the head of the Reyn family.
"My role is to become empress and give birth to a child who will become emperor. And to participate in foreign policy and gain control of the Kingdom of Slidd."


"I want all of you. Hurry up and become my empress, Westalia."
"What do you even see in me? You must have strange tastes."
"It's better if I'm the only one who knows how attractive you are."
"What does that even mean?"
Leonardo Orencia
The crown prince of the Archaites Empire

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Chapter 1: The New Challenge

Le Chantier Palace, where the royal family resided and where politics were conducted, was the gem of the Archaites Empire. It consisted of a number of magnificent buildings grouped together on a large plot of land. It was an estate of luxury and splendor as far as the eye could see—a result of skilled craftsmanship and the Orencias' fat pocketbooks.

Once again, the pair of empress candidates had been summoned to the palace's audience chamber. It had only been a few weeks since the two had spoken with the emperor, with each candidate proposing a solution to end hunger among the poor. Afterward, they had both been informed that the selection process would be delayed for another six months.

Emperor Augusto sat at the highest point in the audience chamber and looked down at the pair of women. His presence was so majestic that he was almost overwhelming to look upon.

"Are the two of you prepared?"

One of the two women, Elizabeth Reyn, lifted the skirt of her bright-pink dress slightly and curtsied. The other, Westalia Lejainne, gave a beautiful bow.

"Yes, of course I am."

"Of course."

Their voices overlapped as they answered in sync.

Today we'll be presented with the selection process's final challenge. I wonder what it will be, Westalia thought. The selection for the next empress of the Archaites Empire was now well underway. All the women in the country had been eligible to participate, and to be the single one chosen from out of so many would make that woman the object of admiration and envy. The empire's citizens eagerly awaited the results of this contest.

The two women had been summoned here today to learn of the

new challenge they would face in the final selection. Both Westalia herself and the greater populace had been perplexed by the unprecedented extension of the empress selection. Everyone was waiting with bated breath to see who would be chosen as empress: the daughter of a powerful and well-known family or the former villainess who had caused an uproar in a foreign country.

Regardless of how they handled this challenge, this would be their final confrontation, and only one of them would be named empress in six months' time.

The emperor stroked his beard as he took the scroll proffered by one of his aides and unfurled it.

"The final challenge for the empress selection is flower gathering," he said.

Westalia and Elizabeth looked at each other involuntarily, having no idea what "flower gathering" could possibly mean. However, the emperor immediately launched into an explanation. Each of the prospective empresses would be given a storehouse, both the same size, within Le Chantier Palace. The one who collected more flowers within it by the end of the six months would be the victor.

There were also several conditions for this test. The first was that the flowers had to be artificial, not fresh. Fresh flowers were not suitable for preservation and would probably be wilted by the time they were counted six months later. Second, the two women couldn't ask someone else to give them the flowers; they had to come up with their own tactics and gather them all on their own.

They were each given a budget of the same amount, and the cost of any necessary resources would be paid for with that allocation. Naturally, the same rules would apply if they chose to purchase their artificial flowers. However, with the limited budget, it would be impossible to fill the warehouse with artificial flowers, no matter how inexpensive they were. And even if they were to employ people to make the artificial flowers, the labor cost and materials must be taken from the budget. Furthermore, they were prohibited from increasing their funds by making investments. Westalia's tactic of going to the casino to raise funds to buy a dress would be in violation of the rules this time around.

This kind of activity clearly favors Elizabeth. Maybe I should just poison the emperor... she thought, biting her lip at the unexpected challenge and severe restrictions. She was intensely conscious of the poison needle hidden in her pocket, but she kept that idea to herself as she looked sharply up at the emperor.

Elizabeth's family, the Reyns, were the most powerful family in the country and had many businesses. They particularly focused on the fashion industry and had factories throughout the country that manufactured the cloth needed for artificial flowers. In addition to being able to produce artificial flowers cheaply and in large quantities, Westalia could imagine that Elizabeth would cunningly wade through loopholes in the rules and do some dubious things.

The selection for empress was a prestigious tradition in the Archaites Empire. Unlike other countries, which placed importance on bloodlines, Archaites had always placed the highest value on merit, in order to bring more excellent women into the imperial family. Members of the royal family who had inherited the blood of these women had led the empire to prosperity. The empresses, despite their position as spouse to the emperor, had used their intelligence and abilities to move pieces on the political playing board from the shadows. It was said that it was this bold and innovative method for selecting empresses that made Archaites the most powerful country on the continent.

"I have always believed in the steady management of the country for the good of the people. I devised this challenge with the aim of contributing to the people's interests, not merely to choose an empress. I can think of nothing more suitable for the final challenge," the emperor said. He was speaking confidently, but the content of the challenge felt like nothing more than a children's game.

How are the citizens benefiting from this? I'd like to know what the point is in wasting money to collect artificial flowers, Westalia thought. Moreover, she felt an open bias toward the Reyn family. Westalia clenched her fists.

"Understood, you two? It may seem like a simple task, but if you engage with it simply you won't be able to beat your opponent.

Sometimes, simple things are more difficult than complex things. It is important to consider from what angle you will approach this problem. I look forward to your creativity," the emperor continued. It was hard to tell whether this was a warning to Elizabeth—who was in an advantageous position—not to let her guard down, or a word of encouragement to Westalia, who was about to face adversity once again.

Then the emperor spoke to Westalia as he was leaving the audience chamber, a large group of knights and aides following him. "If you want to defeat your rival, you must consider the true reason I chose this challenge."

He spoke so quietly that only Westalia could hear him. He glanced at Westalia with a penetrating gaze, as if he had seen through her anxiety, and then passed by as if nothing had happened.

Does he mean to say that this challenge has some sort of secret meaning to it? Westalia thought. However, she wasn't able to instantly ascertain the emperor's intentions and found herself just standing there as she ruminated on his remarks.

After leaving the audience hall, Elizabeth looked at Westalia with a triumphant expression on her face. "That throne is as good as mine," she said. "Between you, the foreigner without any local backing, and me, the Reyn family's daughter, it's obvious who has the upper hand here!"

Westalia remained silent. As Elizabeth said, the Reyn family had power and connections and would be able to provide any number of means to obtain artificial flowers.

Do I even have a chance of winning? Westalia wondered. The emperor had gone to the trouble of extending the challenge by half a year, and all she had to do was collect flowers. How could she possibly show that she was good enough to defeat the Reyn family and those who supported them?

Westalia was honestly not confident that she could win. She briefly imagined Elizabeth smiling at the people of Archaites with her arms intertwined with Crown Prince Leonardo's, which would happen

if she was defeated in the empress selection. That was the position she had been aiming for, and she didn't want to give it up.

I'd hate to have come this far only to lose, Westalia thought.

Paige, Westalia's knight, could sense her lady's uneasiness, which caused her to worry as well.

Westalia gathered what little confidence she had and stared fixedly at Elizabeth. "I will do whatever I can, no matter the odds. I won't give up until the very end."

"Oh my, you just don't know when to quit, do you? I can always lend you a carriage so you can go back to where you came from," Elizabeth replied.





"Hmm, I think that will be the carriage you end up taking to church," Westalia said.

"Church?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, when you go to console yourself after losing to me."

"What?!" Elizabeth's face turned bright red. As usual, she was easy for Westalia to read because her emotions were always immediately apparent on her face. Elizabeth clenched her fists and glared at Westalia. "Do you really think you'll be speaking like that in six months?! I look forward to seeing you cry!"

"Right back at you," Westalia responded with a sardonic smile before turning on her heel and leaving.

Elizabeth was left standing there, watching the other woman walk away.

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When the empress selection process first began, Westalia and Paige had been living together in the mansion Westalia had purchased to gain Archaitian citizenship. Now, the pair's primary residence was within the palace grounds—a prize to reward Westalia for becoming one of the final empress candidates. However, Westalia still kept her large mansion in the city as a secondary residence.

Westalia and Elizabeth had both been given residences within the palace, with the latter's being called the "First Candidate's Residence" and the former's the "Second Candidate's Residence." The numbering of them as the first and second residences, as if they were ranked in some sort of order, seemed to prove that there were those at court who favored the Reyn family. It was as if they were saying that Elizabeth was closer to being empress than Westalia was.

Today, Westalia had forsaken her unfortunately named royal lodgings in favor of her mansion in the city. After the trial in the Kingdom of Lhumzia, in which she had been cleared of all charges, she'd hired several new servants, and the sprawling mansion should have been bustling with activity.

Yet, somehow, it was once again just Westalia and Paige.

Westalia propped both elbows on the long table in the living room and rested her chin in her hands. Paige, intimidated by the serious expression on her lady's face, gulped.

Westalia relaxed her expression into a smile and broke the silence. "Paige, I dismissed the servants because I don't have any money to pay them with. I don't think I even have enough money for us to eat today."

"Don't say something so depressing with a smile on your face! Also, this is the second time we've had this exchange!" Paige cried. The uselessly large mansion was quite difficult to maintain but Westalia had dismissed all the servants necessary to manage it. And it couldn't be sold if Westalia wanted to keep her citizenship in the Archaites Empire.

Westalia had regained her status as the daughter of the ducal Lejainne family in the Kingdom of Lhumzia, and with it, her personal wealth. However, she had immediately used all of that money to support the purchase of medical herbs for Lhumzia, where an epidemic was running rampant. She'd even cut down her personal living expenses.

"In any case it shouldn't be a problem if we use our residence at the palace as our base of operations. I think it very unlikely that they'd allow a candidate for empress to starve to death," Westalia said. At Le Chantier Palace, the maids and knights who attended the candidates were provided for out of the royal funds. Of course, the candidates were also provided with three meals, and even snacks. However, the mansion couldn't be left fully unattended, so Westalia and Paige came once a week to clean it.

"Sheesh. It's wonderful of you to give your personal fortune to charity, but you really *should* think ahead. Isn't it getting your priorities wrong if you save other people's lives and then you come down with an illness and don't have the money to buy medicine?" Paige asked.

"Maybe I'll pick up a part-time job," Westalia replied.

"That's the second time I've heard that too. You better make sure you pay my salary, at least," Paige said, placing her hands on the table and looking Westalia straight in the eyes. Westalia scrunched

up her face and looked away.

"O-Of course I'll pay you. I'll hurry up, become empress, create peace between Archaites and Lhumzia, and then pay you enough to live happily for the rest of your life," Westalia said.

"There's no point in trying to be evasive about my immediate paycheck, you know," Paige said. Westalia looked up at the ceiling with a small smile on her face, knowing Paige could see straight through her.

Westalia could overhear Paige muttering things like "Somehow I've ended up working for an exploitative boss anyway," but the grumbling just went in one ear and out the other.

Regardless, since I'm in the Archaites Empire and have easy access to medicine that cures contagious diseases, doesn't it only make sense that I would want to save even a single person? Westalia thought. It was the empress's job to show compassion for her people and to save those who were suffering.

When she was in the running to become Lhumzia's queen, she'd heard the stories of many suffering from the epidemic, but she hadn't been able to do anything to help them. At the time she'd felt obligated to help them simply because she was the next queen, but it was a little different now. During the empress selection process in Archaites, she'd met many kind individuals and had started to develop a bit more genuine compassion for them.

The Archaites Empire was the source of medicinal herbs that were effective against diseases similar to the one that was rampaging through Lhumzia. Since trade was currently impossible because of hostilities between the two nations, despite their tenuous truce, Westalia had no choice but to purchase the herbs privately and then send them to Lhumzia.

Westalia had been given new funds for the next part of the empress selection, but they had yet to be given to her, so she and Paige had no choice but to live in extreme poverty until they got paid.

Paige let out a sigh and looked down. At Westalia's feet were several boxes of handmade artificial flowers. Paige was amazed at the intricacy of the artificial wisteria flowers with their rows of tiny

petals. But she immediately raised her eyebrows and looked questioningly at Westalia.

"You're not really going to spend the next six months hand-making artificial flowers, are you? There's no way you think you can beat your rival like that," Paige said.

Westalia was silent. According to rumors, since the challenge had been announced Elizabeth had been utilizing the Rias Corporation, run by her own family, to produce a huge quantity of artificial flowers on a small budget. It would be very easy to keep the price down and mass-produce them since they were produced at the factory of her family's company.

Paige picked up one cluster of artificial wisteria flowers and observed them with admiration. As Westalia resumed making her flowers, Paige spoke up.

"But I have faith in you, my lady. Obviously, you have a chance of beating Miss Elizabeth."

"No, I don't," Westalia replied.

"Huh?!"

"There's no way I can win," Westalia replied calmly, continuing to work quietly. Paige reached over and grabbed the wire that her lady was working with.

"So you're just going to enjoy your handicrafts and not even come up with a plan? If you keep doing this you'll lose to Miss Elizabeth!" Paige cried.

"I'm doing this to try and come up with a plan so I *don't* lose," Westalia replied, shaking off Paige's hand. The wire she held would become a flower stem, to which she was now applying fabric petals.

"I like to walk or do something with my hands while I think," Westalia said. "Sometimes ideas just come naturally while I'm doing that." However, in the two weeks since the challenge was announced, Westalia had been holed up in her mansion, and while the quality of her artificial flowers had only been improving, she had yet to come up with a single plan of action. The amount of boxes filled with artificial flowers that surrounded Westalia's chair were growing in number.

"Shall I tell you what it is you're doing while you're all wrapped

up in making artificial flowers?" Paige asked.

"What?"

"It's called escapism."

"Call it a quest for creativity," Westalia replied.

"There you go again with your wishful thinking."

Westalia completed another artificial flower as she argued with Paige. There was no way for Westalia to win if she bought artificial flowers with the budget she had been given. The Rias Corporation was one of the largest clothing companies in the country, primarily making and selling dresses to aristocrats. Elizabeth was in a position to utilize the company however she wished. The woman's confidence was understandable.

"If I don't think about it from a different perspective, I won't win. I have to come up with something bold and groundbreaking," Westalia said. That was exactly the kind of creativity that the emperor was talking about, and that was what was important in this final selection. At the very least, Westalia definitely couldn't win by using the same trick as Elizabeth, which was to hire some company to produce the flowers in a factory.

"What about burning down Elizabeth's storehouse the day before the final tallying?" Paige asked.

"That's a crime. But, well, maybe we can raise some legitimate reasons to prevent flowers from being collected in her warehouse."

"Legitimate reasons?"

Westalia put her finished flower into a box and looked up at Paige.

"For example, if the Rias Corporation went bankrupt, then their factory wouldn't be able to operate."

Paige looked shocked.

"That comes with conditions, of course. The Rias Corporation can only be destroyed if they have something to hide," Westalia said. "But I am a little curious about it. Why did the emperor choose collecting flowers as the challenge when he knew that it would be easy for the Reyn family to produce artificial flowers? I wonder if there is some sort of underlying meaning to this challenge."

Although it was still a matter of speculation, Westalia suspected

that the challenge wasn't simply to collect flowers but to fulfill the emperor's unspoken request. He'd even told her to think about the real reason he'd chosen that challenge if she wanted to win. That meant that she could come up with a winning strategy if she understood the hidden intent in the emperor's challenge.

Even before the empress selection had begun, it had been basically a given that Elizabeth, with her family's backing, would be granted the title. And it wasn't just her family; all the supporters of the Reyns wanted Elizabeth to win. Under such circumstances, if Westalia had no chance at all, then there was no point for the clever emperor to go to the trouble of extending the selection process another six months.

The emperor's true intention, if he did harbor some secret desire, would be nothing other than maintaining the imperial family's position and political power. If the daughter of the Reyn family, whose power had been gradually expanding, were to become empress, she would certainly be a threat to the imperial family. The Reyns were rumored to be corrupt, so the Orencias would have to be even more vigilant. With that in mind, having the Reyn daughter around the palace would be a thorn in their side to say the least.

If Westalia was to formulate a plan, she would have to deduce the connections between the biased challenge of flower gathering, the Reyn family and the Rias Corporation, and the emperor's true intentions.

Westalia had considered the final point for the past two weeks. What else could he desire, if not the downfall of the Reyn family?

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The next day, a grand party was held in the main hall of Le Chantier Palace. Hundreds of the empire's top aristocratic patriarchs, their children, and their wives were gathered together, and the country's most renowned orchestra was performing. The stars of the party were the two candidates for empress.

The women in the hall all watched Elizabeth with admiration as she entered the main hall.

"Look there! It's Lady Elizabeth! She looks so lovely today. Truly, there could not be a more suitable candidate," one of the partygoers said.

"Well, she is the daughter of the Reyns. They're rich and powerful, and *she's* beautiful and intelligent. She's good at everything. Completely flawless. I admire her so much..." someone else replied.

Elizabeth stood in a dignified manner, surrounded by knights and ladies' maids. Despite their low rank, her maids were dressed splendidly: unmistakable proof of the Reyn family's wealth.

"I would like to thank you all from the very bottom of my heart for gathering here today. It is such a pleasure for me to see you here on this very important night. Please make yourselves comfortable," Elizabeth said with a beautiful smile. Then she lifted her skirt slightly, tucked one leg behind her, and curtsied to everyone. She was greeted with envious gazes and unreserved applause.

Then, the entrance area to the hall grew boisterous again. Heads turned as Westalia, the second candidate for empress, appeared in the doorway.

"Good evening, everyone. Lady Elizabeth. People of the Archaites Empire," Westalia said, a dainty smile on her lips. The guests gasped as they saw her. Westalia's long, silver hair looked like threads of silk, and her eyes were like lustrous amethysts. She was a full head taller than the average woman and was wearing heels, which made her even taller and more prominent in the crowd.

Paige was accompanying Westalia as her knight this evening, and she cut a figure so dashingly handsome, one could forget entirely that she was a woman.

You must feel like the star of the show, Elizabeth. But you're not the only candidate for empress, Westalia thought, looking over at her rival. She then performed the same curtsy the other woman had done earlier.

"Good evening, everyone. My name is Westalia Lejainne. I am originally from the Kingdom of Lhumzia, but I am now one of the candidates for empress. Thank you very much for coming to see me

and Miss Elizabeth today. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Westalia said. The words "me and" strengthened the idea that the party that evening was for both her *and* Elizabeth.

The crowd was silent. There were no words of welcome, no applause, and no murmurs or anything as Westalia greeted the audience. Silence prevailed in the hall, as if the earlier liveliness had been a lie. Everyone stepped aside like a receding tide, opening the way for Westalia to walk forward. Then, for some reason, they stubbornly refused to make eye contact.

Westalia whispered to Paige, who was standing diagonally behind her. "Oh dear, are they all too awed by the majesty of the candidate for the next empress?"

"No, I think they're just avoiding you," Paige responded.

"Paige..." Westalia leveled a dry look at her knight, who cleared her throat once before agreeing with her lady that it was certainly Westalia's radiance that was making the crowd avoid her gaze—a compliment Paige clearly didn't mean.

Although Westalia had said it was a pleasure to make everyone's acquaintance, there wasn't a single person in the country who didn't know who she was. Everyone knew she was from a ducal family from the Kingdom of Lhumzia and that she'd been one of the candidates for queen there. Westalia had been thought dead as a result of a conspiracy by Princess Lily and the former queen, who had sentenced her to death by poison. In reality, however, she'd been falsely accused of a crime, survived her death sentence, and traveled to the great Archaites Empire to participate in their empress selection process and then had even proven her innocence in Lhumzia on her own.

While the common citizens of both countries were excited by Westalia's triumphant story, the nobles in this hall were a bit different. Those in power often had guilty consciences. That was why they were wary of Westalia. They all wondered if they would have the rug pulled out from under them and end up losing their positions of power, like what had happened with the former queen of Lhumzia at Westalia's hands. Westalia felt eyes on her from all sides, as if they were watching a wild animal that might attack at any

moment.

Do the nobles of this country really have that much to hide? Westalia wondered. If there were people like that among the nobility, Westalia wouldn't balk at rooting their wicked ways out and dealing with them. She'd even declared that to the emperor in the audience chamber.

It is our duty as aspiring empresses to save and protect the weak from those who would exploit them, Westalia thought.

Westalia walked straight forward to come face-to-face with Elizabeth. She looked down at the woman, who was a little shorter than her. Elizabeth stared back up at her with a provocative look in her eyes.

"Well, well, isn't it a wonderful skill to open paths before you wherever you walk? There are yet many roads in the Archaites Empire that need paving. You should quit trying to be empress and go work in construction instead," Elizabeth said.

Her barb, as if to say Westalia wasn't suited to being empress, made Westalia's brow twitch with irritation. Westalia feigned composure when Elizabeth then added that she could help her get a job.

"I think it is a wonderful thing to build roads, which will lead to the growth of the region and eventually the entire country. When I become empress, I will definitely focus on civic development. Thank you for your advice," Westalia replied.

Elizabeth bristled at the response and sparks flew between the two women. At that moment light from the chandelier reflected off Elizabeth's pink, bejeweled dress, making Westalia squint.

Elizabeth often wore bright pink dresses, and she wasn't the only one. Many of the ladies in this hall were wearing pink dresses the same color as Elizabeth's. The bright pink dye was developed by the Rias Corporation, owned by the Reyns, who had the exclusive right to sell the color. And since it was based on Elizabeth's hair color, it was called "Elizabeth Pink." Elizabeth was the envy of society, and when she wore the color and advertised it, Elizabeth Pink had become an instant sensation. Because everything in Elizabeth Pink was expensive, the main clientele consisted of aristocratic ladies and

their daughters.

Westalia glanced around the hall and took in how many women were wearing Elizabeth Pink.

"That's a very beautiful dress," Westalia said.

"Of course! What a candidate for empress wears must be first-rate. And isn't this cheerful color especially eye-catching?" Elizabeth replied.

"The fascination with Elizabeth Pink is amazing. I've never seen such a vibrant pink before. I'm curious about how you make it." When Westalia was in the Kingdom of Lhumzia, she had used dye she made herself from safflowers to color her hair red and hide its natural silver. Even mixing that bright-red dye with white would not have produced such a vivid pink. Westalia, a lover of science, asked out of pure curiosity and a desire for knowledge.

Elizabeth snorted in response. "It's a trade secret. Elizabeth Pink was made by the Reyn family company using a special formula. No ordinary mixture of red and white can reproduce it. Even *I* don't know how it's made."

Westalia's curiosity was piqued when Elizabeth said it was impossible to reproduce, and she became more and more interested in the manufacturing process. But if Elizabeth didn't know how it was made, Westalia had no choice but to give up.

"Maybe they just don't trust you," she said.

Elizabeth clicked her tongue, and her expression grew bitter. Westalia had only said that to tease the woman, but it seemed she'd hit the nail on the head.

"A-Anyway, you finally do realize that I set the trends in this country, don't you?" Elizabeth asked, laughing triumphantly. At that moment, Westalia caught a glimpse of the hand that Elizabeth raised to politely cover her mouth as she laughed. Westalia let out a small gasp as the end of the long sleeve slid down just slightly, giving her a peek at Elizabeth's wrist, which was covered in a red rash. Westalia could also see a few blisters, and some spots that looked darker than the others, as if Elizabeth had repeatedly scratched at them.

A rash? Westalia thought. While Westalia remained silent,

thinking she dared not point out a problem with Elizabeth's appearance, the woman noticed Westalia's line of sight and quickly pulled the sleeve down to cover her wrist.

But it wasn't just the rash. There was sweat slowly beading on Elizabeth's forehead, and her face was paler than usual, looking slightly ashen.

Maybe she's not feeling well... Westalia thought. Before she could ask, Elizabeth turned and walked away.

Then, the emperor personally introduced the two candidates for empress. While the emperor was speaking to the assembled people, there was a civil servant standing next to him, diligently writing everything down. The man's official title was Royal Chronicler, a position unique to the Archaites Empire. When the emperor attended an important meeting or event, his remarks were recorded. It wasn't just the emperor's remarks, however, but also those of the people around him. This was done in order to prevent disputes over what the emperor had or hadn't said when a problem arose. Whenever Westalia had been summoned to the audience chamber by the emperor, the royal chronicler was always present in a corner of the room.

I don't think I'd like having my conversations recorded like that, Westalia thought.

The man was listening intently to the emperor's words, and his pen glided smoothly and quickly across the paper. Even if she didn't like it, she would have her own chronicler when she became empress. Westalia turned her attention away from the man.

After that, both Westalia and Elizabeth made their rounds to greet the nobles. Elizabeth was already well-known in Archaitian high society, so she was happily making small talk with the aristocrats. Westalia, on the other hand, was greeting people with considerable caution.

After greeting a few different aristocrats, Westalia picked up a drink from the buffet table and decided to take a short rest in a corner of the hall.

"You must be thirsty as well, right? Better get something to drink while you can," Westalia said to Paige, passing her a glass.

"Thank you. But I haven't been talking this whole time like you have," Paige replied. While Paige had just been following Westalia around as her knight, Westalia had spent considerable time talking to a large number of people. Her throat was parched.

"There are so many people here, there's no end to the greetings," Paige said.

"There are hundreds of people. Still, it's an opportunity for people to remember my face, so I have to do my best," Westalia replied.

"Yes, I suppose that's true." Paige was intermittently drinking from her glass with graceful gestures as they talked, and the gazes of the women in the vicinity were drawn to her. Paige always caught people's eyes wherever she went.

Westalia raised her eyebrows at Paige. It seemed like the other woman was stealing the spotlight. "They're going to know your face better than they know mine," Westalia said.

Suddenly there was a crash. Paige had dropped the glass she was holding. It was unusual for her to be so careless, and she looked furious. Paige's brow was deeply furrowed, and Westalia could literally hear the woman's teeth grinding. The murderous, ire-filled rage emanating from her was palpable. It was rare for Paige, who was usually so aloof, to show such negative emotions so nakedly. It wasn't just rare, it might actually be the first time Westalia had seen her like this.

What on earth has made her so angry? Westalia wondered. Nervously, she followed Paige's gaze, only to land on a beautiful, bespectacled man with green hair who was speaking to Elizabeth.

"I've finally found him..." Paige put a hand on her sword as her muttered words made their way to Westalia's ears. Westalia felt a disturbing change in the atmosphere, as if Paige were about to attack the man outright, and she gulped.

"Paige, you're not about to do something...strange, are you?" Westalia asked.

Paige was silent. Westalia's words were completely lost on her.

"W-Wait a minute!" Westalia reached out to grab Paige's arm, but the woman had already stepped forward, and Westalia's hand missed its mark. Paige drew the sword slightly, and its blade glinted

in the light. Suddenly a hand that didn't belong to Westalia grabbed Paige's arm from above and restrained it.

"Now isn't the time to cut that man down. But your opportunity will surely come. So for now, calm down." It was Crown Prince Leonardo who stopped Paige from losing herself in her anger.

Paige glared at the green-haired man and muttered, "Tiberio Reyn..."

That was the name of Elizabeth's father, the duke. Paige exhaled slowly and let her sword slide the short distance back into its sheath. Her agitation didn't seem to subside though, and her clenched fists were shaking.

That's Tiberio Reyn, head of the infamous Reyn family. Westalia had never seen him before. He looked so young that she'd sooner believe he was Elizabeth's older brother than her father. The Reyns, a ducal family, were ostensibly prosperous aristocrats, but some people whispered that they were corrupt and willing to do anything for power and money. This was the man that held the reins of that family.

Tiberio, however, appeared much kinder than the rumors would suggest thanks to his brilliant smile. Despite his good-natured appearance, the Reyn patriarch was hell-bent on amassing power by any means necessary. In fact, he'd long been suppressing those he saw as a potential threat, earning him the ire of many.

He reminded Westalia a lot of her former nemesis, Lily. She always wore a lovely smile and pretended to be innocent and pure, but in reality she was an intensely ambitious woman who had been vigilantly seeking the position of the next queen in order to satisfy her own greed.

Just then, Tiberio, as if sensing Paige's murderous intent, slowly turned his head toward them. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Paige. He looked slightly puzzled but immediately masked it with a cool smile. However, there was a hint of menace mixed in with the smile, which sent a shiver down Westalia's spine.

Clearly, Tiberio recognizes Paige too, Westalia thought. Westalia turned her attention away from Tiberio and looked over to Leonardo to thank him for stopping Paige. If he hadn't shown up, Paige might

have actually stabbed the man.

"Paige, do you know His Grace?" Westalia asked.

"Yes, I do. He's my enemy."

"Your enemy..." Westalia said. Paige's circumstances were unusual. She'd once been held as a slave in the basement of a gladiatorial arena in the Kingdom of Slidd. She'd been forced to fight as a combatant and had boasted an undefeated record. Paige had told Westalia that she'd been the daughter of a nobleman before she became a slave, and that she had fallen into slavery after her family's downfall, but Westalia hadn't heard any further details beyond that.

While the servants were cleaning up the broken glass, Paige took another glass of wine and drank it down in a single gulp.

Paige and Tiberio... What happened in their past? Westalia wondered. Paige usually didn't like to talk about herself much. Westalia was pretty secretive herself, and, not wishing to divulge her own secrets, she hadn't pried into the woman's past. Paige told them the man was an enemy of hers and wouldn't say anything further.

At that moment, the orchestra began to play. A slow waltz echoed through the hall. It was customary for the star of a party to begin the dancing in the center of the room. And at this party, the two candidates for empress were the stars of the show.

As soon as the music started playing, Elizabeth began to dance with Tiberio. As one would expect from a duke and his daughter, their dancing was exemplary, and they were greeted with cheers and applause. Tiberio was beaming with joy, but for someone who always looked so confident, Elizabeth seemed unusually sullen. Was she not enjoying dancing with him?

"Why don't you try to be a little more sociable? A smile is important for an empress," Tiberio said.

"I-I'm sorry, father," Elizabeth replied. She fixed a smile on her face. Westalia saw the change in her expression, even though she hadn't heard their exchange. Leonardo extended a hand to Westalia as she watched the pair execute their dance perfectly.

"You won't lose to that, will you?" Leonardo asked.

“Of course not,” Westalia replied. She smiled boldly at Leonardo as she took his hand. With graceful steps timed perfectly with the music, Westalia and Leonardo also moved closer to the center of the hall.

The combination of one of the candidates for empress and the crown prince caused people to whisper and speculate.

“Is Lady Westalia the crown prince’s favorite?”

“He’s usually so expressionless, but the way he looks at her is so gentle. I think she will be the next empress.”

“It doesn’t matter how much His Highness has his eyes on her. In the final selection, the one who collects more artificial flowers wins. So it’s obvious that she will have to give in to the power of the Reyn family.”

Westalia concentrated on her dance as she felt everyone’s judging eyes on her. As Leonardo led her through the dance she made the occasional spin, the hem of her dress fluttering as she turned. Westalia’s ears picked up on the exclamatory gasps of admiration from the other partygoers. She’d been confined to a royal villa in the Kingdom of Lhumzia and subjected to a strict education. The former queen had been harassing her, but it was during this time that her dancing skills had been honed and polished.

Leonardo, too, had good technique, but he also had core and muscle strength, so he could keep up with Westalia even when she executed difficult steps and support her even in poses that seemed impossible.

“You’re a good dancer,” Westalia said.

“Well, I am a crown prince, after all,” Leonardo replied.

Westalia and Leonardo danced in perfect harmony, performing one difficult move after another. The audience was completely enthralled and applauded especially loudly. It was a much better response than Elizabeth had received.

“Why is it your rival is dancing with the crown prince and not you? Besides, her dance seems to be better received. Perhaps you’re out of practice?” Tiberio asked his daughter.

“Y-Yes, it’s rather painful to see...” Elizabeth replied.

Under the cover of the growing crowd of dancers, Tiberio stepped

on his daughter’s foot to reprimand her, causing her to wince in pain, but no one noticed. Tiberio felt they were now at a disadvantage, seeing as it was Westalia dancing with Leonardo and not his daughter.





Following the two candidates' lead, other couples moved out onto the dance floor. Westalia let out a small sigh, finally free from the gazes and interest of the people.

Then, she whispered to Leonardo quietly enough that others wouldn't be able to overhear. "Paige's bloodlust earlier was really something. We would've been in a lot of trouble if you hadn't stopped her. Thank you."

"It was a considerable hatred. You know nothing at all about the connection between your knight and Tiberio?" Leonardo asked.

Westalia shook her head. "She's not very forthcoming about personal matters." If Paige told her, Westalia could try and help her, but if Paige didn't say anything, there was nothing Westalia could do.

"Tiberio is a man with a lot of enemies. I wouldn't be surprised if something happened to him."

"At first glance, he doesn't look like a bad person," Westalia said.

"Sometimes, the really bad people don't look like bad people. They pretend to be good, which is even worse," Leonardo replied.

"That sounds very familiar." A grim expression came over Westalia's face as she thought of Lily. She'd worn the mask of a kindhearted princess the entire time she was setting up to betray Westalia.

What Westalia was most concerned with now was the Rias Corporation and their Elizabeth Pink. But Westalia had no idea if they were actually legitimate or not. According to Leonardo, the Reyn family was rumored to be involved with the Devorah Trading Company, from which the former queen, Delphine, had purchased poisons and weapons, but no solid evidence of the connection had been found. The Reyns were said to be involved in various dark deeds both domestically and internationally, but they still hadn't actually been caught in the act of doing anything illegal.

"What do you think about the Rias Corporation?" Westalia asked.

"From the outside it looks legitimate, but in my personal opinion, I highly doubt it. For example, with Elizabeth Pink, I've heard that all of the company's addresses are hidden, from the spinning mill to the weaving factory, and only Tiberio and other important people

involved in the management know the details. Doesn't that strike you as suspicious?" Leonardo asked.

"That does seem odd. That's as good as announcing that there's something going on behind the scenes," Westalia replied.

"Right?"

If the Rias Corporation is committing a crime, it won't be impossible to get their factory shut down, Westalia thought. The connection between the flower collecting and the Rias Corporation, and the emperor's true intentions behind setting this specific challenge, immediately popped into Westalia's mind.

The first piece of the orchestra's performance was over, and the second piece was an up-tempo number. Westalia quickly adapted to the new tune and was stepping nimbly when, from somewhere, she heard a loud thud. She stopped dancing and turned to look in the direction of the sound.

"What was that noise?" Westalia asked.

"Someone fell down," Leonardo replied.

Westalia and Leonardo looked at each other when they heard the name "Elizabeth" murmured among the crowd. They pushed through the crowd to see what had happened to the other star of the day.

They found Elizabeth collapsed on the ground, as white as a sheet. Her brow was covered in a cold sweat, and she was grimacing.

The onlookers were only curious to see what was going on, and no one moved to render aid. Unable to leave a suffering person alone, no matter the rivalry between them, Westalia roughly pushed her way through the crowd.

"Move! You're in the way!" Westalia ordered sharply. She rushed to Elizabeth's side, put her hand on her shoulder, and spoke to the woman. Westalia needed to know her symptoms first.

"What's wrong? Are you feeling ill?" Westalia asked.

"I don't feel good... *Ughhh*..." Elizabeth vomited on the floor. Westalia touched her cheek and felt a great deal of heat. Elizabeth also had a red welt on her neck, the same as on her wrists.

"Anything else?"

"My stomach hurts..."

"Nausea and abdominal pain. How long have you had this rash?"

Elizabeth remained silent. For some reason, she wouldn't answer about the rash. Westalia decided it would be best to call a doctor and instructed Paige, who had just arrived on the scene, "Get the court physician right away."

"On it!" Paige turned on her heel but was abruptly stopped by a man.

"There's no need for that." It was Tiberio Reyn.

Paige's hatred almost overcame her, but she held back, her lips pursing into a tight line. The little reason that she had left beneath her fury decided that she should at least obey a superior in a public place, and she stayed where she was. Tiberio took one look at Paige with a sharp expression on his face, but he quickly smiled again and addressed his daughter.

"What's the matter, Elizabeth? Oh, yes, you must've been nervous being in front of so many people. A breath of fresh air will make you feel better in no time. Now get up."

"Y-Yes, father..."

It was obvious to Westalia, however, that this wasn't even remotely close to someone being drunk or nervous in front of people. Westalia felt uncomfortable watching Elizabeth be forced to stand up when she was clearly in no condition to move. It seemed like Tiberio was trying to hide Elizabeth's condition from the public.

"W-Wait," Westalia started.

"Don't get involved," Leonardo whispered to her, putting a hand on her arm.

It was strange of Leonardo to stop her so directly when he usually left Westalia to her own devices. It made it clear to her just how dangerous it would be to get involved with Tiberio Reyn.

Just then, Elizabeth, who had been forced to move by her father, collapsed again and began to convulse. She fell unconscious with her eyes open and stopped moving. The sight of her was starting to make the other guests uneasy.

Westalia ignored Leonardo's hand and crouched down beside Elizabeth. Then she glared at the people around them and shouted in a loud voice that echoed throughout the hall.

"This is not a spectacle!"

The noisy crowd grew quiet at the intensity behind her words.

"Your Highness, please get these people out of here. Then call the court physician immediately. Now!" Westalia ordered.

"Y-Yes!" Leonardo finally nodded, overwhelmed by the strange situation. Under his guidance, the crowded hall was emptied.

Westalia forcibly borrowed a shawl that one of the curious onlookers had wrapped around themself, rolled it up, and slid it under Elizabeth's head as a pillow. She also turned Elizabeth's face to the side so that her airway wouldn't be blocked if she vomited again. When Westalia reached up to loosen the neck of Elizabeth's dress to make it easier to breathe, Tiberio grabbed her arm.

"My daughter is a bit of a germophobe," Tiberio said. "I'm sorry, but could you please not touch her too much? She'll scold me later if you do."

"Then I will say the same to you."

"What?"

"Please don't touch me so familiarly. I'm a bit of a germophobe too." Westalia roughly shook off the man's hand. Tiberio's expression tightened, but he immediately schooled it back to calm.

Leonardo looked up at the ceiling in exasperation at the overly impolite manner in which Westalia was speaking to the head of a ducal family that even the royal family took a shine to.

Westalia waited at Elizabeth's side for the woman to come to her senses, which happened after a few minutes. But again, Elizabeth's face turned pale and she vomited, and this time she grabbed Westalia's hand in her dazed and faltering consciousness. Elizabeth looked at Westalia with pleading eyes and squeezed out a faint voice.

"Please...it hurts..."

"Yes, I will help you. Don't worry, the pain will pass," Westalia replied. In spite of her bitter memories of the woman's harassment, Westalia was not so ruthless as to coldly shun someone who was clearly suffering and begging for help.

Even at a time like this you're not looking at your father, Westalia thought. She didn't have a close relationship with her parents, so

she wasn't really sure, but she felt that usually when people were sick, they would want to rely on the family members closest to them. But she could see Elizabeth wasn't looking to Tiberio in the slightest.

Westalia gave Elizabeth's hand a firm squeeze and loosened her collar, after which the woman vomited once more and fainted again. Finally, the court physician arrived in the hall and began administering first aid.

"I will take care of the rest. You can leave," Tiberio said.

Is this man really Elizabeth's father? Westalia wondered. She felt unsettled by the man's calm smile, unfazed by his daughter's collapse.

"Very well. Please, take care," Westalia said. Despite her misgivings she gave a curtsy. As she turned to leave, Tiberio whispered in her ear.

"The nail that sticks out gets hammered down. Remember this." Tiberio's tone was gentle but intimidating, and Westalia felt a chill run down her spine.

Westalia sat down on a sofa in the lobby outside the hall. Leonardo, still standing, looked down at her and spoke frankly.

"He's got you on his radar now. Why must you conduct yourself in a way that strikes a nerve in others?"

"I'm sure he's had an eye on me for a while. I'm just another rival to his daughter, another candidate for empress, another thorn in his side," Westalia responded.

"And yet you are as fearless and foolhardy as ever."

"But you love that about me," Westalia said in a mischievous tone, crossing her arms. Leonardo looked away with a slight blush on his cheeks. Speaking of nails, it seemed she'd hit that one right on the head.

Paige, who'd been sent to check Elizabeth's diagnosis, hurried into the lobby.

"How's Elizabeth?" Westalia asked.

"There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with her. The doctor just said that she may have been nervous being in front of so many people."

"Seriously? What kind of quack does Le Chantier Palace keep on their payroll to make that kind of diagnosis?!" Westalia said. Vomiting, abdominal pain, cramps, a red rash: with those symptoms, even a layman would think there was something more going on than just mental stress. How many lives would be lost if being under stress could cause such extreme pain?!

Leonardo countered her with a serious expression. "A quack? Absolutely not. This palace is equipped with the highest level of medical care available in the Archaites Empire."

"I know, I'm just being sarcastic," Westalia said. "Paige, were there any other patients in the infirmary with symptoms similar to Elizabeth's? A red rash?"

Paige nodded, raising her eyebrows slightly, wondering how Westalia could've known that without seeing it for herself. "Y-Yes. There were several people with a rash. They all complained of nausea and abdominal pain. The only thing that bothered me was..."

Westalia cut in, index finger raised in anticipation of what came next. "They were all wearing Elizabeth Pink dresses, correct?"

Paige looked even more surprised. "That's right."

Elizabeth's rash was spreading from where her skin touched her dress, Westalia thought. She stood up from the couch, the corners of her mouth lifting in a smile.

"Elizabeth Pink is all the rage in this country right now. And that dye contains poison."

Tiberio and Elizabeth were trying to hide the fact that Elizabeth had a rash. In other words, they knew that Elizabeth Pink was dangerous.

Westalia had finally found it: the weakness that would bring down the Rias Corporation and the Reyns.

Westalia walked slowly and squinted up at the chandelier overhead. *I wonder if the emperor knows about this. If I use this knowledge about Elizabeth Pink, I'll have a better chance of winning this selection*.

Chapter 2: Seeking the Truth About Elizabeth Pink

For a long time now, every time Elizabeth had worn an Elizabeth Pink dress, she'd broken out in a rash wherever the fabric touched her skin. However, the Reyns had invested a lot of resources in promoting Elizabeth Pink, and Elizabeth herself was an important advertisement for the color. When she complained to her father, Tiberio, that she could no longer wear the color because of how it was affecting her, he had forced her to continue wearing it anyway.

So Elizabeth had told herself that the rash was only temporary and had forced herself to keep wearing her pink clothes. But then the rash had become progressively worse, and she'd begun to suffer from other symptoms as well, such as stomach pains and nausea. When at last she'd become so ill that she'd collapsed, her father had finally allowed her to stop wearing Elizabeth Pink for a little while. The only time Elizabeth wore clothes in colors other than pink was when she was feeling especially ill. She'd been learning to live with her symptoms, but on the day of the party, she'd finally collapsed in front of the crowd and made a spectacle of herself.

After resting and recovering in the infirmary for a little while, Elizabeth had returned to her room in the palace.

"How useless can you be?!" Tiberio yelled.

Elizabeth screamed as a sharp slap echoed through the bedroom. She fell to the floor from the force of impact. Her cheek ached and the taste of iron spread inside her mouth.

"I'm truly sorry. Can I earn your forgiveness— *Ouch*!" she cried.

"If you were smarter and more useful, I wouldn't have to be so upset with you," Tiberio replied. He knotted his fingers into her hair and pulled her face close to his. His face was locked in his normal, gentle smile, his expression conveying nothing about his state of

mind. Despite the fact that he was her father, he still frightened Elizabeth.

"You collapsed at the official unveiling of the empress candidates, stained one of our company's precious Elizabeth Pink dresses, and even inconvenienced attendees who could have been important customers. Are you aware of how deeply you have failed me?" Tiberio asked.

"I know. I'll do better next time. I will not collapse, even if I feel sick," Elizabeth replied.

"I expect nothing less." His smile took on a definite air of intimidation. The cold look in his eyes chilled Elizabeth to the bone. She felt her throat constricting. "Why haven't you become the crown prince's fiancée yet? It seems that foreign woman has successfully won him over. Rumor has it that the crown prince has become quite fond of her and has even been visiting her frequently at the palace. Why can't you be like her?"

Tiberio tightened his grip on Elizabeth's hair before tossing her violently back on the ground.

I want to know that too, Elizabeth thought. She'd been touted as the best candidate in the country, and with her family and their power behind her, she'd taken it for granted that she would become empress and reign alongside Leonardo. But everything had gone haywire when Westalia Lejainne appeared on the scene. What a disgrace for the daughter of the Reyn family to lose to some foreign woman.

According to Tiberio's plan, by now Elizabeth should have already been the crown prince's fiancée. He wanted the shadow power that came from having his own daughter become empress: With a pawn in place, he could take over the Kingdom of Slidd, which was currently under the rule of the Kingdom of Lhumzia.

The conflict between Lhumzia and Archaites had begun when the former forcibly took control of the Kingdom of Slidd, which was located between the two countries. The Archaites Empire had objected to Lhumzia's actions, and the conflict had finally escalated into war. Today, the Kingdom of Lhumzia ruled Slidd as a protectorate, through the local royal family, but they were still at

odds with the Archaites Empire over their right to rule.

Slavery was legal in the Kingdom of Slidd, and Tiberio was planning to bring slaves over to Archaites and use them as labor for the Rias Corporation.

"Tell me once again what your role is," Tiberio ordered.

"My role is to become empress and give birth to a child who will become emperor. And to participate in foreign policy and gain control of the Kingdom of Slidd," Elizabeth replied dutifully.

"That's right. It's all for our family," Tiberio said with a soft smile on his face.

Elizabeth had no interest in the prosperity of the Reyn family or in status or honor. All she had was love, pure and simple. Even if her father said he was doing this all for her, all he really cared about was satisfying his own greed.

"I would've been happy just being by Leonardo's side..." The words slipped out of her mouth before she could catch them.

Tiberio grabbed Elizabeth's collar and smiled scornfully at her. "You can't possibly be serious! You don't have the *luxury* of indulging in love affairs... I think you need to be disciplined again."

It had been Tiberio who'd gotten the answers to the written test in the first round of the empress selection and who'd thought up the answers to the question in the final round.

While her father often pulled strings behind the scenes to make sure that Elizabeth looked like the one being cunning, there were also times when she'd harassed Westalia of her own volition. She'd been the one to try and appoint someone under the Reyns' patronage as a judge for Westalia in the second round, and who had torn up her dress in the third.

I've always watched my father's face closely, and it's turned me into a cowardly person whose first course of action is to play dirty tricks, Elizabeth thought. All this time, she'd been reporting every detail of what was happening to her father and had plotted and carried out schemes to suit his wishes. They were birds of a feather.

I am my father's cruel and irredeemable puppet. She obeyed Tiberio without question because she would be punished if she didn't follow his orders. Even the gathering of flowers was being led

by her father—she had no say in the process.

Elizabeth Reyn was not the kind of candidate whom anyone would truly admire. She was a mediocre girl who could study well and was good with her hands, but she was not outstanding or genuinely commendable at anything. The title of "the best candidate for empress" was a ruse that her father had concocted as part of his plan. The real Elizabeth was just one of Tiberio's pawns.

That's why she hadn't been told how Elizabeth Pink was made or where the factory was located. She was forced to advertise the product like a dress-up doll, without knowing anything about it.

"Father, no! Please, stop! No...!"

All throughout that day, the first candidate's chambers rang with Elizabeth's screams.

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A few days after the party, Westalia paid a visit to the rooms of the first empress candidate. Elizabeth's residence was located exactly opposite from Westalia's.

"Are you really going to visit her?" Paige asked. "She's your rival!"

"I know, but I'm still worried about her," Westalia replied. She hadn't heard from Elizabeth at all since her collapse. Perhaps she didn't want to tell Westalia about her recovery because they were rivals, but Westalia couldn't help but wonder if she was feeling better. She certainly hoped the woman wasn't still lying on the floor.

"You might seem like a villainess on the outside, but you're actually pretty kind, aren't you?" Paige asked.

"Is that a compliment? Or are you being mean?" Westalia replied.

"Half-and-half, I'd say."

"I can't help but note your lack of respect for your employer," Westalia said. Verbally sparring as usual, the pair arrived at Elizabeth's quarters. Westalia called out to one of the ladies' maids, who led them to Elizabeth's bedroom.

"The duke ordered me not to let anyone enter this room," the lady's maid said, looking at Westalia somewhat fearfully. Even when Elizabeth's friends had come to check on her, they'd been turned

away on Tiberio's orders. He'd said that he was sorry to turn down the goodwill from his daughter's friends but that Elizabeth needed to recuperate in solitude.

"Well, then you can't let me pass, can you?" Westalia said. "I'll leave." She stepped back gracefully.

"Wait!" the lady's maid cried and grabbed Westalia's arm. "Miss Elizabeth is so exhausted that she hasn't been able to eat properly for the past few days. She needs someone to help her. Please!"

Westalia and Paige exchanged glances at the maid's impassioned plea.

"I don't really know what's going on, but I won't tell anyone I entered this room," Westalia said. She would have to act carefully so the maid wouldn't be blamed for breaking Tiberio's orders.

Westalia put her hand on the large door and gently pushed it open. Elizabeth was sitting on the bed in a state of disarray, her hair disheveled and her body covered with cuts. She looked at Westalia with vacant, lifeless eyes, then seemed to come to her senses when she realized that it was her rival who had entered.

"Hey! What happened to you?" Westalia cried, rushing over to Elizabeth. She looked even worse than at the party. Her rash was still the same, but now she had wounds all over her body that were a separate problem entirely.

"Was she whipped?" Paige asked quietly as she checked Elizabeth's wounds.

Westalia couldn't discern from a quick look at the wounds what had caused them. But Paige, a former slave, might have been whipped in the past, or seen wounds caused by a whip at least.

"I just fell down," Elizabeth said, clearly lying, as she held her arms close to her to hide her wounds. Then she glared at Westalia. "What are you two doing here? My father said no one was to enter."

The lady's maid was standing in a corner of the room, her eyes darting about anxiously.

"It's a recon mission," Westalia replied without mentioning that she had been let in.

"A recon mission," Elizabeth said flatly.

Then Paige took the liberty of speaking for Westalia and held out

a basket of fruit. “My lady was terribly worried about you, to the point where she couldn’t sleep at night, so she came to check on you.”

“You don’t need to go that far,” Westalia chided.

“My lady has trouble speaking frankly, so I came on her behalf.”

“You don’t need to point that out,” Westalia said.

“I’ve always been praised for my attentiveness,” Paige shot back.

“Was this in some daydream of yours?” Westalia asked, pinching the cheek of her brazenly lying knight.

A small smile bloomed on Elizabeth’s lips. Then her shoulders shook as she started to laugh.

“Watching you two makes me forget what I’m worried about. You’re so weird,” Elizabeth said after she got her laughter under control. At that moment, a sad gurgle came from Elizabeth’s stomach. And not just once. The sound happened again and again. Elizabeth blushed at how obvious her hunger was. That reminded Westalia about the lady’s maid’s concerns.

Seeing as how Elizabeth had laughed at her, Westalia figured this was a good chance to poke back.

“Is *that* the infamous Elizabeth Pink?” she asked, pointing to the blush staining Elizabeth’s cheeks.

“You’re really not so bad,” Elizabeth conceded.

Westalia plunked the basket they’d brought down on the bed and showed Elizabeth its contents.

“Is there anything in here you can eat? You should eat properly. If you don’t want fruit, just let me know and I’ll get you something else. It won’t take long,” Westalia said.

“An apple...” Elizabeth said.

“Okay! We’ll peel it for you.”

Westalia asked the lady’s maid to fetch a fruit knife and plate, then sat down on a chair next to the bed. Paige peeled the fruit with a practiced hand.

“Is there anything I can do to help? I’ll do whatever I can. You can count on me,” Westalia said.

“Why are you being so kind to me? I’m your rival, and I have done nothing but try to sabotage you,” Elizabeth replied.

"What you've done to me and what's happened to you are two totally separate things," Westalia said.

"I don't need your help," Elizabeth said, quickly looking away and showing her stubborn streak.

It was easy for Westalia to imagine what Elizabeth had gone through, even without her explaining. On the day of the party, Elizabeth had appeared frightened of Tiberio when they were dancing together. She'd always put on a show of being strong, but in front of her father, her expression had been downcast, and even when she collapsed, she hadn't wanted to turn to him for help. Tiberio, too, had shown no signs of concern for his daughter's poor health, indicating that the two did not have a healthy relationship. And now Elizabeth was covered in cuts. Since Elizabeth was the daughter of a ducal family, the only people Westalia could think of who could do this to her were people of higher rank or her own relatives.

The lady's maid had said earlier that Tiberio had forbidden anyone from entering Elizabeth's room, so Westalia surmised that Tiberio himself was almost certainly the one who had done this. Westalia sympathized: Her own parents had never loved her, and she'd been at the mercy of the former queen, which had led her to suffer for a long time. Even those who seemed to be blessed often had complicated circumstances going on in the background.

Paige placed the cut apple on a plate and handed it to Elizabeth, along with a fork.

I can't afford to be nice to my rival, but I can't ignore her either, Westalia thought. The only sound in the room now was Elizabeth munching the apple.

"Then don't think of it as me helping you; think of it as me *using* you," Westalia said.

"Why would you do that? You have no idea how I feel, so don't act like you're a nice person," Elizabeth replied.

"I'm not you, so of course I don't know how you feel. I just know how painful things can be," Westalia said. She put her hand to her chest and kept her eyes pointed downward as she remembered the night of the party and Elizabeth begging for her help.

"My heart has been wounded so much that it broke a long time ago. I'm dragging my broken heart around with me, just following my father's lead," Elizabeth muttered to herself in a self-deprecating tone. Tears welled up in her eyes and dripped onto the plate of apple slices. "My father never respects my feelings. Whenever I don't act the way he wants me to, he punishes me like this and curses me for being useless. I'm just a puppet..."

Elizabeth covered her face with her hands and sobbed. Paige gently rubbed her back.

"If you don't like it, then you'll have to work hard to change. Are you just going to keep being a meek, obedient servant of your father's?" Westalia asked Elizabeth.

"I am not like you! No one's as strong as you are. There's no way I can change. What on earth could such a weak and pitiful creature like me do?" Elizabeth cried.

"You could do anything." Even Westalia wasn't all that strong. Still, there was a world that she hoped to see, so she kept running, pushing herself to keep going. It was scary to try and change. Still, if one didn't have the courage to take the first step, they would never be able to see what lay ahead. Rather than giving up from the beginning and staying in one's shell, Westalia thought it was better to break out and make an effort to move forward, even if that meant failures and setbacks, even if the results weren't always as she hoped. She believed that those who never stopped moving toward their goals would surely be rewarded.

Westalia smiled graciously as she picked up her teacup. "I was locked up in a royal villa, I was poisoned to death because I wouldn't give in to the absurdity of it all, and yet, despite it all, I have managed to become one of the final candidates for empress of a great country. You can absolutely take revenge on your horrible father. You can argue him into submission!"

Elizabeth's eyes widened and glistened.

Westalia extended a hand to her. "I hate you. But I will never give up on you if you can find it in yourself to move forward."

Elizabeth wiped the tears from her cheeks in one smooth moment, took Westalia's proffered hand, and stood up. "I hate you

too. You're proud and impudent. I'm the one who will be empress and stand at Leonardo's side. But...thank you."

She slowly approached and buried her face in Westalia's shoulder. Westalia wrapped her arms around the woman and gently patted her head.

"I want to change. I don't want to stay weak. Please...help me," Elizabeth said, in a voice so weak it sounded as if she would fade away at any moment.

"Yes, of course," Westalia replied.

After Elizabeth had cried for a while and regained her composure, Westalia abruptly took out a glass vial from her pocket. She held it up in front of Elizabeth's face, and the woman looked at it in confusion.

"Now then, let me use this to collect your urine," Westalia said, a nonchalant look on her face.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's of utmost importance, so please hurry." Westalia forced the bottle into her hands as Elizabeth stood stunned. Westalia smiled affectionately at her as they stood in silence, staring at each other, for a few seconds.

Then Elizabeth, feeling unsafe, thrust the glass bottle back into Westalia's chest. "Absolutely not! What in the world are you trying to do to a lady, you pervert?!"

Westalia frowned and grabbed Elizabeth. "Pervert? Fine then, just give it to me and stop complaining. I'd be happy to rip your clothes off if you want."

"Gyeh?! Please don't do that! Let go of me! Why should I give my urine to you? What are you going to use it for? You're not going to drink—"

"I'm not going to drink it!!!" Just what sort of mental image did Elizabeth have of her? "I'm going to analyze it. I might be able to find out the cause of your health problems. Elizabeth, did your father tell you to keep quiet about the rash you get when you wear a dress dyed with Elizabeth Pink?"

"How did you know that? Yes. He said if it came out that I was allergic, I wouldn't be able to remain the poster girl for it."

Was that really all there was to it? Westalia sensed that Tiberio was stubbornly trying to hide Elizabeth's rash for some reason other than simply that it wasn't compatible with her skin. The day of the party, others who'd been wearing Elizabeth Pink had also fallen ill.

"I don't think that's true. I don't think it's because you're allergic to it. I think it's a symptom of poisoning. It's not just something that happens to you but a reaction that could happen to a lot of people," Westalia said.

Elizabeth looked stunned. Elizabeth Pink was a major business venture for the Rias Corporation, which was owned by the Reyn family. That was why Tiberio tried to hide its toxicity—for the sake of profit.

Elizabeth was being made to promote a dye containing poison without knowing anything about it. It feels as though there's some irony here, Westalia thought.

After Westalia returned to her own quarters, she went into her laboratory. It was a place where Westalia could indulge her hobbies to their fullest extent. There were bookshelves, so large that they took up an entire wall, filled with books on poisons, and glass shelves neatly arranged with medical equipment. This created the perfect environment for researching medicines and manufacturing poison needles—Westalia's hidden weapon of choice. When she was in the royal villa in Lhumzia, she had always been under the watchful eye of the former queen and couldn't do anything that would raise suspicions, but here there was no one to criticize her for studying medicine.

Paige and the palace servants were skeptical of it all, but Westalia didn't care. Often, she spent the whole night studying and showed up to breakfast still in her white lab coat.

A few hours after bringing Elizabeth's urine into the laboratory, Westalia smiled wryly as she held up the test tube.

Just as I suspected.

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A week after her visit with Elizabeth, Westalia went out into the imperial city with Leonardo. He was so busy with his political duties that he hadn't had much time to see her, but he still took time out of his day to visit her in her quarters.

Today was their first outing together since the extension of the empress selection had been announced. Westalia was wearing a purple dress. Its skirt, which was made of lacy fabric with an airy, almost translucent look, was pleated and trailed gracefully as she walked. The only thing missing was the blue stone earring. She had taken it from Leonardo the night they'd met, but she'd given it back to him after moving her residence to Le Chantier Palace. The earring was very important to him, as it was engraved with proof that he was to be the next emperor.

Besides, she no longer needed the earring as an excuse to see him—they could meet simply because they wanted to—but now that she no longer wore it, her ear was feeling empty.

I got here way too early, Westalia thought as she looked up at the clock tower. They had planned to meet in the city, as Leonardo had business he had to attend to earlier in the day.

After repeatedly looking at the hands of the clock, Westalia finally realized that she was getting excited about the date and smiled wryly. She stood in front of the sign for the shoe shop that they had designated as their meeting spot and played with the lonely earlobe that had previously housed Leonardo's earring.

It wasn't long before Leonardo appeared. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Westalia, who was dressed with some panache.

"That outfit looks wonderful on you. You're gorgeous," Leonardo said.

"No need for flattery," Westalia replied. She was somewhat embarrassed by the straightforward compliment, and she looked down as she pushed a wayward piece of hair behind her ear.

Leonardo's eyes narrowed lovingly. "It wasn't flattery. You look like a goddess descended from the heavens."

Westalia was immediately reminded that she'd referred to herself as such on the night they'd met.

His expression changed so little that it was hard for Westalia to tell if he was teasing her or if he meant what he said. Westalia, at a loss for a good response, looked around this way and that, and after a moment of hesitation, she lifted a poisoned needle from her pocket with a flick.

"Stop teasing me or I'll stab you," she said.

"I didn't mean to tease you. And that's dangerous, so put it away." Leonardo gently stroked Westalia's flushed cheek. The places he touched grew hot and that heat gradually spread to other places in her body.

Oh my god, he throws me completely off-balance, Westalia thought. With Paige, say, Westalia could just lightly dismiss her, but with Leonardo, her heart immediately started running amok.

Then, from across the street, a small child pointed at them and said, "Look, mommy! They're making out!"

"Don't point!" The mother grabbed the child's hand and apologized to Westalia and Leonardo, but the mood was already ruined.

"Shall we go?" Leonardo asked.

"Good idea."

Their destination was the apothecary where Westalia used to work. They could have taken a horse-drawn carriage there directly, but they'd decided to have lunch in town, do some shopping, and walk there at a leisurely pace.

The streets were lined with various stores and there were many people out and about. It was an ordinary scene, but to Westalia, who'd been locked up in a royal villa for so long, everything seemed so colorful and vivid.

The smell of delicious food coming from the stalls wafted to her nose. "Hey, Leo, look at that. It's so strange looking." She tapped Leonardo on the arm and pointed to a window display as they walked along the cobblestones. In the window was an oddly shaped, carved wooden figurine.

"It's a traditional handicraft of the seaside peoples. It's used in rituals to pray for a good harvest," Leonardo said.

"Huh. It kind of looks like you."

"It does...?" The figurine was in the shape of a human being and had a funny face that was incredibly unfriendly looking. Leonardo raised his eyebrows in disapproval at the comparison. The resemblance was so striking that Westalia almost burst out laughing, but she managed to hold it in.

Westalia and Leonardo discussed what to have for lunch and decided on buying bread and soup from a food stall and taking it to eat on a nearby terrace. The bread was flat and rustic, with tomatoes, olives, cheese, and bacon on top.

Leonardo told Westalia that it was a traditional bread of the Archaites Empire and that the common people ate it by tearing it with their hands and dipping it in soup, without using a knife or fork.

Well, it's like they say: "Do as the locals do." Here we go! Westalia thought. She'd been taught strict manners during her past education to be queen, so she felt a little lost, but she followed the culture and ate the food, tearing it into pieces without caring if her hands got dirty.

"It's... It's delicious!" The bread was crispy on the outside and soft and chewy on the inside. The savory flavor of herbs spread throughout her mouth, and the acidity of the tomatoes and sweetness of the cheese blended well on her tongue. Leonardo watched her contentedly as she enjoyed the novel foreign food.

After finishing their meal, the two of them looked around the stalls that lined the sides of the street. At one of the stalls, Westalia spotted hair ornaments made of artificial flowers for sale and stopped to take a look. Among them, the one that caught her attention was the one dyed with Elizabeth Pink.

You can find Elizabeth Pink in every store, she thought. Even though she was enjoying her date with Leonardo, her expression grew serious.

Leonardo looked over her shoulder and followed her line of sight. "Thinking of getting some artificial flowers for the challenge?"

Westalia shook her head. "Bringing back just one or two things wouldn't be helpful."

"That's true."

Searching for cheap-looking artificial flowers at street stalls in town and buying them in small quantities wouldn't be enough to win and would only waste Westalia's precious budget.

Then Leonardo let out a small sigh. "The emperor has high expectations for you. You've been given the opportunity to compete for another six months against the woman that the Reyns have been pushing hard for."

"I understand. I know that even though the Reyns pressured the Orencia family when they learned of the extended selection period, the emperor was adamant about giving us this time." Westalia thought back to the words the emperor had whispered in her ear after he announced the challenge.

If you want to defeat your rival, you must consider the true reason I chose this challenge, he'd said.

Westalia confided in Leonardo what the emperor had said, and he brought a hand to his chin as he mulled it over.

"His Majesty's true desire is none other than to preserve the present power of our family. If the Reyns marry in, they will surely interfere in the management of the empire. His Majesty is reluctant to let their family climb the ladder of power any higher than they already have in order to protect the interests of our people. Even though he can't outright ignore them because of their influence, a situation in which Elizabeth could get her hands on the throne is very troubling."

"Just as I suspected," Westalia said.

Because the empress selection process didn't depend on bloodlines, power was never concentrated in a single family but instead dispersed from one generation to the next. That meant that the position of the imperial family was fragile and vulnerable and that they must constantly fear they'd be undermined by a new power. If Elizabeth were to become empress, the Reyns would work ruthlessly to wrest the reins of power from the emperor. In other words, the emperor could not marry someone from the Reyn family if he wanted to maintain his royal power during his reign.

But still, what can I even do about it? Westalia wondered. The

emperor's true intention was tied to the downfall of the Reyn family. Westalia looked down with a melancholy expression on her face. Before leaving this morning, she'd checked Elizabeth's storehouse in Le Chantier Palace and found a huge number of artificial flowers already stored there, even though it had only been a month. Her rival's flower collection was progressing faster than Westalia had expected.

It's too late to expose the secrets of the Rias Corporation to try and shut down the Reyn's artificial-flower factory now. I can't collect more flowers than she can. I can't win... One of the ideas that had taken Westalia two weeks to come up with—namely, "prevent flowers from being collected in Elizabeth's storehouse"—was now completely out of the question. However, no matter how much she thought about it, she couldn't come up with a way to gather more artificial flowers than Elizabeth.

"Elizabeth's storehouse is already full of artificial flowers. As it is... I'm..." *...going to lose*, she finished silently. Westalia's anxiety was growing. How could she beat Elizabeth? How could she win the title of empress? She'd worked so hard and gotten this far, but was it all going to be for nothing?

"Don't be so hard on yourself," Leonardo said, resting a hand on her shoulder. Westalia turned away from his steady gaze.

"I'm scared. I don't think I can win," Westalia said. She'd managed to put on a strong front for Paige and Elizabeth, but in front of Leonardo she was able to expose her vulnerability for the first time.

"I know exactly how you feel. I heard about your situation from Paige, and I thought you must be pretty anxious about it. I wondered if you were just putting on a brave face in front of others," Leonardo said.

Westalia probably had been avoiding reality by focusing on making her own artificial flowers.

Paige had become deeply concerned for Westalia after she'd fallen into a depression at the announcement of the extension to the empress selection. Paige had put her pride aside and gone to talk to Leonardo about it. She'd figured there was no one better to consult

with about Westalia than him, given that her lady had few other friends. Since then, she'd occasionally reported to Leonardo about Westalia's situation. Although Paige adamantly disliked Leonardo, she knew she could always turn to him for help when it came to Westalia.

"Are you going to give up now?" Leonardo asked. Westalia's eyebrows twitched at this. "Would the Westalia Lejainne that I know so well really give up over something as small as this?" he pressed on.

Westalia pursed her lips and shook her head. Leonardo had probably said something so provocative because he knew she had no real intention of giving up. He knew very well that Westalia was the type of person who could be riled into determination.

"I'm prepared to work as hard as I can, and if it doesn't work, I'm prepared to accept my loss gracefully. But..."

"But?" Leonardo prodded.

Westalia looked him dead in the eye and spoke louder. "I absolutely don't want to lose. I *won't* lose!"

Her flame of passion, which had grown weak since the announcement, flared up again at Leonardo's words. Even if she was weak, even if she was on the verge of falling apart, she could not stop moving forward. The intense desire to become empress swelled within her.

"Good. I know that too. I'll do anything to help you, so don't try and do it all by yourself," Leonardo said.

"Anything?" Westalia asked.

"Yeah, anything." His eyes suddenly softened and he removed a long earring from his left lobe. He placed it in Westalia's hand. "This is for you. You can do whatever you want with it."

This earring was worth more than money. His intention in entrusting it to Westalia, was, of course, not that she would sell it for funds but that she'd put it to good use. The blue gemstone in the earring was engraved with the crest of the next emperor. With just this, she could read the banned books kept in the palace and order the Imperial Guard around. She'd returned it once, but it was also a memento that tied Leonardo and Westalia together. She was sure

that it was his own way of showing his support.

"Isn't this trusting me too much? Besides, you're spoiling me too much," Westalia said.

The corner of Leonardo's mouth lifted and he said mischievously, "Don't you know? I have no choice but to spoil you."

Leonardo really did throw her completely off-balance. Westalia wasn't sure how she was in such high spirits now, not when she'd been completely downcast only a few moments ago. Westalia wrapped her hands around the charm he'd entrusted to her and held it close to her chest.

"But I don't understand," Leonardo said. "Why is the last challenge of the empress selection to collect artificial flowers? It's just like the paper used for the written exam; they'll only end up in the garbage. If the subject were more beneficial to the people, it would increase the public approval of my family."

Westalia jerked her head up to look at him. "What did you just say?!"

"It should've been something more beneficial to the people."

"No! Before that! About the flowers!"

"They'll just end up in the garbage."

Westalia's eyes sparkled, but Leonardo had no idea what she was getting so excited about.

"That's it! I've got it! It's finally getting interesting."

Leonardo just looked confused. Westalia didn't explain further, but she was clearly satisfied with herself.

It's a gamble, but it's worth a try. If there's even a chance of winning it's worth it, Westalia thought.

Westalia picked up one of the Elizabeth Pink hair ornaments and handed it to the clerk. "I'll take this one, please."

"Of course!"

After paying, Westalia rushed Leonaro onward. "Let's get to Daniel's quick, Leo!" Westalia rushed ahead of him, walking briskly to the apothecary. Leonardo was left watching her back, a troubled expression on his face.

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When Westalia and Leonardo arrived at the apothecary, they found David watering a withered tree. Besides the herbs he grew for his medicines, he kept many other plants for his research. The withered tree stood out among all the other well-cared for residents of his garden.

"Is there really a point to watering a dead tree?" Westalia asked. Daniel turned toward them. He was an avid gardener, so he of all people should've known that dead trees couldn't come back to life.

"Corda— Westalia! It's fine, I know it won't come back to life. I'm just keeping my promise to my daughter," Daniel said.

Westalia had already told Daniel her true identity. He'd been surprised at first, but his friendly demeanor toward her hadn't changed.

The tree he was watering was a peach tree, grown from a seed Daniel's daughter had planted a long time ago. It had never borne fruit, but he had continued upholding his promise to look after the tree.

"Even if it looks dead, if there's a bit of it left alive it may still produce new shoots," Leonardo said. "The key to everything is patience."

The tree looked beyond help to Westalia, but Leonardo's words seemed to reflect Daniel's sentiments.

"That's right. I bet this tree is just resting. I'm sure it will bear sweet fruit when it wakes back up again," Westalia agreed. Even if the tree was completely dead, she wanted to believe that it would one day show its lush greenery once more, and perhaps she, too, would be happier if she held on to that hope.

"I hope so," Daniel said, looking near to tears. His water jug was just about empty, so they all headed into the apothecary.

"This dye shouldn't be on the market," Daniel said, coming out from the back rooms of the shop with a concerned look on his face.

Westalia had given him Elizabeth's urine and a scrap of cloth dyed with Elizabeth Pink ahead of time and asked him to analyze them both. Westalia remained calm despite the rare grave expression on the face of a man who was usually so carefree.

"So, Elizabeth Pink is a poison after all?" Westalia asked.

"Yes. The urine of the woman who you said wears a lot of Elizabeth Pink dresses contained a dangerous amount of poison," Daniel said, placing the written analysis down on the counter. The toxin in the Elizabeth Pink dye was absorbed into the body primarily through the skin, leading to a variety of symptoms. The symptoms Westalia had observed in Elizabeth included nausea, abdominal pain, a rash, and convulsions.

The Rias Corporation sold their Elizabeth Pink dye on an exclusive basis and hadn't revealed the process to any other company. The company mainly dealt in dresses for aristocrats and because of the dye's luxury status the general public couldn't easily afford it, meaning they could only purchase accessories made with the color.

Some of the young ladies who wore Elizabeth Pink occasionally suffered from unexplained health problems, but nobody even thought to consider that it was a symptom of poisoning, and the size of the market had gradually expanded without anyone noticing those adverse effects. If the Rias Corporation believed that a trace amount of poison would go undetected, then things were going exactly as they had planned. Elizabeth Pink was now their largest venture and a vital source of revenue for the Reyn family.

"What on earth are they using to make the dye?" Leonardo wondered out loud, hand resting on his chin. The whole process was veiled in secrecy.

"I think Westalia already has that answer," Daniel said, holding the scrap of cloth in his gloved hand.

"She does?" Leonardo asked, looking over at Westalia.

Without saying a word, Westalia produced a piece of cloth, dyed the vivid Elizabeth Pink, from her pocket.

"And that is?" Leonardo asked.

"The Elizabeth Pink that I made. It's a good reproduction, isn't it?"

The vibrancy produced by the Rias Corporation's secret technique was said to be impossible to reproduce, and for good reason.

"No one *should* be able to reproduce it," Westalia said, a sneer playing across her lips. "Because this color is made from a poisonous

flower."

Westalia had suddenly remembered what Elizabeth had said at the party—that Elizabeth Pink couldn't be created merely by mixing red and white dyes together. To make the vivid pink, another color was required—orange. And orange dye immediately brought a specific flower to Westalia's mind.

"A poisonous flower?" Leonardo asked.

"It's the flower of the agisakuragi," Westalia replied, smiling elegantly. Agisakuragi was a tall, evergreen tree found in the northern part of the continent, specifically in the Archaites Empire. Its seeds were known to be poisonous, and the oil extracted from them was often used for executions and assassinations. Westalia herself had once been executed by that exact same poison, and she'd never expected it to come back and haunt her again.

"The agisakuragi has beautiful orange flowers. Many vegetable dyes require a process called 'mordanting' to keep the color from fading, but the flowers of the agisakuragi don't, and the color naturally comes out vibrant. Of course, the only thing being factored here is its potential as a plant-based dye. Because of its poisonous nature, it's never actually used," Westalia explained. She was exceptionally knowledgeable about poisons herself, so before passing Elizabeth's urine on to Daniel, she had conducted her own experiments on it. That was how she'd managed to figure out the recipe for the dye. Thanks to their friendship, Daniel knew that Westalia was able to do that level of analysis herself. He pulled out a glass vial of dried agisakuragi flowers and placed it on the counter.

"Even though they can be made into a bright orange pigment, the flowers contain poison as well. Although weaker than the seeds, which are lethal, poison is poison. It's clearly unethical to use the petals of the agisakuragi as a dye," Westalia said. "But the Reyn family must've had their eye on the bright orange of the agisakuragi, especially since no other company was using it. Even if people did get poisoned, as long as it wasn't to the point where they were dying, the Reyns wouldn't get caught."

Just as the Reyns had planned, the uniquely bright Elizabeth Pink had quickly become exceptionally popular, and they'd amassed an

enormous fortune from their sales. When one wore Elizabeth Pink clothing, toxins absorbed through the skin accumulated in the body, and at some point symptoms of poisoning began to occur. Even if one was not wearing something made with Elizabeth Pink, if there was someone wearing it nearby, the toxin could spread into the air via perspiration and cause damage.

Leonardo had been silent the whole time, but now he spoke up. "So if you knew all that, why did you come here?"

It would've been pointless to come just to hear what she already knew. Westalia pointed to the analysis on the counter. "I came for that."

Westalia needed a written analysis to expose the dark side of Elizabeth Pink and the reason the Rias Corporation had kept the manufacturing process secret. Someone like Westalia, who had no official qualifications, couldn't write the analysis and use it as evidence. Daniel, however, was a well-known apothecary. As he'd used to work at Le Chantier Palace and prepare medicine for the royal family, he had their trust, and so he would have a high degree of credibility.

"Please, Daniel, may I have the analysis? If I release it to the world, I'll be able to save people from suffering from Elizabeth Pink."

"No can do," Daniel said bluntly. He picked up the analysis and looked it slowly over from top to bottom. "If you publish this, the Reyns won't hesitate to take me out. I have no title or social standing. I am neither so principled nor so brave as to risk my life for society."

He wasn't wrong. Not everyone could give their all for their beliefs and justice like Westalia could.

But I can't just back down from this, Westalia thought. Daniel was the only apothecary she could trust. She had to do whatever it took to get him to give her that analysis. Westalia leaned in toward him.

"What can I do to get you to give me those results? I need them to become empress and save the people of this country."

"You're being a pain, Westalia."

"I won't give up, no matter what you call me. I'll do anything for

it.”

“Anything?” Daniel’s eyebrows lifted. After a moment of deliberation he turned to a shelf behind the counter and brought down a framed picture to show Westalia and Leonardo. It was a portrait of a young girl who looked to be about twelve.

“Isn’t she pretty? She looks just like my wife.”

“Is that your daughter?” Leonardo asked.

“That’s right. She’s the most important thing to me,” Daniel said, nodding, his eyes narrowing with affection. Westalia had only seen the inquisitive researcher side of him, but this was unmistakably the look of a father. Then his expression darkened.

“But Remilena went missing three years ago and never returned.”

Westalia gasped.

“She went out for a walk alone and was kidnapped,” Daniel said. He then went on to explain that Remilena had been born blind and faced many difficulties in her daily life.

Westalia had known he had a family, but she hadn’t heard anything about his daughter’s disappearance. She’d had no idea he’d been carrying such a heavy burden, with how carefree he always acted.

How did he feel, then, watering that tree? Westalia wondered. She imagined that he was just as heartbroken over the dead tree that would never come back to life as he was over his daughter who had never returned.

He reached out for Westalia’s and Leonardo’s hands as he looked up at them. “Please, find my daughter. Even if it’s just so I know she’s no longer in this world. I can’t keep living with the feeling that she might be suffering somewhere.”

“Daniel...” Honestly, Westalia didn’t have time to go looking for someone. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, and Westalia needed to be focused on exposing the atrocity that was Elizabeth Pink *and* collecting more fake flowers than Elizabeth. And yet...

“Okay. Leave it to me,” Westalia said, nodding vigorously at Daniel. “I’ll figure something out and find out what happened to your daughter. Don’t worry. That fact that you’ve enlisted my help

means you haven't given up hope yet."

"Are you sure?! Westalia, you're facing your biggest challenge yet to become empress..."

Westalia let out a small laugh. "Don't be absurd. I had no social standing or connections when I arrived and the only reason I was able to work and get paid was because of you, Daniel. I would've starved to death otherwise."

"That's true, but..."

Westalia's expression tightened briefly at the fact that he hadn't disagreed with her, and even Leonardo was nodding in agreement with Daniel's assessment.

"Remilena is alive and you will be reunited with her. I truly believe that," Westalia said. She could see Daniel's eyes grow watery as she said that.

His expression changed again and he smiled a little sadly. "I look forward to the day when you snatch this analysis from my hands, as blithely as ever."

Westalia held his hand gently as the man held back his tears.

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"Don't you think you've bit off more than you can chew?" Leonardo asked her as they stopped on the lakeshore after leaving the apothecary. It was a reasonable question.

"Now that I know what happened, I can't just ignore it," Westalia replied. Without any support, she was limited in what she could do at the moment, but there was no way she could leave Daniel in that state. She hung her head and pouted.

Leonardo let out a short laugh and said with a snarky look on his face, "Shall I help you out?"

He seemed to be making a kind offer, but Westalia could tell from his expression that he was up to something.

"Well, I'd be grateful. You're very good at finding people, Leo. Even though I told you I didn't want to see you again, you still persisted in hunting me down in this great big city, always hot on my heels."

Leonardo had happened to be traveling along the border of the Archaites Empire when Westalia made her illegal entry into the country. Even though she'd hoped to never run into him again, they'd ended up having a number of chance encounters.

"You don't sound like you're grateful," Leonardo said.

"It's because you're making that face."

"I have one condition if you want my help."

"A condition? If it's money I don't have any." There it was. Westalia scowled as her earlier prediction had been spot on. She looked up at him with undisguised wariness.

"Don't look like that. It's nothing horrible," Leonardo said. He leaned in close to Westalia and whispered in her ear in a saccharine voice. "From now on, I want you to kiss me every time we meet up."

"Wh-Wh-What?!" Westalia jumped, her face growing red. She took two steps back. What was he saying?

It's quite economical that such a busy man can be bought so cheaply, with just a pair of lips... No, no, no, no! My lips aren't something he can put a price on! Westalia thought. She had kissed Leonardo once before, but that had been a natural progression of events, not something she'd been ordered to do. Her thoughts were running a mile a minute.

"It's easy, isn't it?" Leonardo pressed her.

There was no way. Leonardo looked rather amused as her mouth hung slightly agape. He drew close to her again and scooped her narrow chin in his hand, stroking a finger along her jaw.

"I can take care of the search for the girl, and you can concentrate on the selection for empress. I can figure something out just as well, so it'll be mutually beneficial," Leonardo said. He spoke as if that were a reasonable compromise.

"It would only be detrimental to my good name and reputation," Westalia countered immediately.

"Then this conversation is over."

Leonardo was truly vexing. He knew she had no choice but to agree. He seemed to be enjoying himself, while the challenge of the empress selection was really ramping up for Westalia.

"Hey, you know I'm just kid—"

Westalia jerked on Leonardo’s arm before he could finish his sentence, stood on her tiptoes, and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek. Leonardo’s eyes widened. She then lowered her heels back to the ground and looked up at him, her cheeks still tinted slightly vermilion.





"You better keep your promise," she said.

"I didn't think you'd actually do it," Leonardo whispered, raising a hand to his cheek, which was still slightly warm from her lips. Westalia, on the other hand, couldn't even hear what he was saying because her heart was beating so fast and she was completely out of it. And so, their sweet day came to an end.

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Two weeks after Westalia and Leonardo had their sweet moment by the lake, Paige was on a mission at the behest of her employer. Today, she and Dion, Leonardo's aide, were sneaking into the Reyn mansion.

"Tiberio's office is at the end of that hallway," Dion said.

"Don't give me orders," Paige grumbled, glaring at him.

"Whoa, all right," Dion said, smiling and holding up his hands in surrender.

Ugh, why do I have to work with this guy? Paige thought. She had taken one look at Dion's amiable smile and spat out an oath in her mind. He was always by Leonardo's side, not only assisting him in his political affairs but also performing the duties of a bodyguard to perfection. He was accomplished in both the literary and military arts and above all he had a beautiful face.

Dion kept his shoulder-length brown hair tied back, and his red eyes were always wryly smiling. He was aloof, elusive, and handsome. According to what Westalia had heard, he was apparently a natural womanizer—just the type of man Paige hated. Leonardo trusted him a lot, however, and they seemed to be close enough to exchange light banter. The prince had sent Dion to help her on this critical mission out of the kindness of his heart, but Paige would much rather do this alone than partner with someone of such a questionable nature.

Dressed in robes, the pair observed the Reyns' mansion from the bushes outside.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Dion asked, smiling at Paige. "I

heard you've also got something against the crown prince."

"I hate good-looking men," Paige answered immediately, with no hesitation.

"What? Did a handsome man murder your parents or something?" Dion's joking words were met with a furious glare from Paige. Dion gulped, intimidated.

I will never forget Tiberio Reyn's face, Paige thought, suddenly filled with hatred. She gritted her teeth. She thought back to seeing Tiberio at the formal announcement for the empress candidates. She hadn't seen him in about five years, but he didn't look any older, and he still had the same unpleasantly elegant appearance as always.

Paige hated men with pretty faces. When she had been a slave in the Kingdom of Slidd, her first master had been horrible and had often beaten his wife. He'd had a pretty face too, and that had contributed to her dislike of beautiful men as a whole. But the decisive factor in Paige's hatred of such men was someone else. Tiberio Reyn, the man who had in fact killed her beloved parents and taken everything from her, was the one who had planted the seed for this hatred.

Paige snapped out of her momentary reverie and back to reality and stared fixedly at the guards in front of the Reyn mansion. "There are six guards in front of the main entrance. Let's go around to the rear."

"Aye, aye."

Seeing two knights by the back entrance, Paige and Dion scaled the outer wall and entered the property. It was late at night, so everyone in the house was asleep and there was no one out in the yard. Dion approached what was likely the kitchen on the first floor and put his hand on the window, which had been left unlocked and open.

"This looks like the kitchen. There's nobody in there," Dion said, peering in through the window.

"I can see that," Paige snapped.

"Okay, okay."

Dion made his way through the open window and Paige followed suit. He offered her his hand, which she promptly ignored.

Today's task was to sneak into Tiberio's office at his residence and find out the address of the factory where Elizabeth Pink was produced. That information was strictly controlled, and the locations of all the factories, from spinning to weaving, were kept a closely guarded secret.

The only people who knew these locations were Tiberio and a few others involved in the management of the Rias Corporation. Even Tiberio's daughter, Elizabeth, didn't know where or how Elizabeth Pink was made. Of all the factories, Westalia was most interested in the one where the fabric was dyed. She had speculated that the workers there were being poisoned during the dyeing process.

For two weeks, Paige had followed Tiberio, but she hadn't seen any suspicious behavior and, of course, had been unable to locate the dyeing factory. There was only a limited amount of time before the final count of the flower gathering. Therefore, Paige had decided to stop wasting time with pointless tailing and, although it was a hard-line approach, search Tiberio's office directly to get a clue.

Elizabeth was also cooperating with the plan, and Westalia had asked her to unlock the kitchen window in advance to facilitate Paige and Dion's entry. She was to watch Tiberio's movements as well as distract the knights on guard while Paige and Dion ransacked the office. Apparently, Tiberio was on a business trip and wouldn't be back that day.

"Lady Westalia told me that the crown prince often goes on inspection tours. Do you sometimes find yourself stepping into dangerous situations?" Paige asked.

"Not just sometimes, a lot of times. He's prone to overworking me," Dion replied. Leonardo was like a guard dog, always sniffing around to maintain the country's security and protect the Orencia family's position. He was willing to resort to any means necessary to achieve his goals.

"Ha, I know that feeling," Paige said, smiling for the first time that day as she thought of Westalia. Westalia had grown up being groomed for queen, so she was used to ordering others around and naturally tried to put them to good use. Her haughty attitude was backed up by the fact that she was raised as a person who would

one day be in charge. That was in addition, of course, to her natural arrogance and unyielding spirit.

Dion looked at Paige and smirked. "Oh, you're pretty cute when you smile."

"What?" Paige frowned and looked at him with contempt.

"Hmm, but not with that face," Dion said.

If he ever speaks to me like that again, I'll make sure those are the last words he ever speaks, Paige thought.

Dion, oblivious to Paige's building fury, was smiling broadly. They left the kitchen and went upstairs via the emergency staircase.

Walking down a wide corridor, they headed for their intended destination. According to the map Elizabeth had given them, the office should be the corner room. It was late at night, so there were no servants walking around, but all the lights were still on, and there were a few knights here and there on patrol. As one would expect from a duke's house, the security was perfect. In fact, it was so tight that it was almost suspicious.

Dion hid in a corner of the corridor and peeked his head out to see if there were any knights in front of Tiberio's office.

"Anyone there?" Paige asked.

"It doesn't seem like it."

"Lady Elizabeth did well, then," Paige replied. Normally, there should have been two knights standing guard in front of the office all night. However, Elizabeth must have succeeded in getting their attention and moving them away from the door. It was all going according to plan.

Paige crouched down in front of the door, took a wire bent at a right angle and a straight wire out of her pocket, and inserted them into the keyhole. She looked inside for the place where the pin and the wire matched.

"Where'd you learn to pick locks?" Dion asked.

"Lady Westalia taught me. I don't have any pretensions about my skill, but Westalia always boasts that there's not a lock she can't open," Paige replied.

"Wow, she's confident. I guess versatility is to be expected of a candidate for empress. Is that really a necessary skill to have for a

monarch, though?"

"I dunno about that," Paige said. Making concealable poisoned weapons and lockpicking seemed a bit too fringe of skills for an empress, and Paige sometimes wondered if Westalia wouldn't be better suited to being a bandit.

Tiberio always carried the key to his office with him, so Westalia had asked Elizabeth to check the shape of the key and then come up with a way to unlock the door. Sweat dripped down Paige's forehead as she worked on the lock, which didn't seem to want to open.

Just how cautious can one man be? Damn it, Paige thought. Tiberio kept the lights on at night, had guards patrolling all over the place, and kept the key to his office with him at all times. He was practically advertising that he had things to hide.

After a short struggle, Paige finally heard a clunk and the door unlocked. The inside of the office was neatly organized, but there were piles of papers here and there.

"I'll look on this shelf. Paigey, you can take the desk," Dion said.

"Paige...y? Don't call me weird names," Paige shot back, her face twitching at both the nickname and being told what to do.

Dion looked happy as he examined the documents and put a few away in his pocket as a gift for Leonardo. Today, his main task was to help Paige, but he was also aiming to find out one or two of Tiberio's other weaknesses.

Paige managed to regain her composure and headed toward the desk. The stacks of papers were filled with a fluid handwriting that must've belonged to Tiberio. As she searched among them for anything related to the Elizabeth Pink factory, her eyes fell on one particular sheet of paper.

The former Marquis of Lanchester, Paige thought. They were a family descending from a long line of knights who'd fallen into ruin five years ago. The estate now belonged to the Reyns. The paper was a land management ledger from the former marquis.

Westalia had once lied about her identity, but Paige, too, had a secret she couldn't reveal: Lanchester was her last name.

Dad... Mom... Paige gripped the ledger tightly.

"Got it!" Dion shouted from where he'd been rummaging through

the shelves. “Paigey, I’ve found the address of the Elizabeth Pink factory! It’s not far outside the capital.”

Just as Paige was about to give Dion a hard time, she heard the door open. Paige looked over at the sound of footsteps. It was the last person they wanted to see in the office.

“Well, well, well, it seems I’ve got a rat infestation,” Tiberio said, an intimidating smile on his face. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

There stood the duke. Paige’s enemy. The one who’d killed her parents. The most abominable man in the world. And behind him was Elizabeth, looking at Paige and Dion with an apologetic, tear-stained face.

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“It must be hard for you to have to work so late at night,” Elizabeth said, smiling elegantly at the two knights standing guard in front of her father’s office.

It was an hour before Paige and Dion were set to break into the Reyn mansion.

“Well, that’s part of the job,” one replied, looking away awkwardly. The other was blatantly ogling Elizabeth, his cheeks flushed red.

Elizabeth was wearing a thin, silk nightdress that accentuated the lines of her body. The rash that had appeared from the Elizabeth Pink poisoning had been easily disguised with a dab of white powder. No man—Leonardo aside—could resist Elizabeth’s beauty when she showed off her soft skin and ample cleavage.

“Say, I have some rare tea from abroad in my room. Would you two like to share it with me?” Elizabeth whispered seductively to one of them, pressing her body up against him. He audibly gulped.

“W-We’re on duty,” the knight stammered.

“My father’s on a business trip and won’t be home tonight. There’s no one here who would blame you for taking the night off,” Elizabeth said.

“Well then, we’re at your service.”

Elizabeth walked with her back to the knights as they followed her, just as she had planned. Her lips curved up into a smile. Now all that remained was for Paige and Dion to come and break into the office as planned.

After taking the two knights into her private rooms, Elizabeth was to give them a sleeping potion mixed with the tea, which Westalia had prepared in advance.

"Please have a seat while I prepare the tea," Elizabeth said.

"We don't want to be any trouble..."

"Oh, there's no need to worry about that," Elizabeth replied, pouring the tea for them after they sat down. Almost immediately after drinking the tea, the pair lost consciousness and stopped talking.

Wow, it worked like a charm. Just what kind of person is Lady Westalia really?! Elizabeth wondered. Westalia had said she'd concocted the sleeping potion herself. It was a well-known fact that she'd been thoroughly educated to be a queen in Lhumzia; the Lhumzian royal family must've made her learn incredibly advanced pharmacology as well.

Elizabeth had also studied various things in preparation to become empress, but clearly not as extensively as Westalia had. Her education and depth of knowledge must have been due not only to her hard work but also to her naturally inquisitive mind.

The two knights were sleeping so soundly that Elizabeth poked one of them in the cheek with the wet teaspoon to make sure they weren't actually dead. She could hear him breathing faintly in his sleep, but he didn't move or change expression at all, still as a corpse.

In any case, I'll leave the rest up to you, Paige and Dion, Elizabeth thought. She had been at Tiberio's beck and call for a long time, but she would no longer follow his orders and remain complacent. If her father was profiting from a poisoned dye that he knew would harm people, she wouldn't let him get away with it. She'd suffered enough because of him. That was why she'd decided to cooperate with Westalia to expose the dark side of Elizabeth Pink.

The world would be better off without the house of Reyn. Elizabeth had no idea what her life would be like after that, but she knew there could be no worse situation for her than the one she was in now under her father's control.

If they can locate the Elizabeth Pink dye factory, it would be a clue to saving a lot of people. Father, you're hiding the address because you're guilty of something, aren't you? Elizabeth thought. The first thing Westalia had asked her to do was find out the address of the factory. The people who processed the petals of agisakuragi during the dyeing process were the most likely to get poisoned. Westalia needed to investigate the reality of the situation. Tiberio might have already been aware of the poisoning symptoms among the workers but was hiding the entire factory to keep that truth from the public. The other factories the family owned were also being kept secret, probably for camouflage.

In the end, however, Elizabeth had been unable to locate the address. She'd tried to meet with the important people involved in the management of the Rias Corporation, but they were all Tiberio's dogs and wouldn't take notice of his daughter.

As far as the empress selection, Elizabeth's will was irrelevant, and with the budget she had been provided with, she had taken an early lead solely through Tiberio's doing. Elizabeth no longer even knew whose benefit the empress selection was even for. But she was sure that her father was unaware that she was working behind the scenes to expose his vile tricks.

If one has done wrong, they should be punished and atone for it. That applies to you and me both, father. The crime of promoting a toxic dye was not something she could get away with just because she hadn't known anything about it; she would carry that weight with her for the rest of her life. Elizabeth was an ordinary girl with nothing special to commend her, yet she had been revered as the best candidate for empress in the whole country. All of this was merely a facade created by her father, who had been deceiving the people for a long time.

Even prior to the empress selection process, Elizabeth had done many underhanded things in order to live up to her father's

expectations and avoid his wrath. For example, she'd had someone else do the embroidery to be presented to the current empress, and she'd had someone else write the speech for the founding ceremony and then presented it as her own words. In all aspects, she and her father had worked together to keep up appearances through a series of dishonest acts.

Never has there truly existed an upstanding version of Elizabeth Reyn, she thought. Elizabeth stared blankly at the pair of sleeping knights as she thought about her father and how she'd now betrayed him. However, her daze was broken when a maid knocked on the door. She put a large blanket over the men and got up from the sofa so that the maid wouldn't know that she'd brought two men into her room.

"What brings you here at this late hour?" she asked, peering through the door she'd cracked slightly. That way it kept the rest of the room from the maid's view.

The maid bowed and said, "The master has returned, and I have come to inform you of his return. I'm sorry it's so late at night."

"What?!" Elizabeth cried. Tiberio was supposed to be away on a business trip until tomorrow. She bit her lower lip and wondered at the terrible timing. She quickly put on a jacket and headed to the front entryway. She hurried down the spiral staircase, looking for Tiberio.

When he returned home, he was always greeted by a number of servants, who took his jacket and hat and reported on their work for the day. But it seemed he had already completed that routine tonight.

"A lady doesn't go down the stairs making that much noise, Elizabeth."

"Father!" Elizabeth whirled around to see her father behind her on the staircase. She placed a hand on her chest, where her heart was beating erratically. "I didn't expect you back tonight," she said, trying to feign nonchalance. "Welcome home."

"Heh, since you came all the way to the mansion, I wanted to see your face," Tiberio replied.

"Well..."

As the two candidates for empress, Westalia and Elizabeth had been given extravagant residences in Le Chantier Palace. Elizabeth had made that her main base of operations and didn't return to her family's residence very often, largely because she didn't want to face her father.

Don't tell me he suspects something! Elizabeth thought. She felt as if he could see through her every thought, and when a bead of sweat trickled down her cheek, he relaxed his expression.

"You look pale. What's the matter?"

"N-Nothing! Would you like to have some tea in the living room? I have some imported tea in my room; I'll go get it right now!"

Paige and Dion were in the office. They'd promised they'd finish their search and be gone in two hours, but there was still an hour left to go. Elizabeth had to make sure Tiberio didn't get close to his office.

"Well then, let's have it in your room instead. It will be easier that way, won't it?" Tiberio asked.

"Oh! Well..." If she were Westalia she would better be able to deceive him.

"You aren't very good at keeping secrets or lying, are you? I can't believe you're my daughter. If you can't even deceive others, how do you intend to survive in the palace of power and intrigue as empress? I believe the foreigner is better suited to the job than you are," Tiberio said with a gentle smile.

Elizabeth clamped her lips shut. He was referring to Westalia when he said 'the foreigner,' of course. Westalia had stood her ground in the face of the power of the Kingdom of Lhumzia and won the battle against the former queen.

You don't need to tell me about Westalia's qualifications. I already know... Elizabeth thought. She herself was just a normal person who was supported by her family's wealth and power. In addition, she was a coward and wasn't suited for either the throne or Leonardo.

Tiberio turned and started to climb the stairs. His destination, of course, was Elizabeth's room. She grabbed his arm to stop him, but he easily shook her off.

He found the knights collapsed in her room but didn't react. He

merely squatted down and observed their faces calmly. “These must be my office guards,” he said. “They seem to have been put to sleep with a very strong drug. Poor things. Why are they in your room?”

Elizabeth remained silent. She felt like if she said anything at all Tiberio would see right through her. Tiberio stood quickly and lifted his chin up so she looked at him.

“Why are you silent?”

Still she said nothing.

“Did you have some kind of a feud with these two knights? No, I don’t think so. Then, are they harassing you in some way? No, that’s not it either. Or is it that you let someone into that room?” He probed into Elizabeth’s mind through the subtle changes in her expression and came up with the answer without Elizabeth uttering a single word.

“I see. How strange. I’m supposed to have the only key,” Tiberio continued, chuckling as he rested his hand against his pants pocket, where he kept the key. His slippery smile sent a chill down her spine. “I thought it was odd that you would suddenly come back to the mansion after having been chastised so severely. You wouldn’t truly *want* to be here, would you?”

Tiberio turned on his heel and walked out of the room, deliberately bumping into Elizabeth’s shoulder on his way out. Elizabeth stood stupefied, the blood drained from her face.

I failed, I failed, I failed, I failed... How was she so incompetent that she couldn’t even buy an hour’s worth of time? She was reeling from her inability to accomplish even a single request and could barely stand. She then came to her senses, clenched her fists, and ran after Tiberio.

“There’s nothing going on in your office,” Elizabeth said as she caught up with him. Tiberio looked back at her and their eyes met. No matter how hard she tried to remain calm, she couldn’t stop her eyes from darting wildly. She had a bad habit of showing more emotion on her face when she was in a hurry or in trouble.

“That’s the face of a liar. That just proves there’s something going on in my office,” Tiberio said. Elizabeth’s mind went completely blank at the conviction in her father’s voice. Her throat went dry and she

couldn’t get any other words out, only a pathetic squeak.

“Please don’t go there...” Elizabeth said. Her thoughts were spiraling and her initially earnest persuasion had now devolved into little more than desperate pleas. No matter how hard she pleaded, however, she knew it would not make a bit of difference. For as long as Elizabeth could remember, this man had always been a power-hungry maniac, with not a shred of affection in his heart.

“I hate children who don’t know when to give up. But you’ve been a disappointment for a very long time,” Tiberio said, pushing Elizabeth roughly to the ground. She screamed.

And when Tiberio arrived at his office, he opened the door and smiled gently and calmly. “Well, well, well, it seems I’ve got a rat infestation. Just what do you think you’re doing here?”

Fortunately Paige and Dion were both wearing black hoods, so their faces weren’t visible. However, it was clear they were surprised by Tiberio’s appearance. Paige was the close confidant of the other candidate for empress, and Dion was a close associate of the crown prince. If it were known that they had trespassed in the duke’s mansion, it would lead to the disrepute of both masters, and they all might be severely punished, even though Tiberio was really the one who should be punished for all the horrible things he’d been up to.

Tiberio’s guards pulled out their swords and pointed them at the intruders. Paige and Dion also readied their swords. Elizabeth knew that Dion, besides being Leonardo’s most trusted subordinate, was famous for his mastery with a sword. On the other hand, Paige, the woman who looked like a man, had a murky background, and Elizabeth didn’t know much about her skill with a blade. However, the fact that Westalia, a very intelligent woman, kept Paige by her side suggested that her abilities must be at least above average.

“Capture them,” Tiberio ordered, and his knights all rushed at the pair.

“No! Stop!” Elizabeth cried, at the same time that Paige cut down two knights with her longsword. Dion was also dodging each successive attack and taking down his own assailants. He was clearly more skilled with a blade than Paige was, but her sword arm was far and away stronger than his.

I can't believe there's a woman in this country who wields a sword so easily and beautifully... Her technique looks somewhat like Sir Gasparo's, Elizabeth thought. Gasparo was a former deputy commander of the Imperial Guard who had died tragically. He was a much admired sword prodigy, and Elizabeth had once witnessed one of his matches. Paige's sword hold and form reminded her somewhat of him. Perhaps she had studied under him in the past?

The sound of metal on metal echoed throughout the room. No matter how hard the knights of the Reyn family fought, they were unable to inflict even the slightest scratch on Paige. She dodged the oncoming swords with an easy swerve and then made precise follow-up attacks.

"Amazing. If you weren't a petty burglar, I'd hire you," Tiberio said in admiration. He'd seen a fair handful of excellent knights before.

The office windows are locked, so the only way out is through the door, Elizabeth thought. All the windows in the mansion were locked by a standard key and could be opened with the same one Elizabeth had used on the kitchen door. As she watched Paige and Dion fight, she subconsciously grabbed the pocket containing the key. *If I just sit back and watch, nothing will change. I don't want to be meek and obedient anymore.*

One of the knights was knocked unconscious by Paige's sword, leaving a brief opening, and Elizabeth, filled with determination, seized her moment. She unlocked a window and flung it open. A cool night breeze blew in, ruffling Elizabeth's long pink hair.

"Come on, hurry!" she said. Dion quickly jumped from the window to a tree in the garden. Just as Paige was about to follow him, Tiberio strode up to Elizabeth and pulled out his sword. The blade glinted unpleasantly in the light from the ceiling, and Elizabeth held her breath.

"Ah—!" Elizabeth was so terrified she couldn't even move to avoid it. She looked up to see the tip of the blade descending toward her in a beautiful semicircle.

"Watch out!"

The pain Elizabeth was expecting to feel never came. The blow

landed instead on Paige, who had pulled the would-be empress in close to shield her. Paige took the hit on her right arm and let out a small grunt.

Just as Elizabeth opened her eyes to see the blood dripping from Paige's arm, Tiberio followed up with another attack. The tip of his blade grazed the left side of Paige's face, narrowly missing her eye, but she immediately reacted with her own sword, pushing Tiberio's away and sending it flying into the far wall.

"I'm surprised you could still have such reflexes even after being injured. You're really something, huh?" Tiberio said. "Just who are you?"

"You don't deserve my name. You're a demon in a human body. You're insane to raise your sword against your own daughter," Paige said.

"I knew you would protect her. Thanks to that, you didn't escape, and Elizabeth didn't get a scratch on her," Tiberio said.

"It's not about that. That's not even worth discussing," Paige replied, looking at him coldly. She raised the tip of her sword and pointed it at his throat.

Tiberio, completely unperturbed by the sword pointed at him, slowly shifted his gaze to Elizabeth. "I didn't think you had the guts to betray your father and side with the thieves. Who is this robed man? I wanted his hood off, but I seem to have misplaced my sword. Why don't you tell me who he is?"

Paige had been unable to escape because she'd protected Elizabeth. Fortunately, Tiberio thought Paige was a man and didn't seem to recognize her true identity.

"I'm..." Elizabeth started, but she was trembling too hard and couldn't get any more words out.

Paige pulled Elizabeth even closer. "Betrayed you? What nonsense! You just controlled her with violence and abusive language. She's never truly been on your side, you scum!"

Tiberio was silent. Elizabeth had never used such vicious words against Tiberio like that, but now that Paige had stood up for her, she felt a deep sense of relief.

"Eek!" Elizabeth suddenly cried out as Paige lifted her up and set

her on the windowsill.

"Remember this," Paige said. "One day I'm gonna wipe that creepy smile right off your face."

"Heh. I don't know who you are, but you certainly seem to hate me. What can a little thief like you do?" Tiberio asked.

"Anything. I can do anything. My family taught me that everyone has the strength to do that, no matter how much someone in power tries to stop them," Paige answered. She was likely referring to Westalia as her family.

I wonder if I have strength like that too, Elizabeth thought. Despite being executed as the villainess of the century, Westalia had never given up and continued to stand up against overwhelming political influence.

"Hold on to me, Miss Elizabeth," Paige whispered, and Elizabeth reflexively grabbed on to her. Paige launched them from the second-floor window.

"Gyaaaah!!!" Elizabeth screamed.

Paige landed in some bushes, which cushioned their fall a little bit.

"Oof," Paige grunted.

"Are you okay?! You're insane! You just jumped out a second-story window carrying another person!" Elizabeth cried.

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I'm used to getting hurt, and I'm made of sturdier stuff than most. I just fractured my leg a bit," Paige replied.

"What part of that is 'fine'?!" Elizabeth shouted. Paige was definitely not fine at all. "Was it because I'm too heavy?"

"Well, you're not light. Listen, we've got to run now though."

"Eek!" Though stung by Paige's brusque words, she started running as Paige pulled on her hand. Eventually, they managed to join up with Dion and escaped from the Reyns' mansion.

Tiberio was left in his office looking out the open window. It was a clear night, and the stars were shining brightly. Most of the knights in his office had been left in an impressively comatose state thanks to the two thieves.

One of the only two knights still conscious said, "Shall we go after

them?" as he held his injured arm.

"Yes, go after them at once," Tiberio ordered.

Even if they pursued the thieves, there were only a few functional knights remaining and there was no way they could put up a fight. Besides, the thieves might have backup by this point.

"Yes, sir," the knight said anyway. He ran out of the office. There were several other knights in the mansion he could recruit; however, the forest surrounding the estate wasn't exactly conducive to a late-night manhunt. Beyond the window, the black-silhouetted trees groaned eerily.

At that moment, Tiberio's expression, which always had a smile plastered on it, turned slightly grim. His look seemed as if it could inflict injury on anyone who dared approach, and the remaining conscious knight hunched his shoulders and felt a chill run down his spine.

"Just who on earth is Miss Elizabeth mixed up with?" the knight asked.

"I wonder," Tiberio muttered. But the obedient Elizabeth had begun to change after the day she had collapsed in her fit of convulsions. If anyone had given her a nudge to change, it would've been... The image of Westalia flashed through Tiberio's mind.

"With all due respect, sir, why don't you report this to the palace? The intruders should be caught and punished accordingly."

"I don't think that's necessary. We don't need to rely on the imperial family. We can just purge the thieves in secret here at the mansion." Tiberio looked slowly around his office. Although there were no obvious signs of vandalism, it was clear that the thieves had been looking for something in particular.

One of the thieves was carrying some documents. It's likely to be bad for me if they get out, Tiberio thought. There were a number of documents in the office that couldn't be made public, which was why the office was guarded and locked even in the middle of the night. He didn't want to kick up a fuss and have those end up on public display.

Tiberio didn't need to report to the imperial family; what he needed to do was deal with the thief who'd seduced Elizabeth and

recover the documents as soon as possible. His eyes landed on a crumpled piece of paper on his desk—the land management ledger from the former Marquis of Lanchester.

If I recall, Westalia is accompanied by a single female knight who looks like a man. She looked familiar, Tiberio thought. He had a history with the daughter of that family. They'd been an upstanding family with a long history of producing knights. He'd driven the girl's parents to their deaths, stolen their land, and then sold the girl into slavery. The swordsmanship of that thief had been very similar to that of the former Marquis of Lanchester. And that girl clearly had a deep hatred for Tiberio and took great pride in her monstrous physical strength.

"Yes, Paige Lanchester does ring a bell," Tiberio muttered. He'd been surprised to see her alive at the soiree; he'd thought he'd taken care of her long ago. Those who became gladiators were usually short-lived. Paige, however, had apparently developed her swordsmanship through repeated and extreme battles and had managed to survive. Where did she find the will to live after being deprived of everything? And for some reason, even though Paige was supposed to be a slave, she'd somehow become the knight to an executed villainess. Westalia had apparently even managed to entice Elizabeth, her rival, to her own side.

"You can leave Elizabeth alone. She's a weak girl. She'll give up soon enough and come crying back to me. If I am to make good use of her in the future, simply whipping her won't cut it. This is just a spot of rebellion. Let's let her do as she pleases for a while," Tiberio said. Elizabeth was probably crying to Westalia about his scolding. But Westalia would most likely use her and then toss her aside. There was no way Westalia would show mercy to her rival. Elizabeth was truly foolish.

"I'm sure that Elizabeth will become the empress no matter what it takes. If that abominable foreign woman takes the throne, the Archaites Empire will completely collapse," Tiberio continued. The viper that had bitten the former queen in the Kingdom of Lhumzia was now trying to seduce Elizabeth and turning her fangs against the Reyns. They would wither just as the former queen had. But

Tiberio wasn't so weak that he could be taken out by mere venom. All he had to do was cut off the viper's head before it could bite him as well.

Tiberio looked up at the beautiful night sky with a dry smile on his lips.

"Soon, go to the residence of the second candidate for empress and see if Westalia Lejainne's knight has a wound on her arm and near her eye."

"Yes, sir," a knight said with a reverent bow.

If one of those thieves was Paige Lanchester, Tiberio had to find a way to get rid of her once and for all.

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"So? Why did you bring Miss Lizzy with you?" Dion asked as they ran through the forest outside the Reyn mansion.

"Now that it's known that I am cooperating with you thieves, there's no place for me in that mansion anymore," Elizabeth answered in a self-deprecating tone as she brushed aside the branches in front of her. How could she have been so bad at this? Just when she'd decided to stop doing her father's bidding, it felt like someone was sabotaging her so that she would fail in everything she tried to do. It was as if someone were telling her she should only do what her father told her. Her luck was so bad, she'd ended up causing problems for Dion and Paige. The latter had even been *injured* defending her.

"You might be tired, but hang on a little longer. When we get through the forest, the carriage that the crown prince prepared for us will be waiting," Paige said to Elizabeth.

"Why are you being so nice?" Elizabeth asked.

"I'm not really a nice person. But Westalia is, so maybe it's rubbed off on me," Paige replied.

Elizabeth was silent. How could Paige be so warm toward her when she was nothing more than useless? As she stared at Paige, who was smiling despite having sustained injuries to her legs, arm, and eye, Elizabeth suddenly felt tears prick the corners of her eyes.

"Ow!" At that moment, Elizabeth's long hair became tangled in a low-hanging branch. The branch's many thorns had her thoroughly snagged. She tried to untangle it, but she couldn't see well in the darkness and it just ended up more tangled.

"What's the matter?" Paige asked.

"My hair got tangled in a branch. I can't get it unstuck!" It was her fault *again* that they'd had to stop.

What even is Elizabeth Pink? Elizabeth thought. Although her father claimed to have developed the dye to look like Elizabeth's hair color, so that he could use her as a walking billboard, it didn't even look all that much like her hair. Her pink was not remotely as vivid.

Her father spent a lot of money to set Elizabeth up so that she would be admired by all the other young women, but in reality she was just an ordinary person. Someone like Westalia, who had actual talent, should be the one who was admired by others. She was strong and graceful and could stand on her own two feet. Honestly, she was dazzling.

Elizabeth had been brought up like a princess, but she had no power of her own. On top of that, the dye that she had helped promote contained poison. The horror of her own stupidity, that she'd been unknowingly promoting a dye full of poison to people, made her laugh.

I hate this hair! she thought. She gritted her teeth.

"Please let me borrow this!" Elizabeth said, pulling out the sword that rested at Dion's waist.

"Miss Lizzy?! What are you—"

Elizabeth sliced the sword through her long hair. Paige and Dion stood in stunned silence as the faint starlight shone down on the long, pink locks as they fluttered to the ground.





Elizabeth shook her head and ruffled her new short hair. It felt refreshing. Her hair was prone to knots, but since it was a promotional product, it had been essential to provide it with diligent care. To be honest, she always found it tedious to waste such long hours in the bath.

"Father would be quite angry if he saw this. It doesn't make for a good advertisement," Elizabeth muttered, looking down.

"Miss Lizzy?" Dion asked. He and Paige looked on worryingly at the woman. But in the next instant Elizabeth looked up and barked out a brisk laugh.

"Well! Serves him right!" she said. This severing was a sign of defiance and resolve against her father. She wasn't going to live her life as a meek child, listening to what he said. She wouldn't give into that absurdity; she would defy it.

"Let's go," Elizabeth said abruptly, marching away. Dion and Paige exchanged glances as they followed behind her.

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Paige returned seriously injured to the mansion in the imperial city...with Elizabeth in tow.

"Paige! What happened to your arm?! That needs medical attention! Come here!" Westalia cried.

"It's just a scrape. I'm fine."

"What about that is just a scrape?" Westalia asked. She had Paige strip off her robe so she could check the wound and found it was quite deep. Paige's left eye also appeared to be injured, but there was a lot of blood and Westalia couldn't see the wound clearly. In addition, she guessed that at least one of Paige's legs was injured, as the woman was moving more sluggishly than usual.

Did the plan not work? Westalia wondered. She'd had Paige help Leonardo's aide Dion break into Tiberio's office in order to find out the address of the Elizabeth Pink dye factory. Leonardo's goal from the infiltration was to get evidence of at least one of Tiberio's many misdeeds.

Westalia hadn't been an active participant in case anything had

gone wrong in the mission, but since Tiberio was supposed to be away the entire night, she'd been confident that it couldn't fail.

As Westalia moved to bring Paige and Dion into the sitting room, she found Elizabeth standing next to Paige with a dark look on her face. Her long hair had been messily chopped off.

"I'm sorry, it's my fault that Paige was—"

"Miss Elizabeth saved us. If she hadn't unlocked the office window, we would've been killed," Paige interrupted her.

It was possible that Elizabeth was involved somehow in Paige's injury, but Westalia stopped prying out of deference to Paige's clear desire to protect the other woman.

"Oh my, is that so? Thank you, Elizabeth. On occasion you can be quite useful," Westalia said.

"She really saved us. I thought I'd been trained thoroughly in the arena, but I might've lost my edge a bit recently," Paige said jokingly. Elizabeth still looked glum.

Westalia brought them into the living room and sat Paige down in a chair. On the table was a stack of canvases depicting various angles of Elizabeth's rash, with brushes, paints, and other art tools scattered about. Westalia intended to use them as a case study to prove poisoning by the dye. The painful rash, standing in stark contrast to Elizabeth's beautiful countenance, made the horror of Elizabeth Pink apparent.

"You've got paint right there," Paige said, pointing to the corner of Westalia's mouth.

"What?"

"I noticed it this morning, but you've got paint on you."

Westalia quickly grabbed a hand mirror to check and found a thin black line of paint above her lip, like a mustache. This morning she'd been working on the canvases using Elizabeth as a model, and her brush must've snagged on her face without her noticing. As it was already night, that meant she'd spent the entire day with this mustache. The blood drained from Westalia's face as she remembered her earlier shopping trip into town.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?!"

Paige's shoulders shook with laughter as Westalia wiped at the

smudge with a handkerchief.

"You're quite good at painting. Was this part of your education in Lhumzia?" Paige asked, picking up one of the canvases.

"Yes. It wasn't just painting though. It was also sewing, spinning, embroidery, piano, violin, horseback riding, palm reading, wine tasting, magic tricks, miming, ventriloquism, and juggling," Westalia replied.

"I feel like the latter half of those things have nothing to do with being queen. You're pretty talented though. Outside of cooking, at least."

Westalia pretended she didn't hear that last comment. She pulled out a basin of water, a towel, and a first aid kit and deftly set about patching up Paige's wounds. The one on her right arm was deep, so Westalia had to sew it up. She put a patch over the wound on Paige's left eye, although she apparently wasn't having any vision problems at the moment. Westalia would prepare an antibacterial medicine later, as it would be very dangerous if Paige developed an infection.

In addition, Paige had jumped from the second floor, and although she claimed she had managed to lessen the impact, bones in both of her legs were cracked, and her legs were beginning to swell. After being set, it would take about three weeks for them to heal.

"So, what actually happened in the mansion?" Westalia asked. Paige told her the details and that on some strange intuition Tiberio had come back and found them in the middle of searching his office.

Talk about bad timing, Westalia thought. Paige continued to speak, telling her about the fight with the knights and that Elizabeth's help in their plan had been discovered. The Reyns must employ some pretty competent knights if they'd managed to injure Paige...or was she covering for Elizabeth?

"That sounds like it was rough. But I'm glad you all managed to make it back safe and sound," Westalia said.

We can't do anything else about the situation now, but I'll have to rethink what comes next, Westalia thought, pinching her brow and letting out a sigh. Tiberio would be more than a little alarmed by the

incident. He might have even started searching for the two intruders by now.

Dion returned to Le Chantier Palace to report his findings to Leonardo. Apparently, he'd found the address of the Elizabeth Pink dye factory in the office along with some other interesting letters.

"Let's visit the factory soon. It's in the duchy of Reyn, just west of the imperial capital, is that right?" Westalia asked.

"Yes. And that's the area where the former Marquis of Lanchester... Where my family once ruled," Paige said.

That was the first time Westalia had ever heard Paige's surname. The woman wasn't very keen on talking about her past. Westalia didn't know how Paige had come to be a slave in the Kingdom of Slidd, or where she'd been before that, and she hadn't dared ask.

Lanchester. Weren't they a noble family who had a long history of producing knights? Westalia thought. Paige had mentioned she was from a ruined family of nobles, but Westalia hadn't expected them to be from Archaites. She had been studying a lot about the nobility in this country, and as she recalled, the Lanchesters had produced excellent knights for generations, but the family had supposedly been abolished five years ago due to a corruption case involving the head of the family.

Elizabeth, who had been quietly listening to the conversation until then, opened her mouth. "The Lanchesters... They were a family with a long history, and they loved the martial arts. Are you, by any chance, the daughter of Gasparo Lanchester?"

"Yes, that's right," Paige said.

"No wonder you're so good with the sword, then; you're a Lanchester. It all makes sense."

Being from another country, Westalia wasn't familiar with the people of Archaites. "What, did you know him?" she asked.

"Who didn't? He was famous," Elizabeth replied.

Gasparo had been the deputy commander of the Imperial Guard. He was honest and despised any sort of crooked behavior. At worst, he was difficult and stubborn. However, his swordsmanship was excellent, and he had been regarded as a prodigy when he was young. One day, due to corruption, he had lost his position as

deputy commander and been stripped of his title, leaving him deep in debt as he had to pay reparations.

After the disappearance of his daughter, he had finally lost hope and he and his wife had committed suicide. This meant that Paige was the missing daughter.

"Dad wasn't the kind of guy to take a bribe," Paige said. "He hated that sort of stuff. And yet..."

Elizabeth looked at Paige's clenched fists and asked fearfully, "So then in the office earlier... I could feel your hatred for my father. Do you have some sort of history with him?"

"Tiberio killed my parents," Paige answered without a moment's hesitation. The blood drained from Elizabeth's face.

"That man framed my dad and ground him down to the very end. Dad was a strong man, but he couldn't stand to be ostracized and to have the world look at him in a negative light."

Gasparo had lost his job, his title and fortune, and even his land in the corruption case. In addition, he had also been required to pay compensation, which had ended up being a tremendous amount of money that he would never have been able to repay even if he'd spent the rest of his life working to do so. His wife had been bedridden with illness at the time, and thanks to the unfair treatment toward the family, they had been in dire straits, unable to buy medicine or even bring a doctor in to see her.

According to Paige, her father had always insisted that Tiberio had set him up. Tiberio had then purchased the former Marquisate of Lanchester, which had been confiscated by the empire, and become its new lord.

When the Lanchester family had been rendered homeless, Tiberio, concealing his true identity, had appeared to Paige, saying that if she did as he said, he would help her family. Paige, resorting to desperate measures, had done as she was told; however, after she'd ended up sold to the Kingdom of Slidd as a slave, her parents had taken their own lives.

Despite finally revealing the heavy burden of her past, Paige remained calm as she continued speaking. "I just don't understand. How could someone as harmless and sincere as my father be singled

out and framed by Tiberio?"

"Did your father not tell you anything?" Westalia asked.

"He did say that he had something on the Reyn family. He didn't want to tell me anything specific, though, so I don't know what it actually was," Paige replied.

"I can't apologize enough for the troubles my father has caused you," Elizabeth said, balling the fabric of her skirt in her fists.

"*You* have nothing to apologize for."

"You don't blame me?"

"What you've done and what Tiberio did are two different things. I hold no grudge against you," Paige said. Then she let out a small sigh and continued. "I'm just concerned at this point. It was exactly five years ago that my mother fell ill. Elizabeth Pink was just coming into fashion. My mother loved that vivid color so much that she had her whole room wallpapered in it. One day she collapsed, and shortly after that my father suddenly tore all of the wallpaper down. The corruption incident happened right after he finished peeling it off."

Because no one had noticed the causal link between Elizabeth Pink and ill health, the market had grown in size until the present day. But was it really possible that not a single person had noticed the connection in the past five years? What if Gasparo had linked his wife's poor health to Elizabeth Pink? Being the honest man that he was, he would have tried to alert a larger audience of people to the dangers of the color so that people would not suffer as his wife did.

"And what symptoms did your mother have?" Westalia asked.

"Mainly nausea, diarrhea, and a rash," Paige replied.

Those lined up with the symptoms of Elizabeth Pink poisoning.

"Well then, Paige. Let's go conduct an inquiry with the Imperial Guard. If your father was aware of the harmful effects of Elizabeth Pink, it would be logical that he was treated that way to keep his mouth shut. He must've mentioned Elizabeth Pink to someone. We need to collect testimonies," Westalia said, her eyes downcast.

"All right."

"You must go back to Le Chantier Palace now," Westalia said, looking at Elizabeth. "If you stay with us, your father will easily

figure out who the intruders were. Avoid contact with us for a while, and then if you do need to talk, go through a messenger. Okay?"

"I understand."

"And of course, don't tell anyone about this."

"Of course not!"

Having finished with what she had to say, Westalia got up from the sofa. "You must be tired, Paige. Take your time and rest. I'm going back to my room." She left without another word.

Westalia's rapid exit from the room left Paige and Elizabeth exchanging glances.

Back in her room, Westalia finally released all the tears she'd managed to hold back up until that point.

Paige... I'm so sorry. Westalia collapsed on the spot, leaning her back against the door and holding a hand over her mouth so that no one outside would hear. She began to sob. She'd never thought Paige could have such a twisted past. Paige always spoke calmly and matter-of-factly, and yet she'd endured so much pain and suffering.

It was precisely because Westalia, too, had experienced pain, frustration, and anger that had no outlet that she could understand what Paige was feeling.

Westalia remembered the hatred she'd been able to feel coming off Paige in waves when they'd met Tiberio at the soiree. She probably hated him enough to kill him. It was heartbreaking to think that Paige had been carrying such heavy burdens and enduring those hardships alone, all the while supporting Westalia as she strove to become empress. Paige was always so aloof that Westalia had been unable to notice the darkness in her heart.

I wasn't a good employer, let alone a good friend, Westalia thought. She wiped her tears away with her sleeve and grimaced. Paige had been working so hard without complaint that Westalia couldn't just allow herself to cry herself to sleep in self-pity.

It's my turn to support her*. Let me take away your sorrows, Paige. If you don't like that man's pretty face, let's turn it into something ugly*, Westalia thought. It was just a guess, but Westalia suspected that Tiberio was the reason for Paige's hatred of attractive

men.

Westalia walked to the window and looked up at the starry sky. Tiberio's image superimposed itself over the beautiful stars.

"I will lay waste to that beautiful face until it looks like something out of a nightmare," Westalia whispered, her tone dripping with venom. "I will beat you with my own bejeweled hand. And then I shall torment you with my most precious poisons, Tiberio Reyn."

A crack spread across the windowpane where Westalia struck it with her ring-adorned hand.

Chapter 3: Undefeated

Paige Lanchester had been the only daughter born to a family whose lineage was famous for producing a number of distinguished knights. The Marquis of Lanchester had long ago been granted a large, rural estate, far from the imperial capital. Paige's father, Gasparo Lanchester, had had a strong sense of justice and honesty and had been good with the sword—but he hadn't been very wise. Her mother had been gentle, charitable, and well-liked by her subjects. That said, Paige was her father's child through and through. Gasparo had been a man who was single-mindedly devoted to the martial arts. He'd been the deputy commander of the Imperial Army, and when war broke out, he had been sent to the front lines, where he'd performed well, receiving numerous medals and rewards for his military deeds.

Paige had idolized her father and wanted to become a knight herself one day. Female knights were quite rare, but Paige had been certain she'd be able to succeed, as a member of Gasparo's bloodline. But instead of shedding blood on the battlefield like her father, Paige had longed to serve alongside the knights of the Imperial Guard.

However, the peaceful life of the Lanchester family had begun to fall apart when Paige's mother collapsed one day.

At the time, they were staying at a town house in the imperial capital. Up until that point, the family of three had always eaten together, but now that her mother was bedbound, it was just Paige and her father. Ever since her mother fell ill, Paige's father had been restless and unfocused, and she'd taken to helping him around the house.

"How was your mother this morning?"

Paige frowned and shook her head. "Not great. The rash has spread and she throws up right away after eating, so she's not

taking in any nutrients."

"I see. Well, try and get her to eat as much as possible. I'll get her anything it seems like she might be able to eat."

"Yeah, I know."

A dark cloud now hung over the once lively dining table. The truth was that neither Paige nor Gasparo were the type of people who would actively go out of their way to liven up the place. It had been Paige's mother who always set a vase of flowers on the table and put on a happy face.

Paige was preparing for the entrance exam for the Imperial Guard, but she'd also been taking care of her mother on top of her training. She could have left the care of her mother to the servants, but she wanted to do it herself.

"Speaking of that... Paige, move your mother to a different room."

"Why? The one she's in gets the most sun."

"Just do as I say."

"Fine! But don't get mad at me when she starts growing mold and mushrooms from rotting away in the dark," Paige shot back sarcastically. Her father was always bad with words, and Paige didn't care for following orders she didn't understand. However, given her father's status as the head of their household, she had no choice but to follow his orders—not that it would stop her from complaining about it.

After switching rooms, her mother's health improved a little. At the time, Paige had thought that the timing of the room change and her mother's improvement had just been a coincidence. However, the first room she'd been in had been decorated with a very vibrant wallpaper—one that Paige remembered was called Elizabeth Pink. When Gasparo realized his wife's health was indeed improving, he'd torn down and disposed of all of the Elizabeth Pink wallpaper.

Just when Paige's mother truly seemed to be on the mend, disaster struck again: Gasparo was involved in a corruption case.

"You didn't *really* bribe someone, did you?" Paige asked, shocked. "This is some sort of conspiracy, isn't it, dad?"

"It's all Tiberio Reyn's fault. I'm being framed."

"Tiberio Reyn? The duke? What did he do? I'll beat him senseless!" Paige shouted.

Gasparo pinched the space between his eyebrows and replied, sounding aggravated, "I'm sorry... I need to rest."

"Dad!"

The corruption case had left Paige's father completely exhausted. Every day, the Lanchesters' house was harangued by angry crowds, stones and raw eggs thrown at their walls as slanderous, hateful letters poured in. Her father, who had always been a fighter and had always received nothing but praise and envy, was likely not at all accustomed to being criticized by others.

Little by little, her father's personality changed. Normally, if Paige said something cheeky, he would immediately reply, but now, no matter what she said, he never seemed to be listening. He began to lose vitality and started neglecting his sword training, and his expression was always dark. Paige's heart ached as she watched this shift in him.

The case against Gasparo alleged that he'd taken bribes from numerous soldiers in exchange for promotions to higher ranks. A considerable amount of money had allegedly changed hands, false evidence was submitted, and all those who were accused of being involved in the bribery, including Gasparo, were swiftly disciplined. At first, the members of the army who looked up to the commander protested, but their voices were silenced and soon Gasparo had no allies left.

The corruption incident triggered a suspicious change within the army. All of Gasparo's close associates left or were demoted, and Paige could tell that they'd been pressured into it. Gasparo was charged as a criminal and his wealth and fiefdom were confiscated. However, he still continued to insist that he'd been framed and that it had all been orchestrated by Tiberio Reyn.

Why is dad so focused on Tiberio? Paige wondered. Her father never confided in her the details, but he told Paige that he'd found something out about the duke that he could use as leverage.

However, despite the loss of their wealth, titles, and lands, the Lanchesters were still being asked to pay an exorbitant amount in

compensation. The family was also completely isolated from society thanks to all of the rumors flying around about Gasparo.

Paige was determined to pay her father's debts as they came due, but the situation made it impossible for the family to make ends meet, so Paige had had to pick up a job. This was the first financial hardship she'd ever faced. Gasparo's trauma was far deeper than Paige could have expected, and he fell into a deep depression. This meant that Paige had to work to support both of her parents.

"I can't take this anymore. I can't keep living like this. I want to die..." her father said suddenly one day, his face grim. He could have slapped Paige in the face and she would have been less shocked.

She didn't know why her father would say such a thing. He might have lost his position, his honor, and his fortune, but his family was alive. Paige believed they would be able to make a fresh start, and she was working hard at her manual labor job every day to make that happen. So why did her father look like he'd given up on himself?

"What?! Don't say that!" Paige yelled, unleashing her feelings on him. "We'll be able to get through this if we work together. It's hard for me too, but I'm doing my best every day! Don't ever say that again!" She couldn't deal with her father's despair, so she pushed him away.

"I'm sorry, Paige..."

She would never be able to forget the look on his face at that moment. It was the first time her father, a man with a strong sense of justice and a genius with the sword, whom she had always respected, had ever cried in front of his daughter.

Just as Paige's life was crumbling completely, a man appeared before her. Paige was working a day job, doing housework, and taking care of her parents all at the same time. One day, on her way home from work, a group of middle-aged women approached her.

"You coward!"

"How dare you cheat us!"

The women began throwing stones at her. Exhausted, Paige couldn't even muster up the energy to avoid the stones, so they all

hit her. Not long ago, these women would have respected Gasparo, but the look in their eyes had changed, and they'd begun to slander him after the corruption case had concluded.

Why are they doing this to me*? I haven't done anything wrong...* Paige thought. Satisfied after a round of accusations, the women of the fiefdom stuck up their noses and went on their way. Alone again, Paige looked down and touched a wound on her cheek from one of the rocks.

"Here, this is for you," a gentle voice said.

Paige looked up and was greeted with a high-quality handkerchief. She cautiously took it and wiped the blood from her cheek.

"I can help if you want to do something for your parents."

"Who are you?" Paige looked up into the face of a handsome, clean-cut aristocratic man. It was the most strikingly beautiful face that Paige had ever seen. The man's eyes curved gently with his kind smile, and he was very pleasant to look at.

"Paige Lanchester... No, that's not your last name anymore, is it? I know all about you. I heard your family has fallen on hard times as of late, and you're working to support both your parents," the man said.

"How do you—"

"That's just the rumor I've heard. I have a daughter about your age, so I was very moved when I heard about your hardships. I'm sure you're excellent with the sword and you were promised a great career. I'm sorry you've had to endure so much. But it's all right now. I'm here to help."

Paige had been working so hard for her family, but no one had praised her for it, and she hadn't expected them to. When she walked down the street she was greeted with hard glares, ridiculed as the daughter of a criminal, and never offered any sort of helping hand. She was still a young teenager, and her heart was badly broken, but the man in front of her was different from the others.

So there really are kind people in the world, Paige thought. The man's words penetrated deep into her heart and made the corners of her eyes prick with tears. Little could she have known they were

the whispers of a devil.

"I can get you a job that pays well, one that fits your skill with a sword. Then you'll easily be able to pay off your debts and save your family."

"A well-paying job..." With the job she had currently, she was just trying to make ends meet; even attempting to pay off the debts had scarcely crossed her mind.

I don't have a choice, really, Paige thought. Like her father, she wasn't the most intellectual person, and in this instance, she didn't have the luxury of being able to think it over. So, as a last resort, she sold her soul to the devil. She thought she was making a courageous choice for the sake of her family, but it was a choice she would regret for the rest of her life.

"I'll do it," Paige said. "I'll do anything to save my family."

The man introduced himself as Rio. The job he described to Paige was far from wholesome; she'd be fighting in a spectacle in an arena in the Kingdom of Slidd. She would be a gladiator—in other words, a slave. But the offered remuneration was high enough to almost pay back all her family's debts, so Paige had no choice but to take it.

Gasparo was suspicious on the day Paige left, as she was carrying far too much luggage for her usual day job.

"What's with all those bags? Where are you going?" her father asked, looking her up and down.

"Um, I found a better job..." Paige said, trailing off at the end. She scratched at her cheek and avoided making eye contact with her father. The man had trained her daily in the art of swordsmanship, and that training had also included education in the moral code of knighthood. To Gasparo, using a well-trained sword to protect one's master was a virtue, and he would never harm anyone for something as meaningless as a spectacle.

Paige hung her head as her feelings of guilt over her lie overwhelmed her.

"Well, all right then. Don't be out too late or your mother will worry. Besides, we won't be able to survive without you," Gasparo muttered despairingly.

Paige knew she was needed at home, but she was also frightened

by the heavy responsibility that had been placed on her shoulders. In truth, she thought the pretext of becoming a slave would give her a reason to escape the situation. Paige wanted to go somewhere far away, away from her ailing mother and depressed father. That was why she had accepted the suspicious and dangerous proposal to become a gladiator.

"Yeah... I'll be back soon," Paige said, smiling as best she could before fleeing out the door.

And then she was sold to Slidd.

Paige spent her days fighting men and beasts in the arena. It was nothing short of humiliation for her to throw herself into such vile and barbaric fights, far removed from the chivalry she had aspired to since childhood.

I hope mom and dad are doing well, she thought. The acrid smell of the beast she'd killed snaked its way up her nose. The blood flowing from a wound on her own head made her vision blurry as she looked up at the blue sky. She was always kept locked up in the basement of the arena, and the only chance she had to see the sky was during the fights. The sky was disgustingly beautiful and vibrant, despite the fact that every day was a living hell.

Paige thought about her parents as she scrutinized the distant sun. The only thing that saved her was the fact that her parents' pockets had been lined with the money she'd sold herself for.

Two years had passed since Paige had first come to the arena. Although she didn't know it yet, she would soon be sold off to her first owner.

"It's good to see you again, Paige Lanchester. You look better than I expected." It was someone from Paige's past.

She hadn't heard the name Lanchester since she'd come to Slidd. She looked up at the familiar, kind voice. Looking down at her from the other side of the iron bars of her cell and smiling wryly was Rio, the man who'd arranged for her slavery as a gladiator. He smiled at her, even as she was covered in filth and old battle scars.

"What about me looks better? I'm completely worn out. Why are you even here?"

"I wanted to see you."

"Must be nice to have so much free time. How are my mom and dad?" Paige asked, leaning forward. Surely he would know how her parents were doing. Paige had told him not to tell her parents that she was being sold as a slave, since she'd lied about her reason for leaving and didn't want to break their hearts. The corruption case had left her father exhausted, but surely he was now rebuilding their lives with the money from Paige's enslavement.

The man in front of her let out an unsettling chuckle. He leaned in close to the bars. "They died. They committed suicide together."

"What...?" She couldn't believe it. Rio gave her no chance to process as he told her what had happened. The money from her sale hadn't gone to her parents but instead had gone into Rio's pockets where it had been used to buy the old Lanchester estate. Her parents had been at a loss, unable to contact her. Rio then told her that he'd informed her parents that she'd been sold into slavery in Slidd, and they had committed suicide in despair. The man's face was twisted with amusement as he told Paige the story.

"You are a thoughtless, stupid child," Rio said with a chuckle. "Too stupid to realize you shouldn't listen to a man whose name you don't even know, no matter how dire a situation you're in. You may be good with a sword, but you're not very smart, apparently. Just like your father."

"Damn it..." She wanted to say something in response to the insults he'd hurled at her father, but she couldn't get any further words out. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she'd known that this day would come. She'd left her father in a weakened state, and her mother sick in bed, to chase the whispers of a devil.

"But don't worry, you'll join your parents soon enough. Gladiators don't live very long. I *was* just going to kill you, but I thought your beauty and skill with a sword would fetch a good price. I'm a fan of making the best of what I've got. But you're more stubborn than I thought you would be."

"What do you mean you were going to kill me?" Paige asked.

Rio's shoulders began to shake and he almost doubled over in laughter. "My plan was that if I got rid of you, your parents would

lose their emotional support and be too weak to recover. And then they killed themselves! It saved me the trouble of having to deal with them directly."

"What are you...?"

"Oh, that's right. Let me tell you something else. My name isn't Rio." He narrowed his eyes, which were filled with a terrible glee. "It's Tiberio Reyn."

At that moment, Paige's mind went completely blank. Did the Lanchester family's ruin truly hinge on this one man and his lurid smile?

"That vacant expression suits you. You certainly seem surprised. It was I who pressured Gasparo into isolation, and it was I who spread all kinds of unsubstantiated rumors about you and your family. Oh yes, even the day you took me up on my offer, I was the one who arranged for the women to throw stones at you."

"You're the one who made up the false accusations? What did my dad ever do to you?" Paige asked, her voice shaky.

"He learned something he didn't need to know. He should've pretended he'd never learned of it. Your father ruined himself because of his honesty. I sold you here to muzzle him."

"What do you mean by muzzle him?! Explain!" Paige shouted, but the man turned on his heel. "Wait, Tiberio!"

Tiberio left without any further words. Paige, still reeling, felt an unspeakably intense anger begin to well up inside of her.

Paige blamed herself for being thoughtless and stupid, but she continued to train and fight, and it lifted her spirits slightly.

Someday, I want power. I want enough power to get my revenge on him, Paige thought. She wouldn't give up. She wouldn't break. No matter how devastated or disappointed she felt, Paige's spirit never withered. She held on to hope. She held on to the hope that someday, if she gritted her teeth and persevered then she would arrive at a turning point. She held on to the hope that there would come a day where a light as brilliant as the sun lit up the pitch-black darkness of the arena's basement. She might not have been able to do anything but fight, but she had all the freedom in the world to

hope.

I'll never let a man like that tear me down, she thought. In this manner, she was decidedly different from her father, who had crumpled under the pressure from the same man.

Then Westalia appeared before her. Wise and noble, Westalia never gave up and worked hard to carve her own future, no matter what kind of adversity she was presented with.

"Let's get out of here quickly, Paige."

Westalia was something different from other people. Paige knew that if she took the woman's proffered hand, a whole new world would open up before her. Westalia's slender, elegant hand pulled Paige into the outside world. As they spent time together, Paige realized that Westalia was full of passion and fighting hard to pull herself up from rock bottom. Westalia, a genuinely pure person, was standing on her tiptoes, stretching out her arms, and desperately reaching to grab hold of her dream.

Paige found Westalia charming and precious. Just like herself, Westalia truly believed that even after the darkest of nights there would be light again. All the while, Paige tended the hatred in her heart, waiting for the day when she could get revenge on the demon who had sold her into slavery.

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"—ge. *Paige*," Westalia said, but the woman just scowled and didn't reply.

Westalia and Paige were on their way to the office of the Imperial Guard. They were traveling by carriage, and Paige seemed to be lost in thought.

Paige's injuries had healed quickly, and she was able to regain full mobility two weeks after the escape from the Reyn mansion. She was remarkably resilient, but there was now an infection in her eye, so the eye patch remained in place. Westalia had told her repeatedly not to rub it, no matter how much it itched, but Paige hadn't listened, so bacteria had gotten into the wound. Westalia hoped the swelling would go down soon and that it wouldn't permanently affect

Paige's eyesight.

"Paige, are you listening?" Westalia asked.

"Oh, sorry," Paige said, jolting back to reality. "I was just thinking. Were you saying something about not telling the crown prince you'd secretly enrolled in cooking classes?"

Westalia was silent. She'd never talked to Paige about the cooking classes. And actually, when had Paige even realized Westalia was attending lessons? She'd recently been disguising herself as a commoner in order to attend cooking lessons so she could surprise Leonardo and Paige, but after turning ingredients into charcoal on the first day, scorching the teacher's hair on the second day, and breaking the frying pan on the third day, she'd finally been banned from the class.

"—believe it?!"

"Huh? What?"

"They forced me to withdraw! Can you *believe* it?!" Westalia cried, covering her flushed face with her hands. "Why do I fail every single time?! I must have been forsaken by the goddess of cooking. But I'm not going to give up!"

Westalia pouted and looked out the window of the carriage. Paige's shoulders began to shake with laughter.

"You're just too much sometimes," Paige got out between laughs. "A forced resignation. Oh man, you're going to make me cry." She wiped at the tears that had gathered in the corners of her eyes.

Westalia would normally lob a barbed comment back at Paige for her teasing, but this time she was just relieved to see her friend smiling.

"You finally laughed," Westalia said.

"What?"

"You've had a really angry look on your face for a while."

Paige looked down, ashamed. "Thank you, Westalia. Talking to you makes worrying feel ridiculous."

"Is that your way of saying that *my* worries are inconsequential and ridiculous?" Westalia asked, crossing her legs and jabbing her pointer finger at Paige.

Paige shook her head. "Not at all. I was just thinking again about

how glad I am that I met you."

"Wh-What's with this all of a sudden?!" Westalia stuttered, shocked by the sincere words coming from her usually cocky friend. Westalia leaned back in her seat, a slight flush coming to her cheeks. She certainly wasn't dissatisfied with the compliment.

I feel like she stole one of my lines, Westalia thought. For her—someone who'd lost everything before, thrown to the curb with only her tattered body and heart to rely on—it was hard to put into words just how reassuring Paige's presence in her life had continued to be.

The beautiful streets of the capital rolled by outside the carriage window. Westalia listened to the clopping of the horses' hooves against the cobblestones for a few moments.

"We'll be arriving at the headquarters for the Imperial Guard soon," Westalia said. "There should be someone there who knew your father."

Paige said nothing, only clenching her fists.

The purpose of their visit today was to gain information about the corruption case involving Gasparo Lanchester. When Paige's father had talked to her about it, the only thing he'd ever say was that it was a false accusation, or that Tiberio Reyn had framed him, so Paige didn't have a very good grasp of what had happened.

So Westalia had decided to look into proving Gasparo's innocence herself. Besides, if what had happened to Gasparo had anything to do with Elizabeth Pink, then it could be a critical card to have in hand when she exposed Tiberio.

"We'll resolve any of your father's last regrets," Westalia said.

"Do you really think that can be done?" Paige asked.

"It's not a matter of can or can't. We *will*." That was how Westalia always carved out her future. She believed that no matter how reckless a course of action was, if she had the resolute determination to do it, then she would succeed.

Paige's vision swam and her shoulders shook slightly. She rarely spoke weakly, but her voice was somber now as she spoke. "I've always regretted it. I did everything wrong. If only I had never left my parents, if only I had been there for them, then it wouldn't have ended so badly. I think I just used paying off the debt as an excuse,

but really I wanted to get away from dad, who was growing weaker, and mom, who was so sick. I didn't become a slave for my parents; I just did it to run away."

"You're wrong, Paige."

"What?"

"We all have only so many choices at any given time. You were under so much stress and you just made the best choice you could in the moment. More to the point, it was really the only choice you *had*. No matter how it turned out, it doesn't mean you were wrong. You're only human. You're allowed to turn away. You're allowed to run away. I could never think that was wrong." Tears were slowly gathering in Westalia's eyes. Paige had been fighting in that dark hell for so long. Who could blame her for the choice she had made? If anyone did, Westalia would beat them up.

Daily life was made up of a series of choices, but it didn't always turn out the way one wanted it to. Still, no one knew what the right answer was at any given time, and people could only make the choice that felt right in the moment. No one could change what had already happened anyway, so why not let go of the regrets and sadness, so your heart could feel a bit lighter?

"I like who you are now, Paige. I love you. I could never look down on any of the choices you've made or the path you've walked up till now. It's made you who you are. I think it was all...necessary."

Tears overflowed from Paige's eyes, even from behind the eye patch. Westalia started crying in earnest too. They hugged each other silently.

"I was thinking about Tiberio," Paige said. "He did such terrible things to me and my family, and yet he remains alive and well. I hate it. I spend every moment of my life wanting to kill him. I don't know what to do with this rage. It has nowhere to go..."

So thoughts of Tiberio were what had put such a grim expression on Paige's face earlier. Westalia, too, had once been in the depths of despair, having spent her young years in solitude, confined in a royal villa, betrayed by her best friend and rewarded with a poisoned cup, and finally abused by the very people she had thought she was protecting. But Paige's pain was unimaginable.

"I know how you feel. I felt the same way. But no matter how much we hate them, those people don't think about us one bit and just blithely live their lives. When I think about that, I feel stupid for spending my precious time and energy on someone I hate."

"That...is a good way of thinking about it."

Being angry and full of regrets wouldn't change reality, but that didn't mean it was easy to stop worrying about things. Westalia, who'd struggled and suffered so much in her life, knew that very well, but she still wanted to relieve Paige's suffering and make her feel better, even if just a little bit.

"So you just keep your eye on what you need to do. What is it that you *really* want to do right now?" Westalia asked.

"I want to devote myself to being the loyal knight of the future empress of this country—Westalia Lejainne."

Westalia smiled elegantly at Paige. "Well then, for now, just try your hardest to do just that. I will make you laugh as often as I can so that your heart will feel a little lighter."

Westalia abruptly put her hands on either side of Paige's face, and the other woman nodded back at her with a teary smile.

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There was a large training area at the headquarters of the Imperial Army, from which Westalia and Paige could hear the sound of clashing wooden swords. When they arrived at the training grounds, Westalia called out to a trainee to ask about Gasparo. When Westalia gave her name, the trainee's eyes grew wide and they beckoned their friends over, quickly causing a bit of a commotion.

"Whoa! Aren't you one of the candidates in the empress selection?" the first trainee asked.

"Yes, that's right," Westalia replied.

"I might be new, but I've got a lot of confidence in my physical abilities! I'll definitely be of service to you, Lady Westalia!" a young woman said.

"I have an excellent record with the sword, and I am confident

that I can protect you!" said a young man.

"Please let me be your escort!" All of the trainees cried out, their voices overlapping.

Westalia and Paige exchanged anxious glances.

They're totally job hunting, Westalia thought. To knights, being part of the empress's personal guard was the highest possible honor. It was the most prestigious of placements and it would be much better to be handpicked by the empress herself than to have to make multiple grand achievements to be placed in her guard.

Paige forced herself between Westalia and the young knights. "Lady Westalia is an officially recognized candidate for empress. Don't you think it's disrespectful to act so familiar with her and beg her for a job?" she admonished them.

Westalia let out a small laugh.

"My lady?" Paige asked.

Westalia couldn't stand it anymore and she broke out in a full smile, covering her mouth with her hand to cover her giggles.

"It's not so bad, honestly. It's really validating my need for approval," she said.

"This makes you happy?! I suppose you are that kind of person..." Paige muttered.

This was what Westalia dreamed of. The empress was supposed to have a large number of noble and strong knights at her beck and call. At the sight of Westalia's delighted expression, the young knights took a step backward and Paige pinched her brow in dismay.

"Unlike the other candidate, I have no money at all. I'd be happy to hire you...if you're willing to work for free," Westalia said.

The trainees left as quickly as a receding tide.

"W-Wait!" Westalia called after them. She and Paige stared blankly at the dust floating in the air behind them.

"Jeez, you scared our witnesses away! Listen, I'll talk to them, so why don't you go find something else to do?" Paige said, chasing off after the knights.

Westalia looked back toward the main administrative building of the Imperial Army. The building had a solemn exterior and evoked a sense of history. Just as she was about to go inside and look for

someone who might know Gasparo, a familiar man came out from the entrance.

"Leo!"

He turned at her voice, and their eyes met. Westalia instantly went on alert and took several steps back. Leonardo smirked at her reaction and walked over to her briskly. Next to him was Dion, who bowed slightly to Westalia.

"No need to be so alarmed," Leonardo said.

"What are you doing here?" Westalia asked.

"I heard you were coming here, so I came by on official business. Here," Leonardo said, handing over two papers to her. One was a list of knights who had been friends with Gasparo Lanchester before his death. This would save Westalia a lot of trouble in searching for those who had been in contact with him.

"You work as quickly as ever," Westalia said, impressed.

"It's not that big of a deal. Look at the other paper."

"What? Is this a petition?"

"In Gasparo Lanchester's own handwriting, submitted five years ago to the Orencia family."

The petition asked that Elizabeth Pink should be investigated for its toxicity. Then, in messy handwriting, was a note that added his wife was suffering from poisoning caused by wallpaper dyed with Elizabeth Pink. The Imperial Court had kept the petition for five years.

"This petition was never circulated through the Imperial Court, but it does prove that Gasparo was aware of the toxicity and had raised his concerns about it."

"So why didn't he tell Paige about it? She was his daughter," Westalia said. Paige had had no idea that the toxins released from the Elizabeth Pink wallpaper were what had caused her mother's illness.

"Your knight is honest and shortsighted. And not very wise either. If she had known the truth, she would've gone on a suicide mission in a fit of anger and plunged straight into danger."

"Oh, yes...that does sound like her."

"Perhaps it was a fatherly kindness, not wanting to put his

daughter in danger," Leonardo said. Gasparo had understood his daughter's temperament well enough to not want to involve her in Elizabeth Pink's darkness.

"More to the point, I wonder if the petition really didn't make any waves in the court," Westalia said.

"What do you mean?"

"If the court really didn't believe it, why would they keep the document? I heard that Gasparo had a strong sense of justice. So, His Majesty, in his wisdom, must've realized that Gasparo was telling the truth. Perhaps he even tried to have Elizabeth Pink analyzed. But remember what happened when we asked Daniel for the analysis?"

"He refused."

No one wanted to be on the receiving end of the power that a preeminent ducal family wielded. A single, simple analysis report could get you killed, in the name of destroying evidence.

The corners of Westalia's lips curved up. "Just as I thought, the emperor does want me to uncover the dark truth behind Elizabeth Pink."

Due to the power of the Reyn family, even in five years, the Imperial Court had been unable to touch the Elizabeth Pink issue. The emperor was being quite smart in using the empress selection, a once-in-a-lifetime national event, as the way to solve this issue.

If you want to defeat your rival, you must consider the true reason I chose this challenge. That was what the emperor had told Westalia on the day he announced the final challenge. The emperor's greatest desire was to protect the throne while he was alive, and to do that, he needed to deal with the threat posed by the Reyn family.

Making the challenge artificial-flower gathering meant that it could function as a trump card for disqualifying the Reyns. Westalia knew that the Rias Corporation was wrapped up in shady dealings, but that wasn't enough to shut down the production of artificial flowers prematurely. That being the case, it was up to Westalia to come up with the next strategy for dealing with Elizabeth Pink. It was a fact that the color was the greatest weakness of the Reyn family.

Dion, who had been silent up until that point, finally spoke up. "What's exposing the truth about the color going to do? I don't think you have the luxury of playing a hero of justice right now. Or have you already given up on the empress selection?"

"Absolutely not. Elizabeth Pink is my way to victory."

Dion didn't seem convinced. "So you're going to work to disqualify Elizabeth? You've been allowed to continue participating in the selection process, despite your background. Why would *she* be disqualified?" Dion asked.

One of the most important aspects of the empress selection was that all women in the country were eligible to participate—regardless of their family backgrounds.

"What do you mean by 'my background'? I'm innocent."

"You entered the country illegally."

"Well..."

"Stole my horse and earring."

"Uh..."

"Cheated at the casino."

Westalia was silent. Leonardo's words struck home, each statement more damning than the last.

"E-Enough about my past. I'm not trying to win by disqualifying my rival. I'm going to win legitimately by collecting more flowers than her."

It was Leonardo and Dion's turn to be silent, and they exchanged a look.

"Haven't you heard? Miss Elizabeth's storeroom is pretty much already full," Dion said.

"And yours is mostly empty," Leonardo added.

Tiberio had been working harder at collecting the artificial flowers that Elizabeth had. With the low cost of producing a lot of flowers through the factory, Dion was correct when he said that Elizabeth was in the lead.

"Elizabeth's storeroom is filling up, which means that her budget is also running quite low. It's all going according to plan—I still have a good chance of winning. Not only will my storeroom be full, I will have more flowers than it can hold," Westalia said confidently.

Neither man looked convinced. “In any case, there’s no need to worry.”

Dion raised his eyebrows. “Why don’t you stop being evasive and just tell us your plan?”

“No. I don’t want to talk about my plan while it’s still in motion. You’ll just have to wait and see,” Westalia replied with a mischievous laugh. What she had to focus on now was exposing the true nature of Elizabeth Pink in a way that would be easy for people to understand. She had no chance of winning if the truth didn’t come out in full. She had to overcome the Reyns for Paige as well as herself, and so she couldn’t afford to be afraid. Westalia was also certain that she wouldn’t be able to become a great empress without overcoming this obstacle. It was surely another test for her in order to become her ideal self.

“Sheesh, you’re always so reckless,” Leonardo said in an exasperated voice.

“I don’t know any other way to live. I make mistakes and fall down in the mud and just have to get back up again and keep going.”

“Whenever you fall down, I’ll help you back up,” Leonardo said.

“Well, that’s reassuring.”

“I don’t know what your plan is, but I believe you can win.”

Leonardo’s words encouraged Westalia more than anything else had. They smiled at each other. Then Leonardo told Dion to go wait for him at the carriage. Westalia was on guard again when it was just the two of them left.

“Are you being so cautious because of that promise you made me?”

Leonardo was referring to the time that he had asked her to kiss him each time they saw each other, in exchange for his help in finding Daniel’s daughter. Westalia’s face grew stiff as she took another two steps away from him.

“I-I don’t think it’s fair for you to ask for compensation when you haven’t given me anything,” Westalia said.

“I’m the one who got the documents. I also have a lead on where we might find Remilena. She’s been spotted in what used to be the

Lanchesters' territory." Leonardo was usually fairly unexpressive, but he approached Westalia with a strange air of joy around him. Westalia sensed the danger that was about to befall her and continued retreating backward.

"W-Wow, you work so fast, it's uncanny," Westalia said. "I would expect nothing less of the crown prince. You used to be my stalker, so you must be a pro at finding people. In fact, that would be a promising career path for you."

"Why are you running away from me?" Leonardo asked.

"Because you're getting closer to me! Now that we have a lead, we have to follow up on it immediately. Let's talk and figure out a plan so that we can— Oh!" Westalia's back hit the wall of the administration building. Leonardo put his hands against the wall on either side of her, successfully trapping her there. His deep-green eyes made Westalia feel like she'd been swallowed up by a forest, and even though she had seen them many times at this point, she still couldn't look away.

"Yes, let's make plans for seeing Remilena. I'll go with you. It just so happens that she's been sighted numerous times near the Elizabeth Pink factory and apparently has a rash all over her body."

"So you think she works in the dye factory?"

"We won't know until we go. When are you free?"

"Wait a moment. I'll check my schedule book. In the meantime, why don't you step back?" Westalia asked.

Leonardo didn't grant her wish. He brushed one of her cheeks lightly with the pad of his thumb. He was being very gentle, as if he were handling something fragile.

"You always look like you're having so much fun when you tease me," Westalia said.

"That's because I am," Leonardo replied.

Westalia was silent.

"You don't like it when I touch you?" Leonardo asked. His expression turned sad. "I'm a man, you know. I want to touch and be touched by the person I love. But I don't know much about the female psyche. If you don't like it, just say so. In truth, I didn't originally intend to help you because I wanted something in return. I

really just wanted to support you in your endeavors."

"I know that..." Westalia said. Even though he teased her sometimes, he was a genuinely kind person. Westalia's heart started beating faster at his earnest words. She felt her face grow hot. "I just... I lived such a sheltered life for so many years, you know? This is the first time I've had someone that I love and I'm... I'm full of..."

Leonardo's eyes glistened as Westalia's face grew redder. "I'm your first?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I don't have any experience. I'm just not used to it, but... I don't hate it." Westalia didn't want him to stop touching her. She did, actually, want to be wanted and desired.

"I understand. I'll take good care of you," Leonardo said, his happiness pushing away his earlier slump. Westalia let out a small sigh and moved the prince's hand away from her cheek. She maintained her grip on his hand and looked down at it. His hand was calloused and almost twice as big as hers. It was warm, and just touching it like this was enough to make her feel a thrill. She swept her own fingers over the pad of his thumb and cautiously brought his hand toward her lips.

"My lady!" Paige called, running up to them just as Westalia was about to place his hand against her mouth. Westalia and Leonardo both jerked in surprise, distancing themselves from each other.

"Are you okay? This man hasn't done anything to you, has he?" Paige asked, pushing herself between the two and glaring at Leonardo.

"No, Paige. We were just fooling—er, playing around," Westalia replied.

"Playing? Like kids?"

While Westalia was trying to come up with a good response, Leonardo took his leave. "We'll continue this another time," he said, making Paige even more suspicious.

"I will erase his entire existence if he does anything bad to you," Paige said. She'd said that any number of times, but Leo was still the crown prince. If Paige did anything to him, it would come at the price of her own life. However, she was just as reckless as Westalia.

"I'll be counting on you, then," Westalia said, smiling at her

friend. “So, did you learn anything about your father?”

“Yes. It seems like before he got caught up in the corruption case, he’d gone around the army telling everyone to get rid of anything they owned that used Elizabeth Pink.”

“I see. So that’s how he came to Tiberio’s attention.”

Tiberio knew about Elizabeth Pink’s toxicity, and yet he’d been pushing for its use to spread. Westalia’s expression grew grim as she looked down, taking pity on Gasparo, who’d been eliminated simply for revealing the truth.

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Leonardo and Dion returned to Le Chantier Palace after their visit to the Imperial Army headquarters. Leonardo was dealing with some governmental affairs in his office when Dion suddenly spoke up.

“You seem to be in an unusually good mood today, Your Highness.”

Leonardo’s pen stopped moving at the observation. He looked up at Dion. “Is it that obvious?”

“Yes. You’re smiling,” Dion said teasingly, pointing to his own mouth. Leonardo’s eyebrows furrowed. Then he remembered his earlier encounter with Westalia and his face smoothed over again.

She was as lovely as always today, he thought. When he’d heard Westalia was going to the army headquarters, he’d obtained the list she needed and rushed over to give it to her. He’d even gone as far as to lie to her saying he’d just dropped by on official business. He’d keep the truth under wraps, knowing she might get worked up if she was aware that he’d taken time out of his busy schedule just for her.

But how wonderful it had been to see a woman who was usually so composed blushing madly for him. It made Leonardo want to tease her even more. She always put on a brave face, as was necessary to become empress, but in truth, she was an ordinary girl. Leonardo hoped he was the only one who knew that about her.

“I never thought I’d see the day when a workaholic—that is, someone as passionate about his work as you—would shirk his duties for the sake of a woman. Is Lady Westalia really that

charming?"

"Yes, she is. But never you mind that." Leonardo was the only one who needed to know about her charms. It would be unbearable if other men found out about her charms and lured her away from him.

"Hmm, I haven't had much of a chance to speak with her, but since you're *so* interested in her, I think I ought to get to know her better," Dion said.

Leonardo was silent, but he glared at the other man. Dion shrunk back.

"Goodness, you're scary! Never mind then. I wouldn't mess with someone my boss liked, anyway."

Dion had quite the reputation among the social elite, and there were always various rumors flying about in regards to his involvement with various women. Leonardo trusted him as a subordinate but certainly not as a man. But Leonardo knew he didn't have anything to worry about. Westalia was much too preoccupied with him to ever take Dion seriously.

Leonardo let out a small laugh, as though he truly wasn't that bothered, and Dion sighed in exasperation.

"You have another date with her in two weeks, don't you? You have too much work to do to be acting so carefree," Dion said.

"It's not a date; it's a visit," Leonardo said. Westalia would probably scold him for being so laid-back. His desk was piled with documents he hadn't read through yet. "Anyway, I'll take care of it, don't worry," Leonardo said. "In the meantime, I'd like you to look after Elizabeth."

"The Reyn girl? The one you don't like?"

"Who else would I be talking about?"

"Why this sudden change? Not that I mind doing it, but..."

Elizabeth had tried to court Leonardo on a few occasions. Leonardo subconsciously disliked her because of her shared blood with Tiberio, and he'd just assumed that she'd been trying to get with him to satisfy her own ambitions. It was true that Elizabeth had once tried to sabotage Westalia with a dirty trick, but there were still reasons to sympathize with the woman. After all that he'd heard

from Westalia, Leonardo had come to understand that Elizabeth had just been a puppet of her father's. Her love for him had been genuine.

"Anyway, that's an order," Leonardo said.

"As you wish, Your Highness," Dion said, with a reverent bow of his head.

Leonardo's gaze fell once again to the documents in his hand. They were letters that Dion had confiscated from Tiberio's office when he'd infiltrated the Reyn residence. They revealed the truth about the Marquis of Lanchester's corruption case from five years ago. Gasparo had been accused of bribery and had had everything from his title to his property confiscated, and in the end, he and his wife had taken their own lives. In reality, however, he'd been framed by Tiberio.

What did Tiberio have against the Marquis of Lanchester that would make him go to such great lengths? Leonardo wondered. The depths of the Reyn family's shadiness were impressive. People who tried to strike back at Tiberio often died mysteriously or went missing, but the imperial knights always turned a blind eye to him.

The letter Leonardo was currently looking at had been sent to Tiberio from one of the top brass of the army—someone who had accepted a bribe. In the letter, the official said that he had pinned his crimes on Gasparo and he himself had now left the army and was living a life of luxury. The letter summed up that he had escaped the charges because he had followed Tiberio's instructions.

Come to think of it, Gasparo's daughter went missing too, didn't she? Leonardo thought. He planned to release the letter to the public at the appropriate time, and if Gasparo was posthumously exonerated of the crimes, then his family would get their lands and title back. So, it would be ideal if Leonardo could locate the daughter.

"Dion, I have one more favor to ask of you. I need you to find the whereabouts of the missing daughter of the Marquis of Lanchester."

"Oh, you mean Paige?"

Leonardo blinked, surprised. The image of the woman who looked like a man, and who bore an intense grudge against him,

flashed across Leonardo's mind. "What?"

"Paige Lanchester? I heard from Miss Elizabeth that Paige is actually the daughter of Deputy Commander Gasparo."

"I see. So that's why she's so strong..." It was only at that moment that Leonardo was able to piece together where her physical strength came from. Somehow an evil woman who'd been sent to the executioner's block due to a conspiracy and a knight who'd lost her parents to a conspiracy had crossed each other's paths. Fate was a strange thing indeed.

"Well then, I will share this letter with Westalia," Leonardo said. Westalia was soon to expose the truth about Elizabeth Pink and confront the Reyn family. He was sure she'd put this letter to good use.

Chapter 4: The Evil Woman Saves the Girls

Two weeks after visiting the headquarters of the Imperial Army, Westalia and Leonardo headed to the Elizabeth Pink dye factory. The former Lanchester territory, only a short distance from the imperial capital, was surrounded by mountains and rich in nature. There were only a few houses here and there, and the rest was just fields and pastureland. The center of the territory was apparently prosperous, but the dye factory was tucked away on a hill in the countryside.

"So this is where they manufacture Elizabeth Pink," Westalia said.

"Most likely. Let's go inside."

"Wait!" Westalia grabbed Leonardo's arm. She took a piece of cloth out of her pocket. "Elizabeth Pink releases toxins into the air. It will make you sick if you inhale too much of it."

They covered their mouths with the pieces of cloth Westalia had brought with her and then headed toward the building. Covering their faces not only protected them from the poison of the agisakuragi petals but also concealed their identities.

Those men... Two guards were posted outside of the entrance of what was supposed to be a simple dye factory. They, too, covered their mouths, and they wore gloves. Westalia smiled softly at Leonardo.

"Shall we help them sleep?" she asked.

"All right."

Westalia handed Leonardo one of her poison needles and then walked right up to the guards. They were clearly alarmed by the pair's appearance.

"Who are you? Show us your permit or we can't let you pass."

"Oh, yes, our permit. Of course I have one." With an amiable smile, Westalia pulled out from inside her cloak not a permit but a

poisoned needle. Both she and Leonardo moved with such fluid motions that neither of the guards reacted quick enough. Taking advantage of the moment, Westalia and Leonardo pressed the needles into the men's bodies and injected the drug. The men's eyes rolled backward and they immediately fell to the ground, unconscious.

Westalia took the spent needle back from Leonardo and wiped the moist tips of both on a guard's clothes. "You did quite well. Not as well as someone experienced, though," she said, looking up at Leonardo from her crouched position.

"You don't say," Leonardo replied, clearly remembering how she'd stuck him with a poison needle on their first meeting. And after he'd saved her life, no less.

With the two guards taken care of, they were able to enter the factory.

"This is terrible!" Westalia was appalled by what she saw. Inside the main room were large containers filled with dye solution, tables, and other work equipment. Above her head was a pole hung with a huge amount of dyed threads. Five girls were working in the factory and although they all wore protective clothing, the quintet still suffered the effects of severe poisoning.

The girls worked silently, dipping bundles of yarn into the steamy dye solution. There was no one to watch or guard the room except for the workers. That made sense—anyone who stayed in the room for too long was likely to be affected by the poison.

"You, show me your hand," Westalia ordered one of the girls who was hanging thread on the pole.

The girl shrieked in surprise. Westalia grabbed her hand and inspected it. Not only did she have a rash spreading from her fingertips up her arms, but her skin was covered in broken and oozing blisters.

"I-I'm sorry! I'll work harder, so please..." the girl stuttered. She was shivering and clearly frightened, but her eyes were moving unnaturally and she wouldn't meet Westalia's gaze.

Leonardo had been silent, but he finally spoke up. "Don't be afraid. We won't hurt you. Are you blind?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Were you born that way?"

"Yes."

Leonardo crouched down and looked at the blind girl. Reassured by his calming voice, the girl slowly let her guard down.

"Why are you working in a place like this?" Leonardo asked.

"I was...kidnapped. All the kids here were. They take all the orphans in town and punish us if we don't work properly."

"Kidnapped? So you're an orphan?"

"No," the girl said calmly, shaking her head. Leonardo felt a sense of déjà vu at her behavior.

This calmness...it reminds me of someone, he thought. He couldn't help but think of a certain apothecary who was always doing things his own way and getting lost in his medical research. Although she was emaciated, the girl looked like the portrait Daniel had shown him.

"Is your name Remilena, by any chance?" Leonardo asked.

"That's right."

"And your last name?"

"Rossi...?"

Westalia's eyes widened at the puzzled girl's answer. Daniel's last name was Rossi. She knew that from when she'd worked at his apothecary part-time. The daughter he'd been looking for was named Remilena, and she, too, had been blind from birth.

"And your father's name is...?" Westalia asked.

"Um, it's Daniel?"

Oh my goodness! Westalia pulled the girl in for a sudden, quick hug. Remilena let out a gasp.

"You *are* Daniel's daughter."

"Um, do you know my dad?"

"Yes, I know him well. He's been looking and looking for you this whole time. He quit his job in the Imperial Court and became an apothecary. He's devoted to his work in the imperial capital, but he goes out into the city every day to look for you," Westalia said. She'd only recently learned that he'd quit his position in the court because of Remilena's kidnapping. His position had kept him very busy, and it

hadn’t left him with much free time to search for his daughter. Daniel had wanted to devote all of his time, other than when he was doing his research, to finding her.

Even when Westalia had worked there, Daniel would go out and roam the city early in the mornings and in the evenings, looking for his daughter, and would spend his days off traveling farther away from the capital in his search.

“Oh. Then you also help dad with the peach tree in the garden, right?”

“The peach tree...” Westalia remembered seeing Daniel watering the withered tree in the garden of the apothecary. His living quarters were in the back of the shop, and that was where Remilena had grown up.

“A long time ago I planted a peach seed there that I’d gotten from a relative. It’s grown the sweetest peaches ever since!”

Westalia and Leonardo shared a look. According to Daniel, the tree had never borne fruit. Perhaps Daniel had gone out of his way to buy peaches and given them to his blind daughter as if they had been picked from the garden. Westalia’s heart tightened for the smiling girl. Remilena, who should’ve been living happily with her father, was soaked in agisakuragi poison, emaciated and ragged.

Now really isn’t a good time to say, “Isn’t it great we found her?” Westalia thought. Daniel believed his daughter to be alive, but how could Westalia tell him the state Remilena was in? It would be too cruel.

“So I’ll be able to see daddy now?”

“Yes, you will. And you’ll be together from now on,” Westalia said.

“Okay...” Remilena looked down, her lips quivering slightly. Westalia could tell she was trying to hold back tears.

When Westalia and Leonardo asked the other four girls about their circumstances, they said that they were orphans who’d been living inconspicuously in the back alleys of the city and that they’d all been kidnapped and forced to work in this factory. Remilena wasn’t an orphan, but because she was blind and had fallen in a puddle of water during a walk, she’d been mistaken for one because of her dirty clothes and taken away.

When girls were no longer useful due to the effects of the poison, they were taken outside the factory, but none of the current girls knew what happened to them after that. However, it was easy for Westalia to imagine that they'd been disposed of, in light of the fact that the Rias Corporation couldn't allow anyone who knew the inner workings of the dye factory to go free.

Girls had tried escaping many times, but when they were inevitably caught they were beaten as an example to others, and some of them had even died from it. Additionally, there was only one way in and out of the building, and someone was always watching it. The girls had finally given up and stopped trying to escape. They were allowed to go outside for exercise, to bathe in the nearby river, or to do laundry, supervised, if necessary, but only for a short amount of time. The sightings of Remilena that Leonardo had been informed of were probably from those limited outings.

Based on the amount of Elizabeth Pink items that ended up on the market, Westalia could guess that there were other factories like this one.

"Who are you, nice lady?" one of the girls asked.

"She must be the boss! She's come to get rid of us!" another said. The girls were surrounding Westalia.

"I'm on your side," Westalia said. "I'm one of the two final candidates for empress of the Archaites Empire. My name is Westalia Lejainne."

"Final candidate for empress?" the girls asked, their voices overlapping. Westalia guessed that the factory girls must have been largely cut off from the outside world and its news, so she explained to them what the empress selection process was.

"Wow! So that means you might be empress some day!"

"What a rare honor!"

"Shake my hand!"

Westalia, embarrassed, was swarmed by the high-spirited girls. The Archaitian empress selection was open to all young women in the country. Whoever was chosen in the end would be the object of admiration and envy. Westalia had always dreamed of being respected and loved by the people, but she found herself unable to

rejoice in this moment. She wondered if she was even qualified to call herself a candidate for empress when she couldn't even protect the minimum standard of living for these girls.

Then, one of the girls tugged on Westalia's sleeve. "Please, empress candidate, help us! We can't live like this anymore," the girl pleaded.

Westalia grabbed the girl's outstretched hand. The would-be empress had declared in front of the emperor that she would not give up on anyone who was reaching out for help. She gripped the girl's hand tightly as she answered. "Of course. That is my duty as future empress."

Westalia took the girls under her protection and brought them back to Le Chantier Palace for the time being.

Leonardo bound the two guards from outside the factory and brought them back to the palace as well. And then the Elizabeth Pink dye factory was banned from operation, and seized, in the name of the crown prince.

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A week had passed since Westalia had brought the girls from the dye factory into Le Chantier Palace. She was sheltering them in her rooms for the time being, due to threat from the dark side of the Reyn family.

"Ow! Be gentler, Lady Westalia!"

"I'm being as gentle as I can. It's normal for this to hurt; it's very inflamed. Just a little more," Westalia said.

"Ugggh..."

Westalia was personally treating each girl one by one. She wanted to bathe them, but the sores and rashes on their skin were so bad that forcing them into the bath could cause the scabs to peel off, making their condition worse. So, for the time being, Westalia had to wipe each girl's skin down by hand with a wet towel.

"I wish I could have been treated by that cool guy with the eye patch," the girl said.

"Don't complain. Are you so dissatisfied with being treated by a

beautiful lady?"

"You're unfriendly and rough, and you don't care about your patients, and you're haughty and arrogant and—"

"So many complaints!" Westalia had no idea how one girl could find so many things to complain about. At first the girl had been reserved, but after she got comfortable, she'd begun to open up. Perhaps she hadn't yet mastered the rules of etiquette because she was an orphan.

At first she was so impressed that I'm a candidate for empress, Westalia thought. But she supposed it was better that the girl was comfortable with her. On the other hand, the one whom the girl referred to as "the cool guy" was, of course, Paige. Westalia couldn't take care of all five girls by herself, so Paige had been enlisted to help.

"You're so cool! I wanna be your wife!" the girl said, addressing Paige directly.

"Thank you," Paige said with a laugh. "But I'm sure you'll find someone better than me."

"Why? I want you!"

"I've told you before, but I'm a woman."

"I don't care! You're cool! But if you don't want to marry me, then why don't you come be my knight?"

Westalia raised her eyebrows at the girl's request. She pulled Paige back by the shoulders and reined in the immature girl. "I'm sorry, she's *my* knight. I won't give her to anyone."

Paige's eyes widened at Westalia's possessiveness. But soon after, the corners of her mouth lifted in satisfaction, and she put her hand on Westalia's slender arm. "Don't worry, I have no intention of serving anyone other than you, Westalia. Sorry."

"Laaaaaame."

Westalia and Paige moved down the line of girls, chatting with them as they disinfected their wounds. Finally, it was Remilena's turn.

"Okay, Remilena, I'm going to change your bandages and apply medicine to your rash. Can you give me your hands?"

"Okaaay," Remilena said calmly as she held out her arms. They

were thin and bony, and her rash, blisters, and inflammation were worse than the other girls'. Her skin was hardened and darkened from chronic inflammation. According to Remilena, she had been working in that factory the longest. She'd been one step away from being disposed of, but she'd managed to treat the affected areas of her body with items from the factory, reducing the inflammation and maintaining her usefulness. Westalia, impressed with the girl's resourcefulness, could tell she was indeed Daniel's daughter.

"This might hurt a little," Westalia warned.

"It's bound to hurt a little bit if you're using hyoticin. But for people like us with severe skin conditions, the ingredients in hyoticin may be a little *too* irritating," Remilena said.

"You're very knowledgeable!" Westalia said. The ointment that she was using to treat her patients was a concoction of her own making. Hyoticin was known as a poisonous herb, but it had anti-inflammatory properties that relieved skin sores, itching, and pain. The girls were suffering from severe symptoms of the poisoning, so Westalia had to use a strong dosage.

"Hyoticin has a very distinctive smell. Daddy taught me about it a long time ago. I have a very keen sense of smell, even though I can't see," Remilena said in a laid-back manner. "But I still think you should switch to a weaker medicine, because overstimulation can tire out the skin. For example, you could extract components from zerna berries or lucerne grass. Oh, but you may not be able to get zerna berries this year. If it rains too much, there won't be many berries. And then—"

Westalia and Paige were taken aback by the girl's relaxed manner as she talked about medicinal leafy plants. Remilena, with her index finger on her chin, tilted her head in puzzlement at the silence between the two.

"Did I say something wrong?" Remilena asked.

"No, not at all. I was just impressed by you. You're clearly Daniel's daughter. I still have a lot to learn. You're right, I'll get you some medicine that will be a little less harsh on your skin," Westalia said.

"Thank you. You're very kind, Lady Westalia."

“I’m just doing what I have to do. It’s nothing compared to what you’ve had to go through.”

Remilena smiled softly, but then she frowned with worry. “Daddy is coming here today...right?”

“I sent a letter with the fastest horse here, so he should be here as soon as he reads it.”

“I see. I hope he won’t be upset by how I look...” Remilena let out a sad sigh. She always seemed so carefree, but she was probably easily rattled when it came to her father.

In truth, Westalia wasn’t sure about letting Remilena and Daniel meet. She thought it would be best to let Remilena recuperate a little longer before her father saw her, but Paige disagreed, strongly pushing for the two to meet as soon as possible.

“He’ll have to know the truth eventually. It’s just a matter of sooner rather than later,” Westalia said.

“I know that he secretly buys me a lot of peaches every year to make me happy, even though the tree in the garden doesn’t bear fruit. But you know, he was always so thrilled about it, so I just pretended not to know, which really did make me happy.” Remilena’s eyes slowly began to fill with tears. She clearly understood how much her father loved her and didn’t want him to worry about her.

“I see...” Westalia was unable to come up with any meaningful words of comfort. Then they heard the sound of running footsteps from the hallway.

“Please wait!”

“You can’t go in there without permission!”

Westalia could hear the sound of her ladies’ maids in the hallway. Then the doorway to the drawing room flew open.

“Remilena!” Daniel came stumbling in, sweating and out of breath. Westalia could tell he’d run out of his house the minute he’d read the letter. He’d managed to misbutton his shirt, either from being in a hurry or from being upset. Westalia’s ladies’ maids came in after Daniel, but Westalia held up her hand and silently told them they didn’t have to do anything.

“Daddy?”

Daniel looked frantically around the room and was left speechless

when he finally caught sight of his daughter. He dropped the peaches he'd been carrying and rushed over to cradle his daughter in his arms.

"Oh, Remilena!"

"Daddy..."

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"I can't...breathe." Remilena coughed as she was hugged tightly, and Daniel hurriedly loosened his arms. He put his hands on Remilena's cheeks and stroked them as if to confirm she was real. Tears were flowing freely down his face. Remilena's eyes were also wet from being with her father again for the first time in years.

"Remilena, your skin..."

"I know. It got like this while I worked in the dye factory. It's Elizabeth Pink poisoning. Girls who were there before me were even worse, and it likely killed them. I don't know what kind of poison it was, do you, daddy?"

"Elizabeth Pink..." Daniel was having a hard time processing that his own daughter was affected by the poison, so Westalia spoke up.

"The dye used to make Elizabeth Pink is extracted from the petals of agisakuragi. Those petals are easy to use for dyes because you don't need to use a mordant and they are sensitive to heat. Plus, they have a very bright orange color that you can't get from anything else."

"But those seeds are poisonous and used for assassinations and executions. If you eat it, you'll suffer horribly and then die," Remilena said.

"You're quite smart. It's an agonizing death," Westalia said.

Remilena tilted her head, unaware that the woman in front of her had drunk agisakuragi poison and lived to tell the tale.

Westalia explained Remilena's story to Daniel, mentioning the other girls who'd been kidnapped and forced to work in the factory as well.

"That's absurd..."

"Daddy...will my skin ever return to normal?"

"Yes, I'll do everything I can to fix it. You don't have to worry about a thing."

"Okay."

"Oh, and I brought these for you," Daniel said suddenly, placing a peach into her blistered hand. "Your tree is producing a good crop again this year, dear."

"It's all because you take such good care of it, daddy!" Remilena smiled as she sniffed the peach, even though she knew he'd bought it from a store.

Is this what familial love looks like? Westalia wondered. Her relationship with her parents had always been tenuous, and she'd cut them off completely after her execution. She'd never known a father's love. Westalia felt a little envious, somewhere deep inside, as she watched Daniel and Remilena.

Then Daniel noticed the stack of canvases on the table. They were painfully realistic drawings that Westalia had done of the girls as they currently were. At the top of the pile was a drawing of Remilena.

"Westalia, what are you going to do with this picture of my daughter?"

"I'm going to use it to inform other people about the dangers of Elizabeth Pink," Westalia answered.

"No. I don't want to expose my daughter in such a way. Please don't use her picture."

The girls had already given their approval—including Remilena. Westalia had found other people suffering from the poisoning in addition to the girls and Elizabeth and had been drawing them incessantly.

Remilena shook her head slowly. "No, it's okay," she said, in a tone that almost sounded like a rebuke. "If there are people like me who are suffering from Elizabeth Pink poisoning and don't know the cause, I feel sorry for them. If I can help, I want to."

"Remilena... If you're okay with it, then I won't object. But are you sure?"

"Yes." Remilena reached out a probing hand and rested it on her father's arm. Then she looked up into his face. "Please help Lady Westalia. She's trying to spread the truth about Elizabeth Pink to the world. That's why I want you to release the poison analysis too."

Daniel turned to look at Westalia with a puzzled look on his face.

"Just so you know, I didn't force her to say that. Remilena, how do you know about the analysis?" Westalia asked.

"I overheard you talking about it to someone."

She probably meant either Paige or Leonardo, who had free access to Westalia's rooms at the palace. After a few moments of hesitation, Daniel shrugged in response to his daughter's plea.

"All right," he said, having made up his mind. "That was the deal. I'll leave this with you. I don't care what you do with it, but I hope you will protect me and my daughter from being crushed by the powers that be."

Daniel took out an envelope from his breast pocket and held it out to Westalia. Paige handed her a knife, and she carefully broke the seal. She looked at the contents, finding it was an explanation of the composition of Elizabeth Pink. She clutched the analysis to her chest and bowed to Daniel and Remilena.

"Thank you both for your cooperation. Tiberio will never be able to touch you. He'll soon fade from society completely," Westalia said. The corners of her mouth slowly curled up into a smile—the sheer power radiating off her practically knocked Daniel over.

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Shortly after the seizure of the Elizabeth Pink dye factory, Tiberio paid a visit to Le Chantier Palace.

Westalia was heading into the main hall of the palace when she heard servants gossiping that Tiberio was on his way to the dungeon.

He's probably here to make sure the guards from the factory don't say anything incriminating, she thought. Leonardo was leading the interrogation of the two guards. They'd readily talked under pressure and had already admitted they were being forced into the work, and other information was coming out slowly. They also let on to the fact that the Rias Corporation had been conducting their businesses with full knowledge that the Elizabeth Pink dye contained toxins and would poison people.

Westalia made her way to the area of Le Chantier Palace where political affairs were conducted and stopped in front of a particular door. Before knocking, she deliberately removed the blue earring from her right ear. Looking down at the coat of arms, the sigil of the next emperor, she slowly smiled.

"I'm going to take advantage of this, Leo," she said, entering the room.

The door swung shut and the sign on it, reading "Office of the Royal Chronicler," glinted in the hallway light.

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Tiberio was in the dungeon of Le Chantier Palace, shortly after one of his Elizabeth Pink dye factories had been seized.

"You there, you haven't said anything, have you?" Tiberio asked the two guards in the cell. They were being detained as important witnesses.

"O-Of course not, sir!" one guard said.

"We've said nothing!" said the other.

Seeing Tiberio's high-handed smile through the iron bars, the two guards turned pale. They'd been employed by Duke Reyn for a long time and were well aware of the fates of those who defied him, so they were afraid that they, too, would be subjected to the purge.

How did this happen? Tiberio wondered. *The things happening lately have put me on edge. Everything started when that girl came to Archaites...* He thought about Westalia, the other candidate for empress. She hadn't been satisfied with merely disrupting order in the Kingdom of Lhumzia and had to come to this country to participate in the empress selection. She'd abandoned her mother country, and at first she'd seemed like a small, insignificant whirlpool, but gradually she'd grown stronger and become a huge swell, involving everyone around her. It made for an extremely unpleasant situation for Tiberio.

The duke clenched his fists but didn't lose his smile.

"Get out of here quickly," Tiberio ordered.

"But, sir, we're being detained here in relation to forced child

labor..."

"That's not a problem. I already have the guards here under my control. I can get you out of the country." Tiberio had bribed the guards. The one sitting in the chair in the corner of the corridor had his eyes closed, showing his willingness to turn a blind eye to anything Tiberio did. Although he said to their faces that he would get the two guards out, he had no intention of letting them go free. He was going to have them taken care of. He let out a sly laugh and unlocked the cell.

"Where are the girls who worked in the factory?" Tiberio asked.

"I don't know. Two tall characters in cloaks stuck us with needles, and when we came to, we were here."

"Were they both men?"

"No...one sounded like a woman. I couldn't really tell though because of the cloaks."

It had been a pair of people who'd snuck into his mansion earlier as well. After having his men investigate, he was now certain that one of them was Paige, who was currently recuperating from injuries to her eye, an arm, and her legs. The other remained unidentified. Tiberio knew that Westalia claimed Paige was her only knight and that she hadn't appointed any others to her guard. However, since it was Leonardo who had instructed the Imperial Army to seize the dye factory, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that the other thief might have been his subordinate.

Leonardo Orencia... What an abominable man, Tiberio thought. Leonardo had been Tiberio's most vigilant opponent so far. He was clever and levelheaded, working in secret to maintain the country's security and protect the Orencia family's position, sneaking around to find out what the underworld was up to.

Leonardo was also the only one who knew that Tiberio had procured the answers to the first round of the selection for his daughter. At the time, Elizabeth hadn't been disqualified because Leonardo hadn't had proof, but he had stopped her from appointing someone with the Reyns' support to the selection committee in the second round.

Additionally, the Devorah Trading Company, which Tiberio had

previously used to purchase poisons and weapons, as well as to make investments, had been put out of business after someone brought out its history with the former queen of the Kingdom of Lhumzia. The company's transaction history had been one of the pieces of evidence used to clear Westalia's name, and Tiberio had always wondered how it had made its way into her hands. He hadn't been surprised to learn Leonardo was behind it. He was almost positive it had been Leonardo who'd broken into his office with Paige.

Leonardo was always able to acquire an uncanny amount of evidence in relation to crimes, and Tiberio could only assume that the man either employed the best thieves in the country or was one himself.

Westalia Lejainne is even more of a problem with the crown prince on her side, Tiberio thought. He could sense that the two of them had teamed up and were about to turn their blades against the Reyn family. Tiberio snapped back to reality.

"Regardless, you two have gotten me in a lot of trouble. If it gets out that I knew about the toxicity of the Elizabeth Pink dye and still sold it and, on top of that, that I kidnapped children and put them to work like chattel even I won't be able to get away with it," Tiberio said to the two guards in the cell. The toxins in the pink dye could cause serious issues when they accumulated in the body. However, those suffering from the poisoning had thus far been unable to connect the dye to the cause of the ailments. The use of the poisonous flower of the agisakuragi plant remained a secret.

As long as that secret isn't revealed, then Elizabeth Pink will continue to rake in a huge profit, Tiberio thought. So far, the only person who'd realized the truth about the dye and confronted Tiberio on it had been Gasparo Lanchester, but if it happened again he'd just have the next person to bring it up silenced as well.

As for the children he was forcing into work, they were orphans with no other relatives, so their deaths from poisoning would never be noticed. In fact, several had already died due to Elizabeth Pink's toxins, but they'd never become a problem. To Tiberio, they were nothing more than disposable goods. In order to gather more

workers, he needed to win control of the Kingdom of Slidd so he could bring slaves into Archaites. And to fulfill *all* his goals, he had to get Elizabeth to become empress, no matter what it took.

"Now come on, get up," Tiberio ordered.

"Yes, sir!" they said, standing up.

"I don't think so," a woman's voice echoed through the dungeon, accompanied by the sound of heels clicking against the stone.

Tiberio turned around and saw a tall woman wearing a cloak. She pulled back her hood with an elegant, slender hand, and her silver hair shimmered in the dim light.

"That voice! That's the woman who broke into the dye factory and knocked us out!" one of the guards said.

"Did you hear what I said just now?" Tiberio asked.

"I already knew all of that," Westalia said, walking over to Tiberio and looking him dead in the eye.

"You shouldn't try to take a detainee out of prison without permission, Duke Burglar," Westalia said.

"You're the one who's a burglar. What are you doing snooping around? Do you think you'll get away with it, foreigner?"

"Oh, how frightening! Are you threatening me?" She spoke with feigned terror and without any of the politeness his position should demand.

Tiberio involuntarily reached out and took her chin in his hand. "If you speak like that to me again, I'll crush your jaw." He dug his fingernails into her soft, pale skin, but she was completely unmoved and made no attempt to move away. If it had been his daughter, Elizabeth, she would have immediately cried and pleaded with him to stop. But then again, Westalia had a lot of experience in matters like this. She had guts, he would give her that.

"You're the one who won't get away with it," Westalia said. "Enjoy the sensation of being slowly and gradually eaten away, just like what the poison in the agisakuragi petals does."

"I've lived a long time and I've never met a woman as impertinent as you," Tiberio said.

Westalia snorted. "The look on your face says you want to kill me."

"Poison doesn't work on you, does it? By all means then, tell me what does," Tiberio said sarcastically, knowing she'd escaped death by poisoning. Westalia still didn't flinch. "Or maybe I will just crush your jaw."

"I'll bite your hand off before you can do that," Westalia replied.

"You're quite the talker. But you're just a woman." Tiberio gripped her chin harder and pushed her backward as hard as he could.

Without putting up any resistance, Westalia allowed herself to be pushed, her temple hitting the iron bars behind her. She fell to the floor. But her expression as she looked up from Tiberio, blood streaming down her face, took his breath away.

Like a wild beast that had found its prey, she glared at him, holding him in her sights.

What's with that expression? Is she really just a young girl? A shiver ran down Tiberio's spine. What a creepy woman. Even when threatened or assaulted, she didn't show any fear or signs of distress. For the first time ever, Tiberio felt afraid, like he was being hunted. He was so overwhelmed by her that he could scarcely move. He felt like a venomous snake was coiling around his body.

Tiberio finally took a step back as Westalia rose and slowly walked toward him.

"Are you not afraid of anything?" Tiberio asked.

"Well, I'm certainly not afraid of weak, ugly, pathetic men," Westalia replied.

"What did I ever do to you?" Tiberio asked with a sharp laugh. He'd only just met her; she had no reason to hold a grudge against him.

"You killed the parents of my most precious knight," Westalia answered, her voice clear.

"Your most precious knight?"

"Paige Lanchester. Surely you remember her, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But you misunderstand. I didn't kill her parents. They died on their own; I had nothing to do with it."

"How despicable." Westalia's face contorted. "If you leave now, I'll keep quiet about your bribe to the guards and your attempt to release the detainees. So you should get lost."

Tiberio was silent.

"I said get lost!" Westalia's glare was as full of rage as if he'd killed her own parents. Her murderous intent reminded him of Paige's when she'd snuck into his mansion. Westalia was clearly worried about her subordinate and burned with vengeance as if it were her own.

Westalia Lejainne, strong and noble, was the other candidate for empress. She had courage, passion, and intelligence, and she would stand up for others—all the necessary qualities for an empress. If she took the position, she would create an upward current that would take everyone around her up with it. This swell would surely spread throughout the country.

Yes, she's frightening. I'm more afraid of her than I am of agisakuragi poison, Tiberio thought.

"You should've died in Lhumzia," he spat at her, a smile still on his face despite being filled with an unfathomable fear.

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After Tiberio left, Westalia approached the cell and looked down at the two guards. The tips of her fingers trembled slightly from confronting Tiberio.

One of the guards let out a squeak when he saw the blood dripping down her face.

"You know what happens if you try to escape, don't you?" Westalia said, her face expressionless, as she gestured to the poison needle that rested inside her breast pocket.

"H-Hey, just when are you going to get us out of here?"

"You're not speaking very respectfully to your superior. I'm sure you mean to ask 'might you let us out?' Why don't you try that again?"

"When might you let us out...?"

Westalia smiled wryly as she wiped the blood from her temple with a handkerchief. Her head ached from the blow. She'd grown angry, wondering why she had to endure so much pain at that man's hands.

"I'm sorry, but you *won't* be getting out. You'll be stuck in this dark dungeon forever, never seeing the sun again."

"You...!"

"Just kidding."

"Just...!" The men's faces changed from fear to surprise and back again. After toying with them, Westalia came to her senses and shrugged.

Taking out my anger on them does nothing, Westalia thought. She fastened the lock on the cell and then spun away sharply on her heel. She walked down the long hallway of the dungeon and stopped near a corner.

"You can come out now."

"Okay..." Emerging from the shadows of the dungeon was the Royal Chronicler.

In the Archaitian royal palace, when the emperor participated in important discussions or events, there was an attendant who kept a record of it. This was to provide proof in case any problems ever arose. There were only a few historians in the imperial palace, and they spent their time listening to the conversations of the royal family and writing down every word. Their records were absolutely reliable.

"You recorded our conversation just now, correct?"

"Of course, Lady Westalia. I have recorded everything Duke Reyn said, word for word, right here!"

Westalia took the proffered book from the chronicler, noting that indeed their conversation was accurately recorded on the page. It included what had been said about the truth regarding Elizabeth Pink, the outrageous statement that Westalia should've died in Lhumzia, and the assault Tiberio had perpetrated against her.

When Westalia had heard that Tiberio was heading to the dungeon, she'd used the power of the crest inscribed on the earring from Leonardo to ask for the cooperation of the Royal Chronicler while she tried to provoke a reaction from Tiberio, hoping that she would be able to elicit some useful testimony. Perhaps Tiberio's impatience had made him speak his true feelings in such an unguarded manner.

"Hmm? Wait a moment..." Westalia said.

"What's the matter?"

Looking down and reading further into the text, Westalia saw that it even included the exchange she'd had with the two guards.

"What do you mean by 'Lady Westalia teased and terrorized the two detained guards with a nasty look on her face, then took pleasure in watching them squirm'?"

"Of course I had to record that you took your frustration out on the two guards!"

Westalia furrowed her brow and grabbed the chronicler by the collar. "And what do you mean by saying that I had a nasty look on my face and took pleasure in watching them squirm?!"

"Well, that's the way it looked to me... It's my obligation to write down what I see and hear. Please let me go!"

"Isn't this just your opinion?! You don't have to make any unnecessary adaptations. I want you to erase all these lines."

"I can't do that! It's forbidden to make changes to the records." The Royal Chronicler was a frail-looking young man with glasses. This was also the man who'd been recording beside the emperor at the empress selection announcement party. He seemed to be a little older than Westalia.

Westalia released him and he immediately picked up his pen and notebook again and began writing at great speed. The sound of the pen's nib gliding across the paper echoed around the hall of the dungeon.

Westalia could guess what he was writing as he looked at her grudgingly from time to time. She took the book from him and read it over. The new section read: *Lady Westalia screeched not to add any embellishment. Her face is like that of a demon.*

"I told you you don't have to add that!" Her voice echoed around the dungeon. From that day on, Westalia became warier than anyone else when around the Royal Chronicler.

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Elizabeth, at Westalia's direction, went around the country visiting

aristocrats to find out the extent of the damage caused by Elizabeth Pink. She was targeting those who claimed to be suffering from unexplained physical ailments. Although she didn't know how exactly Westalia was trying to stop the spread of Elizabeth Pink, Elizabeth had decided to follow her lead, of her own volition, in order not to allow the damage of the dye to spread any further.

"I never expected you to come all the way out here, Lady Elizabeth. I'm sorry that I'm in such a state and can't offer you any sort of hospitality," said the woman Elizabeth was interviewing, before her words got cut off by a strained groan.

"Please don't strain yourself. Are you in pain?"

"I feel...sick." The woman looked nauseous, so Elizabeth picked up a washcloth from the side table next to the bed and handed it to her. Elizabeth rubbed the woman's back until her nausea subsided.

"When did you first start feeling ill?"

"About six months ago." The woman's hands, face, and neck were covered in a familiar rash. And she was wearing loungewear made from a fabric dyed with Elizabeth Pink.

"This is a lovely outfit. When did you get it?"

"Um... I think it was about six months ago, from a dress shop in town. What was the name of the shop...?"

"There's no need to remember the name. I see, about half a year ago..." Elizabeth said, biting her bottom lip.

Nausea and a rash... There's no mistaking it, her symptoms are the result of Elizabeth Pink poisoning, Elizabeth thought. How sinful the Reyn family was. It was no exaggeration to say that Elizabeth Pink was the most captivating color in the country today. It was used for various things, from dresses and other clothing to curtains, wallpaper, and miscellaneous goods, mainly targeting aristocrats as its market.

Elizabeth had visited dozens of houses since she'd started her investigation and had seen many people suffering from the same symptoms.

"I would like you to remain calm and listen to me. Your symptoms are being caused by Elizabeth Pink. You need to get rid of these clothes right away," Elizabeth said.

"What...?"

"The dye in Elizabeth Pink contains a toxin that is harmful to the human body. I am currently investigating the damage it has caused."

The young lady's eyes widened in surprise at the truth. She had never dreamed that the physical problems she had been suffering from were caused by the clothes she was wearing. Then Elizabeth asked her to sign a petition for the eradication of Elizabeth Pink and to write down the products she owned that used the dye and the details of her symptoms.

Elizabeth left after the woman had written everything down. Dion, clad in a cloak, was waiting outside the room.

"Welcome back. I see you didn't get egged this time," he said, waving at Elizabeth and smiling flippantly. He'd been accompanying Elizabeth for the past month since she'd begun her investigations.

Elizabeth walked out of the mansion ignoring Dion, and he fell into step behind her, a lopsided grin on his face, unbothered by her brusque attitude.

The egging Dion was referring to was something that had happened at another house they'd visited. When Elizabeth confided that the dye was the cause of the unexplained physical ailments, the woman had at first been puzzled and then gradually become angry. Her respect for Elizabeth, who she'd once thought an exemplary lady, had turned into hatred. She'd glared at Elizabeth like an enemy, reprimanded her, and then thrown eggs at her. Elizabeth was, after all, the face of Elizabeth Pink; naturally the woman blamed Elizabeth for making her sick. All Elizabeth could do was apologize, even as she'd been spat at and had water thrown on her.

"Where are we going next? Another noble's estate?" Dion asked.

"Yes, that's right. Westalia is handling the investigation into commoners who were affected," Elizabeth replied. She stopped and turned to look at Dion with a quizzical look on her face. "Why are you accompanying me?"

"Well, it would be dangerous for you to go alone," Dion said.

"That's not really a reason. You have no need to worry about me. You're Leonardo's loyal servant. Doesn't that keep you busy? You should get back to Le Chantier Palace as soon as possible."

Leonardo always seemed so busy that he barely had time to rest, and Dion was usually with him. He really wasn't in a position to be spending so much time with Elizabeth.

"To tell you the truth, he's the one who ordered me here." Dion moved in closer to Elizabeth and smirked. He had a teasing, probing look on his face.

"Oh..."

"It was none other than your beloved Crown Prince Leonardo who ordered me to look out for you," Dion said.

Elizabeth wondered why. Leonardo had seemed to dislike Elizabeth, given that she was a member of the Reyn family. He'd disregarded Elizabeth's obvious goodwill and had even spoken coldly to her before. So why would that change now?

"Why is he showing such concern for me?" Elizabeth asked. She had a history of being mean to Westalia and had torn up an important dress of hers. It would be no wonder if Leonardo hated her.

"He knows about your situation and feels sympathy for you, obviously. He might seem cold on the outside, but he's actually a kind person."

"I know that..."

It's not fair for him to be kind to me at a time like this... Elizabeth thought. As she received harsh treatment everywhere she went these days, it made her heart soar that Leonardo was concerned about her. Leonardo and Westalia were similar in some ways. No matter how much they disliked someone, they were the kind of people who would unconditionally help anyone whom they saw in need. They seemed to be a perfect match for each other. There was no room for Elizabeth, and even if she won the empress selection, she knew that there would never be a day when Leonardo would look at her like he did Westalia. Her eyes pricked at the gloomy realization and she bit her lip to keep the tears from falling.

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It had been a month since Westalia visited the Elizabeth Pink dye

factory. She had been spending her time visiting the local towns and the commoners to survey the damage caused by the dye. She'd also been renovating her rooms at Le Chantier Palace into a temporary home for the girls; the formerly deserted space was now fully stocked with bedding, clothing, and other necessities for them.

Paige was shocked at the transformation of the rooms. Her injuries had healed and she'd been able to remove her eye patch. "Westalia, as far as I remember, your finances were so tight that you didn't even have enough money to cover my salary. You didn't pay for this furniture out of the budget for the empress selection, did you?"

Paige was right on the mark. Westalia remained silent, smiling slightly. Paige took this as confirmation and kneaded the space between her eyebrows.

"Do you know how large of a difference there is in the number of artificial flowers you have compared to Miss Elizabeth?"

"What can I say?" Westalia replied. "We can't have all those sick kids sleeping in one place together. It is of the utmost importance that they have a comfortable space to recuperate."

"The most important thing for us should be the empress selection! Remember?! Couldn't you expend some effort to collect flowers?!"

"Of course I'm working on that too. You saw how hard I've been working on artificial flowers this past month, didn't you? When the dust settles, so much the better."

"I know I'm not very bright, so I'm not really sure what strategy you have up your sleeve. But can you really beat Miss Elizabeth like this?" Paige asked, her brow furrowing.

Westalia smiled. "I knew from the beginning that it was going to be a tough fight. But I'm not giving up. It's not *whether* we can win or not. We're *going* to win."

Westalia's eyes reflected her bright fighting spirit. She hadn't given up at all. She was looking up to a faint light far, far away and reaching for it with all her might. She wasn't desperate by any means; she was still running and struggling just as hard as she had been since she'd crossed the border wall. Paige gasped as she

realized that Westalia's eyes weren't dead but rather filled with passion.

Westalia didn't want to divulge her plan while she still didn't know if it would work out the way she wanted it to. Besides, if she proposed an all-or-nothing kind of idea, it might stir up even more anxiety. So, Westalia just had to put what she was thinking straight into action and show Paige the results.

"Just a little longer. Wait just a little longer. I'll fill that warehouse with flowers."

"Okay then... But don't put too much pressure on yourself."

"What?"

"Even if you don't become empress, you can choose a new future. Wouldn't it be fun to go on a round-the-world trip together? Maybe we could dig up a vein of gold or something," Paige said.

Westalia could feel Paige's concern, even as she expressed it in her own unique way. Westalia let out a small laugh. The fact that Paige's alternative plan was digging for gold was very like her.

"I'll have to get a shovel," Westalia said.

"And you better pay me with all that gold you dig up," Paige said with a laugh. She was teasing Westalia again. But the thing Westalia most wanted to do was to give her friend the status garnered by being knight to the empress. She was sure that Paige would like that too.

Just then, one of the girls from the factory appeared from the hallway pushing a tea cart.

"Lady Westalia! Lady Paige! I've made some tea. Want some?"

"Thank you. However, you should say, 'I've prepared some tea. Would you care for a cup?' That's the polite way to phrase it."

"Okaaay..."

The other girls surrounded Westalia and Paige as they drank their tea. "How is it? Is it good? We made it!"

"It's bitter," Westalia said.

"No way!"

"There is a proper way to make tea, as well. If you don't heat the water to just the right temperature, it tends to have a bitter taste. I'll teach you next time."

"Thank you!"

The four girls were making quite the fuss around Westalia. They were working hard to help her, cleaning the rooms and washing the sheets and curtains. No matter how many times Westalia told them to rest because they were sick, the girls refused to listen to her, saying that it was better for their recovery if they were physically active.

Then one of the girls spoke up shyly. "Um, Lady Westalia?"

"Yes?"

"Can we...keep working here? It doesn't matter if we don't get paid! We'll work hard as long as you give us at least a meal!"

The other girls also echoed the first girl's sentiments. "We don't have any parents or anywhere to go back to. If we go back on the streets we'll die..."

"No job will take us since we're in such bad shape."

"Plus, we owe you our lives, so we want to be useful! Doing anything is fine! We'll study etiquette and polite speech as hard as we can!"

All the girls nodded along as each one spoke.

So this is what it feels like to be needed, Westalia thought. She was silent. It was what she'd wished for while alone and suffering through her strict education. She'd wanted to be useful, to be needed, by *someone*, and now these young girls truly relied on her. She knew that there were many other girls in similar situations and that she, as the empress, would have to try to help them all, without being beholden to any one in particular. But Westalia couldn't refuse the hands that were reaching out to her.

"I understand. If that's what you want, you can stay here. I will pay you for your work. But for now, you should concentrate on getting as much rest as possible," Westalia said, gently patting the first girl's hand. "I'm sure I won't be bored with all of you here."

"Lady Westalia!" the girls said, and then they all piled onto her in a group hug. Paige, sitting across from them, looked a little dismayed but also a little proud.

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Later that night, Leonardo was going to be coming to Westalia's rooms for a short talk. To kill time until then, Westalia sank down on the sofa and started reading a book.

Then, a moment later, she heard the sound of glass breaking and looked up to see two men in black cloaks coming through the window. Their swords glinted in the starlight.

Assassins?! Westalia quickly pulled out a poison needle, which she'd inserted into her bun as a hair ornament, and threw it at one of the men. Her hair cascaded around her and the needle flew true, hitting the man in the neck and injecting him with a load of poison. The poisons she made were highly potent, even in small doses.

The man collapsed on the spot with a groan, unconscious. The anesthesia would ensure he didn't wake for about half a day.

Unfortunately, Westalia only had one poison needle on her. There was nothing she could do against the other man who was coming at her. There were screams coming from the room where Paige and the girls were, and she guessed that an assassin had entered there too.

"Whose orders are you under?" Westalia asked.

The man was silent.

"You should answer me. But I can guess even if you don't."

It had to be Tiberio Reyn. He was the only person Westalia could think of who could be so fearless and bold as to sneak an assassin into the rooms of a candidate for empress. It was rumored that Tiberio would use any dirty tricks available to satisfy his own lust for power. Some people even called him a villain. Where there's smoke, there's fire, the saying went. Those who went against Duke Reyn often met with sudden accidents or mysterious deaths.

A sword was thrust at Westalia's neck, drawing a trickle of blood.

No, I can't die here... The rug was being pulled out from under her again. Westalia was always so close to achieving what she wanted when it was pulled away from her again and again. She'd made it this far, fallen down multiple times and stood back up again. If she died, what would happen to Paige? Or to Leonardo and those girls? What about all of the people who were suffering from Elizabeth Pink poisoning?

I can't die yet. There are people who need me, Westalia thought.

Was there anything, anything at all, that could distract this man? She tried desperately to think of something, but nothing came to mind that would get her out of this predicament. She looked up at the man, unable to move an inch, like she was sewn into the couch. His hand holding the sword was trembling slightly.

The assassin lifted his sword again and swung it down in a sharp arc. It seemed to move so slowly.

I'm sorry, Leo. He was the last thing she thought of. He would likely be incredibly depressed by her death. After her mental apology to him, the pain she expected didn't come. There was just the sound of metal screeching on metal.

"Just who do you think you were about to harm?"





A low, deep voice made her open her eyes. Leonardo was standing over her, protecting her. She went limp with relief.

Leonardo swung his sword. The assassin quickly readjusted his stance and readied his own sword, but the prince was quicker than that to deliver the coup de grâce. The assassin let out a muffled grunt as his shoulder took the brunt of Leonardo's thrust.

Leonardo flipped back the assassin's hood with the tip of his sword, revealing the face of a young man who glared ruefully at Leonardo. After a moment's hesitation, the young man did an odd thing: He took the sword in his hand and stabbed his unconscious comrade through the chest.

Is he mad? No, wait, it's to keep him from being interrogated!

The assassin easily accepted his fate. Realizing that he couldn't defeat Leonardo on his own merits, he had stabbed his comrade to keep him quiet. He probably intended to take his own life after this.

"Hey, you! Stop!" Leonardo instantly sensed the young man's intentions and reached out to stop him, but the young man took a packet from his pocket, put something medicine-like in his mouth, and swallowed it quickly.

The young man fell to the ground and began to writhe in agony. Leonardo threw down his sword, ran over, and grabbed the young man's shoulder.

"Hey! Spit out whatever you just swallowed!"

The young man pushed Leonardo away. The assassin was gasping for air and convulsing, and then blood began to pour from his mouth. He fell to the ground and stopped moving.

Westalia, who was still on the sofa, slowly got up and walked over to the young man.

"There's no use in shouting at him. He's already dead," Westalia said, shaking her head as she looked for the man's pulse.

She pulled the small package from the man's hand, opening it to find a few ground-up agisakuragi seeds. Even in small doses, it was a fast-acting deadly poison that could kill in a matter of seconds.

"What the hell kind of poison was it?" Leonardo asked.

"Agisakuragi. After ingesting the seeds, one will experience convulsions, abdominal pain, difficulty breathing, and finally death

from organ failure."

"You're pretty knowledgeable about it..."

"I've taken it once," Westalia said.

"At your execution?"

"That's right."

The two assassins had died to keep who had given them the order a secret.

Westalia frowned as she looked down at the two young men. When the second man had pointed the sword at her, his hand had been shaking slightly; he'd seemed hesitant about killing someone.

"Didn't you deserve better? Were you taken advantage of?" Westalia muttered as she looked at them. But her questions went unanswered.

"Was your knight not with you?" Leonardo asked.

Westalia confessed that she'd heard screams coming from the other room. "But don't worry, Paige wouldn't be taken out by these kinds of men."

Paige rushed into the room right at that moment. She had a young man held under one arm like a sack of potatoes.

"Hey! Let go!" the boy shouted, struggling in Paige's grip.

"Oh, be quiet! Westalia, are you okay?!" Paige asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. How about the girls?"

"The girls and I are all fine. But the other two who snuck in took some kind of poison and killed themselves. The person who ordered the assassination probably told them they would be killed if they returned home unsuccessful. But this one seemed to be afraid to die and tried to run away."

"I see," Westalia said.

Paige had already taken the packet of poison away from the boy. It seemed that two more assassins were dead, but it was a blessing to have one witness left.

Then something fell from the boy's pocket.

"What's this?" Paige asked. The boy grew pale.

"Stop! Don't touch it! That's just—" he started shouting.

Ignoring the boy, Paige leaned down and picked it up. She opened it up, revealing a family seal.

“Don’t look at it! Hey! I told you to stop!”

Leonardo raised his eyebrows. “Wait, that’s the seal of the Reyn family.”

Seals like these, depicting a family’s crest, were used for things like governmental affairs and were very important to families.

The three looked at each other, wondering why the boy had brought the seal of the Reyn family with him.

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Westalia spent the rest of the night in the main part of Le Chantier Palace while the dead bodies were removed from her suite. She stared out into the darkness from the balcony attached to the bedroom. After the earlier chaos, she was finding it difficult to relax. Despite the fact that people had died just hours ago, the night was as beautiful as always.

“Can’t sleep?”

Looking down toward where the voice came from, Westalia saw Leonardo, on a balcony diagonally below her, looking back up at her. It seemed that this room was close to Leonardo’s personal rooms.

“So much happened today. I’m still jittery,” Westalia replied.

“Yeah, I couldn’t sleep either. I thought I’d come out and get some air.”

Westalia was silent. He’d found her in a pensive mood. “You could come up here...if you want,” she said after a moment, motioning him to her own balcony.

As Leonardo stood beside her on her balcony, Westalia could feel the heat of his body where their arms touched. It made her feel safe.

“Are you okay? It must’ve been a shock,” Leonardo said.

“It was,” Westalia replied, placing both hands on the railing as she looked down. “When the man pointed his sword at me, I was terrified. Not because I could’ve died, but because I don’t know what would happen to Paige and the girls if I were gone. And all the people poisoned by Elizabeth Pink would continue to suffer...”

Leonardo was silent.

"I was reminded again that becoming empress would mean bearing enormous responsibility." For a long time, Westalia had thought that she would be happy as long as she became a ruler, something she'd dreamed of for her entire life. But she could see now that that might not be the case. Even if she fulfilled her dream, she would still have to deal with troubles and hardships. She might even have her life threatened again, like it had been today. Throughout history, many people had died when caught up in the whirlwind of political intrigue that surrounded ruling households. This attempt on her life was nothing unusual—in fact, it was a natural part of the struggle for a throne.

"Are you getting cold feet?" Leonardo asked, resting his own hands on the railing and looking out at the night sky.

Westalia shook her head. "No, neither the risks nor responsibilities associated with being empress have any bearing on my desire." On the contrary, she felt her yearning and passion for the position grow even stronger. She stretched a hand into the air and clenched her fist. "I'll do everything in my power to grab that throne with my own two hands."

Leonardo turned his face to look at her.





"I know you'll be a good empress. I told His Majesty that as well. 'Westalia Lejainne was born to become empress,' I think is what I said," Leonardo said.

Even though he knew that she still didn't have any flowers in her storeroom, he still continued to believe in her. She pushed a flyaway strand of hair behind her ear as she smiled bitterly at his unexpected overestimation of her. But the truth was, she couldn't simply imagine any other future for herself.

Westalia suddenly grabbed Leonardo's hand and placed a kiss on the back of it. He had calloused, muscular hands that had saved and supported her so many times. And it wasn't just her; his hands had saved many people. She loved this kind man's hands.

Leonardo's eyes widened in shock. Westalia looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you for always supporting me."

The prince's surprised expression took on an air of mischievousness as he raised the hand up and placed his own lips to the spot where Westalia had just kissed. Westalia's face flushed as if Leonardo had just kissed her directly. His deep green eyes, filled with heat, pierced her gaze.

"I was terrified when I saw the sword pointed at you today. I fear that one day you really will die because of your recklessness," Leonardo said.

"Don't go killing me off in your imagination. But everyone dies one day. You just have to live aggressively in the present because you never know when something might happen," Westalia said. "Or do you want to lock me in a cage somewhere forever so I won't do anything dangerous?"

"If I locked you up, would you even go quietly? You'd just pry open the bars and escape," Leonardo replied.

"You know me so well," Westalia said with a chuckle, turning to face him. They both let out a small laugh. She finally felt the stress of the day beginning to melt away.

"The more time I spend with you, the more indispensable you become to me. That's why I'm so afraid of losing you," Leonardo said.

Westalia, acting in her selfish, brash way, was causing nothing

but problems for him, and she found it strange that he still loved her despite all that. No matter what sort of facade she put up, he was able to see through all of it. There was no way she could hide from him that she was just an ordinary girl who was scared and depressed.

"What do you even see in me? You must have strange tastes," Westalia said.

"It's better if I'm the only one who knows how attractive you are," Leonardo replied.

"What does that even mean?"

Leonardo took her hand and squeezed it, pulling it up to rest against his cheek. Her fingers were cold from the night air, but gradually they grew warmer as they rested against his cheek.

"I want all of you. Hurry up and become my empress, Westalia." Leonardo's green eyes shone lustrously in the moonlight.

How bewitching... Westalia thought. She'd never known another man like him—someone who could melt the very core of her being with his seduction. He stroked Westalia's hand and looked at her hungrily. His gaze was aimed at her lips.

"Stare all you want, but I won't kiss you again. The promise was just until Remilena was found," Westalia said. She'd promised to kiss him every time they saw each other in exchange for his help in finding Daniel's daughter. She felt like she might have broken the promise a few times, but now it had expired.

Leonardo pulled on her wrist to pull her closer and put his hand on her face. Westalia pursed her lips and closed her eyes. Even though she expected a kiss on her lips, Leonardo teasingly pressed his mouth lightly against her forehead.

"Then I guess it's up to me," Leonardo said, looking down at her.

Oh, I'm powerless against him, Westalia thought as a sweet tingling spread from her forehead throughout her entire body.

Chapter 5: The Results

The selection for empress was in its final stage; however, there was a clear difference in the number of artificial flowers that the two candidates had managed to accumulate in their storerooms. Westalia's remained empty, while Elizabeth's was full to bursting. Even under such dire circumstances, Westalia remained calm, happily making flowers by hand on the terrace of the garden attached to her rooms, together with the girls from the factory who had now become her ladies' maids. She kept a watchful eye on the girls to make sure their presence wasn't noticed outside of her residence.

"It's done! What do you think? It looks good, doesn't it?" one of the girls said.

"It's passable," Westalia replied.

"Huh? Wow, harsh!"

"Speak politely, please."

"Okaaay. Do you think this is enough to win against your rival?"

"Yes, I think so."

The girls surrounding Westalia on the terrace were making a lot of noise. It was a common occurrence. Even though they said Westalia was unfriendly, she'd grown quite attached to the girls. Their artificial flowers left a lot to be desired, but they would still be included in the final tally.

Westalia placed the completed flower in a box at her feet and let out a small sigh. The gardens were meticulously cared for by the gardeners, with seasonal flowers planted in the flower beds and the bushes trimmed into neat shapes. Each breath of fresh air entering her body made her feel refreshed.

Paige appeared on the terrace and slammed her hand down on the white table, making the flower-making tools resting there bounce into the air. The girls followed the movement with confused

looks on their faces.

"Westalia, are you still making fake flowers?!" Paige cried. "Trying to escape from reality doesn't change the *actual* reality!"

"Call it a creative exploration, not an escape from reality. Besides, I'm not going to be making any more."

"What you need to be doing is concentrating on coming up with a strategy to win the empress selection. Wait, you said you're going to stop?!"

"You're being quite loud. And yes, I've grown bored of it."

"You're...bored of it?"

Westalia stood up from her chair, put away the tools that were spread across the table, and then picked up the box of flowers from near her feet.

"Shall we go claim our victory?"

"W-Wait a minute! What do you mean?!" Paige asked, bewildered, as she followed behind Westalia to her storeroom.

"Has Lady Westalia lost the will to compete? This is as good as conceding defeat."

"From the very start she had no chance of winning. She was up against the Reyn family, after all."

"But still, this isn't right! With only a month left until the final count, she has zero pieces in her storeroom! Is she making fun of the sacred empress selection?"

The two knights in charge of guarding Westalia's storeroom sighed in dismay. Elizabeth's room was filled with artificial flowers, while Westalia's remained empty. The wind blowing in through the windows only stirred up a cloud of dust. The people of Le Chantier Palace had initially had high hopes for Westalia, who had been the talk of the town with her great comeback story, but their enthusiasm had waned to almost nothing over the past six months.

"I have no intention of losing."

"Lady Westalia! You heard..." The knights paled. Both men had been so engrossed in gossiping that they had failed to notice Westalia and Paige's arrival.

"If you're going to gossip, you shouldn't do it somewhere so public," Westalia said.

“Please forgive us!” both knights said in unison.

Westalia ignored the apology and handed the large wooden box she’d brought over to the knights. Inside were the artificial wisteria flowers that she’d been diligently making. Westalia’s servants, along with Paige, followed suit, handing over the boxes of handmade artificial flowers that they’d made over the past six months. Even so, it wasn’t enough to fill the room. Like the knights, Westalia’s own servants were skeptical of her confident attitude.

Then Elizabeth, accompanied by her attendants and a large number of knights, sashayed up to Westalia, her heels clicking against the floor.

“You look like you’re putting on a brave face,” Elizabeth said. She crossed her arms as she looked at the storeroom, which contained only a modest number of artificial flowers.

Westalia was silent.

“What do you think you can do with only a month left? You were supposed to beat me and prove that you were worthy of being empress. I am utterly disappointed in you,” Elizabeth continued, her shoulders slumping.

“I can’t tell if you want to actually beat me and become empress or not,” Westalia commented.

“Of course I do! I will become empress and be the one at Leonardo’s side!” Elizabeth shot back. “But...”

At this rate, if Westalia was unable to confront Duke Reyn and Elizabeth became empress, then Tiberio would do everything in his power to make Elizabeth follow his wishes.

“I’m going to become empress and confront my father on my own! I’m not going to rely on you anymore!” Elizabeth cried. Westalia remained silent as Elizabeth barreled on. “If everything continues like this then Leonardo will be lawfully wed! Is that really okay with you?!”

Westalia still said nothing.

“Say something!” Elizabeth cried.

“You’re right,” Westalia finally said.

“I am?”

“If I don’t do anything, the title of empress will be yours. I

wonder what will happen to me if I lose. Your father doesn't seem to be my biggest fan, so I might get erased."

The assassins who had attacked her hadn't been able to be identified, meaning Tiberio had prepared carefully to ensure that.

I don't know what the future holds. Maybe I'm just being stubborn. I'm always so afraid and anxious, Westalia thought.

Westalia's rare moment of weakness and uncertainty made Elizabeth's expression cloud over.

"Let me ask you something. Have you already exhausted the budget you were given for this challenge?" Westalia asked.

"Why are you asking all of a sudden? As you can see, my storeroom is fit to burst with all my flowers. Of course I've used my entire budget. All that's left is to wait for the day of the count. You'll be weeping by the end of it," Elizabeth replied.

Westalia's lips curved into a beautiful arc. Now that Elizabeth's budget had run out, the time was ripe for Westalia to make her move. "I will do what I can until the end. If I keep running, then surely one day I'll gain a tailwind blowing me forward. Maybe today is the day my destiny changes."

Elizabeth looked on in confusion as Westalia, a wry smile on her face, left the storeroom area with Paige.

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That afternoon found Westalia in the audience chamber in Le Chantier Palace. Emperor Augusto had cleared the room of people before Westalia could make her request, as though he knew exactly why she'd come.

Westalia was alone with Emperor Augusto, who was seated high above her on the throne.

"I have a matter I would like to discuss with you, Your Majesty," she said in a firm tone, looking up at him. Westalia presented the evidence related to the truth of Elizabeth Pink dye that she'd collected over the past months.

The documents included Daniel's analysis, the reports of injuries she and Elizabeth had gathered from both commoners and

aristocrats, the pictures Westalia had drawn of the child laborers plus their personal testimony, and the record of the conversation between Westalia and Tiberio that the Royal Chronicler had written. In particular, the number of reports of injuries she and Elizabeth had gathered was truly frightening, and the documents formed a mountain on the emperor's desk.

"All of these documents are related to Elizabeth Pink dye. Please take a look."

The emperor hummed assent as he stroked his long beard and scanned his eyes over the documents. Westalia waited for his reaction with her head bowed.

Emperor Augusto placed the papers in his hand back on the desk, slowly turned his gaze toward Westalia, and instructed her to raise her head. He was as stern and dignified as ever. His face was similar to Leonardo's, which made sense given they were father and son.

"When I decided on this final challenge, I gave you a sure path to victory. You have arrived at the correct conclusion," Emperor Augusto said.

"Your Majesty's true intention behind this challenge was to use the weakness of the Elizabeth Pink dye, produced by the Rias Corporation, to oust the Reyn family because they pose a threat to the imperial family, is that correct?"

Emperor Augusto's mouth curved into a small smile, and Westalia took that as confirmation that her suspicions were correct. There had been an underlying extra facet to the challenge, one that the emperor had presented to Westalia alone. It was whether it would be possible to reveal the truth of Elizabeth Pink and eliminate a political rival who had caused the emperor so much trouble. Now that Westalia thought about it, it was almost an impossible task. But if Westalia was empress, the emperor's reign would be stabilized. That was the best both sides could hope for.

"Whether I will prevail or not depends on Your Majesty's decision after this. I have fulfilled the true challenge behind this task, so you can reward my wish as well."

The emperor looked down at her. "Very well."

The Reyns were the most powerful family in the Archaites

Empire, and even the imperial family couldn't easily touch them. They hadn't been able to do anything about Elizabeth Pink either, as many doctors had refused to analyze it. The Reyns were so feared no one wanted to get even remotely on their bad side.

Even for Emperor Augusto, if he wished to maintain his authority during his reign, which family's daughter would be chosen to join the imperial family in the empress selection process was a matter of life and death, and a daughter of the Reyns was nothing but a threat. The head of the family, Tiberio, was both powerful and ambitious, and if he were to gain influence over the imperial family through a marriage, he would likely try to overturn the power dynamics at court.

The decline of the Reyn family would elevate the rule of the Orencias to greater heights and make it even more unshakable. The emperor's voice had sounded slightly cheery at the prospect of finally being able to remove the dangerous elements from the selection, which was one of the empire's finest traditions.

Westalia looked up at the emperor. "You know what my wish is, for I have only one. Your Majesty, please immediately issue an imperial decree for the whole of the Archaites Empire."

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Two days after Westalia's visit to the audience chamber, the Imperial Court summoned Tiberio Reyn to Le Chantier Palace for a public conviction. It was carried out by Crown Prince Leonardo on behalf of the emperor.

"You are guilty of expanding the Elizabeth Pink enterprise, despite knowing the dye contained poison, and of causing enormous harm to the people. You will be stripped of your title, fortune, and land and sent into exile," Leonardo said.

Tiberio Reyn was silent.

A large number of aristocrats had crowded into the audience chamber to get a glimpse of Tiberio, whose pure evil was no longer just a rumor. The crowd, Westalia and Paige among them, watched Tiberio with curiosity.

They say the misfortune of others tastes the sweetest, Westalia thought. Seeing the curious crowd brought back memories of her own trial and execution.

Tiberio was held on either side by knights, who were keeping him from escaping. He hung his head in silence.

Leonardo walked up to him and stared fixedly at him, his eyes sharp. "Do you understand the crime you have committed? The estimated number of victims is well over tens of thousands. How many people have suffered to satisfy your desires?"

Tiberio still said nothing.

"Shall I take your silence as an affirmation of your guilt?"

The audience listened with rapt attention to every word exchanged between Leonardo and Tiberio.

"This is a conspiracy. No, an act of petty vengeance, rather. Is it not, Paige?" Tiberio asked, looking up and finding Westalia and Paige in the crowd. "Have the injuries I gave you healed yet, thief? You were the one who snuck into my mansion that night, weren't you?"

The look Westalia shot to Paige told her she didn't have to say anything in response.

"That night you stole the seal of the Reyn family so you could take back the lands that your family once ruled, Paige. No, I should call you your proper name—Paige Lanchester, daughter of the deputy commander of the Imperial Army. It seems that children of criminals become criminals after all."

Tiberio's words caused a commotion in the audience chamber. There was no one present who didn't know the Lanchester name. They had been a prestigious family of knights, and the head of the family, Gasparo, had been praised as a genius with the sword. However, five years ago, he had lost his position, honor, and fortune due to corruption. Then Gasparo and his wife had lost all hope of surviving and committed suicide. The only daughter of the Lanchester family was now standing beside the prospective empress, dressed as a knight. The crowd couldn't help but be surprised at the revelation.

"Stay strong, Paige," Westalia said.

"Please don't make me endure any more of this man," Paige

replied, clenching her fists and, ignoring Westalia's attempt to stop her, stepping toward Tiberio. "Don't insult my father! I stole your seal? Don't make false accusations. I would never take money away from a girl at rock bottom who had sold herself off, the way you did, and use it to steal her family's lands."

"Now, what are you talking about?" Tiberio asked.

"Don't play dumb with me. You framed my father and drove him to ruin!"

The knights managed to stop Paige before she could grab Tiberio.

Then Tiberio spoke to the audience, smiling gracefully. "Did you all hear that, ladies and gentlemen? She's confused, unable to distinguish between reality and delusion. She bears an unreasonable grudge against me because she thinks it's my fault her family's in ruins. Your parents died of their own accord. Were you not the one who left your family and ran away?"

"What are you—?!"

It was Tiberio who had enticed Paige to run away by saying he had a lucrative job for her. However, the duke was already in control of the conversation. The people who'd been watching Tiberio now turned their attention on Paige.

"It's not a false accusation. A few days after your visit to the mansion, someone rewrote the deed for the former Marquis of Lanchester's lands, and it has your name on it," Tiberio said.

Paige's eyes widened, and Tiberio shrugged off the hands of the knights, smiling.

"There's no point playing dumb," Tiberio continued. "After using it, I'm sure you hid the seal in your room or somewhere close by. Your Royal Highness, Crown Prince Leonardo, please give me the opportunity to sue the real guilty party. Paige Lanchester is a criminal who resents me for the downfall of her family. She made false accusations against me with her delusion that Elizabeth Pink is poisonous and, in addition, stole my family seal!"

Several knights wearing Reyn family colors rushed into the room.

"The Reyn family seal has just been discovered in Paige's private rooms!" one knight said, holding up the seal for the audience to see.

Leonardo looked bewildered, unable to comprehend what was

happening.

Paige snorted out a laugh. “It wasn’t enough just to frame my dad, but now you want to frame me for a crime I didn’t commit as well.”

People in the crowd began muttering, speculating if the Elizabeth Pink poisoning was all a hoax fabricated by Gasparo’s daughter.

Tiberio took the liberty of ordering the knights serving at the imperial palace to apprehend Paige, the real guilty party.

“Just who is the delusional one?” Westalia asked, crossing her arms. “It’s not an unreasonable grudge she holds against you.” She quickly raised her hand and turned toward Leonardo. “Your Highness, there’s no reason to give the convicted a chance to explain himself. Tiberio’s exile is the will of His Most Revered Majesty, the emperor.”

People’s attention shifted from Paige to Westalia. She’d been watching the commotion unfold around her and now walked gracefully to the center of the hall and stopped in front of Tiberio.

“Paige.”

“Yes.” Paige sensed what Westalia wanted her to do and left the hall, returning quickly and dragging a boy with her. He was the only living assassin remaining among those who had infiltrated Westalia’s rooms.

“Sit down,” Paige ordered.

“Fine...” the boy grumbled. He was completely drained from harsh interrogation and knelt on the floor without resistance.

“You screwed it up,” Tiberio muttered, too quietly for anyone to hear.

“The boy is one of the assassins who attacked me in my private rooms the other day,” Westalia continued. “He immediately confessed when interrogated. He said he’d been ordered by Tiberio Reyn to kill me and hide the Reyn family seal in Paige’s room as an insurance policy in case any false accusations had to be leveled. Is that correct?”

The boy, his expression dark, gave a small nod. “That’s right. I did it all on that man’s orders.”

Tiberio still had a relaxed expression on his face. “Where is the

proof that the boy is an assassin? He could be a fake that you prepared. The fact is that the seal was found in Paige's room. There's no way you can prove it was planted now. Although I do understand your desire to defend your precious knight."

A cold smile played on his lips, but Westalia didn't flinch. She took another step toward him and held the seal up in front of his nose.

"Do you mean this seal?" she asked.

"Wh-Why are there two Reyn family seals?" Tiberio looked puzzled as he compared the seal that the knights had brought from Paige's room with the one Westalia was holding.

Westalia pointed to the seal the knights were holding. "That's the fake, and this one's the real seal," she said with a small laugh. "See? The image of the sword on the seal your knights brought in is upside down."

The knight looked at the seal in his hand. "She's right..."

Tiberio took the seal from him, speechless.

"It was really funny to watch you confront Paige with such a smug look on your face while holding up a fake seal. You should have checked it first," Westalia said, amused by his response.

"How did you...?"

"One of the assassins you sent to my residence, this boy, in fact, had it hidden on his person. His being an intruder has been confirmed not only by my personal guard but also by people in the Imperial Guard. I had an inkling why he might be trying to hide it in Paige's room, so I had a fake made and hidden to see if my theory held water." She'd hidden it between the clothes in Paige's closet.

There's no use putting up more of a fight, Tiberio, Westalia thought. The attack that night had been not only to kill Westalia but also to hide the seal in Paige's room. Perhaps the latter had even been the main objective, and the assassination of Westalia was only a matter of chance. However, before they could accomplish their mission, the assassins had committed suicide after being cornered by Paige and Leonardo. The poison that the assassins had had on them had been given to them by Tiberio so they could take their lives rather than face interrogation, but one of them hadn't had the courage to die.

"You've dug your own grave. You've failed in both the assassination and the fabrication of evidence. Now you're also guilty of attempting to assassinate the empress candidate and of filing false charges," Paige said, a smile of contempt on her face.

"Was your outburst just now just an act?" Tiberio asked.

"No, I was really angry at you for insulting my father. I was also just amused by your pathetic attempts to pin the blame on me," Paige replied with a snort, crossing her arms.

Paige was right; it was too late for him to claim that the Elizabeth Pink case was a false accusation. There had been so much evidence gathered, from the Elizabeth Pink analysis to the cases of poisoning with signed statements from all over the country. There was no way Tiberio would be able to get away with claiming it was just one girl's conspiracy against him.

"I found out a lot of other interesting things," Westalia said, looking at Paige and holding out a stack of documents.

"You have more?"

"Your mansion is being raided as we speak. Interestingly enough, we've already found evidence of your crimes. Trafficking in dangerous weapons, trafficking in poisons, human trafficking, bribes...and cover-ups."

Among them was a letter attesting to the collusion between the Reyn family and the Devorah Trading Company. The Devorah Trading Company was the company from which the former queen of Lhumzia, Delphine, had bought poisons. Tiberio evidently frequently exchanged letters with the chairman of the Devorah Trading Company, making investments and acquiring poisons and weapons.

Westalia scattered papers that had been found in Tiberio's office across the marble floor: evidence of his many misdeeds.

"And then there was *this*," Westalia said, fluttering a single remaining document in her hand. "The corruption case of Marquis Gasparo Lanchester from five years ago. You orchestrated the pinning of charges of bribery of a leader of the Imperial Army on Gasparo. We found some of your correspondence with the man who was supposedly bribed, and when interrogated, he confessed immediately. He said you enticed him to create a false accusation

and pin his own guilt on Gasparo. Tiberio, you wanted to eliminate Gasparo before he could spread the truth he'd discovered—that Elizabeth Pink was poisonous. Right?"

The audience hall had grown even more crowded.

Westalia drew closer to Tiberio as she spoke. "There's no getting away with it. The evidence is mounting against Elizabeth Pink and all the wrongdoings you have committed. Your crimes are too many. There is nothing you can do to win now. There's nothing left for you to do but wait for the day of your exile."

Tiberio's shoulders began to shake with laughter.

"What's so funny?" Westalia asked.

He had an unsettling smile on his face as he answered. "I really underestimated you! You really have truly, utterly bested me! How dare you, in only the time since you abandoned your homeland and escaped to this country, win the hearts and minds of my daughter, the crown prince, and even a distinguished apothecary and then hunt me down? You are brilliant, a talented leader, and lucky. I'll admit I've lost, but it is my daughter who will be empress."

All women in the country were eligible to participate in the empress selection process. No matter their age, origin, family background, or experience, it was ultimately based on merit and achievement. Even if one was the daughter of a criminal, as long as one was recognized as having the right qualities to become empress, she could take the position. And now, with less than a month to go before the flower collection was to be tallied, there was a clear difference in the number of flowers collected between Westalia and Elizabeth. Tiberio was right; if things continued as they were, the title of empress would surely go to Elizabeth. Westalia was sure that it wasn't just Tiberio but everyone in the hall who was assuming that outcome.

"I will be empress."

"It will be Elizabeth."

"Me."

"Elizabeth."

"No, it will be me."

Neither of them were backing down. At that moment, Tiberio's

smile, which was always plastered on his face, crumpled for the first time. He clenched his fists tightly, his body trembled, and his eyes narrowed.

"I told you it will be Elizabeth!" Tiberio shouted. His voice echoed throughout the audience chamber, and everyone recoiled at its force.

Only Westalia met his rage head-on, without even raising an eyebrow.

If I show my fear here, my standing as a candidate for empress will be ruined, Westalia thought. She didn't want anyone to underestimate her. She wouldn't present this man any opening, any weakness.

"I can't let you take everything away from me," Tiberio spat, breathing heavily.

How can you say that when you've taken so much from others? Westalia wondered.

"You're a criminal, and there's nothing more you can do. At best, you can sit in your cell with your fingers crossed and watch the results being announced," Paige said, fixing Tiberio with a glare.

"I don't need to do anything more. She has no chance," Tiberio replied.

"She'll win. She's carved that future out for herself. That's why you're so afraid, isn't it?"

"You seem to be very devoted to her. But if you trust so easily, you'll just be betrayed again, just as I once deceived you," Tiberio said with a sharp laugh.

"She couldn't be more different from you." Paige looked into Tiberio's eyes. "You're not an aristocrat anymore; you're just a criminal. Oh...what a lovely sight. I've finally managed to wipe that creepy smile off of your face. It's like a dream come true."

Tiberio was silent. Paige looked at him contemptuously, then moved to stand diagonally behind Westalia. That was where she belonged now.

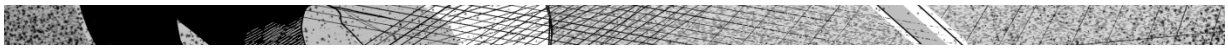
Leonardo clapped his hands to silence the crowd. "Tiberio Reyn's other crimes will be discussed later by the Imperial Court. Lock him up in the dungeon for the time being."

"Yes, sir!" At Leonardo's command, the knights began to drag

Tiberio out of the audience chamber. He was completely disheartened and walked without resistance, but he stopped when he caught sight of Elizabeth near the entrance.

"It's not over yet, Elizabeth. The only way to strike back at that woman is for you to win the selection. For the sake of my honor and that of the Reyn family, you must seize the—"





Before her father could finish, Elizabeth slapped him hard across the face. Tiberio looked amused that his daughter had dared to strike him and raised his hand to his reddening cheek.

"Who would want to be empress for you?! I've lived in fear of your punishments, always keeping quiet and doing what you've wanted. I'm going to become empress for *myself*! I don't care what happens at home. I love Leonardo and want to be by his side!" Elizabeth cried.

Leonardo's eyes widened slightly at the sudden confession.

"You know what will happen if you raise a hand to me again, Elizabeth. You should have been a better listener. Just do as I tell you. You will be empress and you will prove my innocence. Is that clear?" Tiberio asked.

"No, I won't. I will no longer meekly obey you! Besides, I'm not afraid of you! You're being exiled as a criminal!" Elizabeth said, tears streaming down her face. "You used me as a walking promotion for Elizabeth Pink without ever telling me it was toxic! Even though I didn't know, a crime is a crime. I take this crime very seriously and will live the rest of my life miserable as the daughter of a criminal. You will also suffer and atone for your sins for the sake of all those you have harmed!"

"Elizabeth... I guess I still raised you wrong."

"You raised me wrong?! You're no longer my father! I... I hate you!"

Tiberio was stunned into silence. There was no longer any sign of the Elizabeth who had mocked herself for being her father's puppet.

Tiberio was dragged away, and just before leaving the door of the audience hall, he spoke without turning around. "You'll just be wasting your time and effort, Westalia Lejainne, on anything you try to do before the final tally is announced!"

Westalia's shoulders slumped slightly after the door closed behind Tiberio. She glanced out the window, knowing her storeroom was still mostly empty. She might really lose at this rate.

"Don't listen to a word that man says," Paige said. She gasped as she turned to comfort Westalia and found her friend gazing anxiously out the window. She couldn't help but feel a little

melancholic after catching a glimpse of how Westalia felt as they waited for the final tally.

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Two days after Tiberio's sentencing, the emperor released an imperial edict aimed at everyone in the country.

The edict read: "The Elizabeth Pink dye developed by the Rias Corporation contains a substance that is extremely harmful to the human body. The use of Elizabeth Pink is henceforth prohibited and all clothing, sundries, and any other articles in which the dye has been used are ordered to be disposed of."

The evidence that Westalia had put together about the truth of the dye was circulated in newspapers and other media all over the country, sending the Archaites Empire into turmoil. Although medicine-related accidents had occurred from time to time in the past, it was an unprecedented situation for the emperor to directly issue a prohibition order. Consequently, everyone, no matter their rank in society, disposed of every last one of their Elizabeth Pink items.

As Leonardo had declared, the Elizabeth Pink incident resulted in the confiscation of Tiberio's title, property, land, and much more by the state, and he was sent into exile. His time would now be spent doing hard physical labor in the undeveloped settlements.

Tiberio's goal had been to seize power by installing his daughter as the empress who would then give birth to the next emperor, thus allowing Tiberio to meddle in foreign affairs and wrest control of the Kingdom of Slidd from the Kingdom of Lhumzia. He had intended to then use Slidd to import slaves to use in the expansion of his Elizabeth Pink business. In fact, he'd already been meddling in diplomacy and exerting pressure on nobles so that the peace negotiations between Lhumzia and Archaites would be stuck at a standstill.

Elizabeth, meanwhile, was not charged with any crimes, thanks to her ignorance of the toxicity of the dye and her cooperation with Westalia's investigation. Management of the Rias Corporation was to

be handed over to Elizabeth, but now that both she and the company had lost the public's trust, it was unlikely that she'd be able to restore the company to a useful state. Elizabeth herself was no longer a young noble that people admired. However, she didn't drop out of the empress selection process, and the Orencias didn't take steps to disqualify her.

While the Archaites Empire was in an uproar from the ruling against Duke Reyn and the edict from the emperor, Westalia took the time to visit the apothecary in the imperial capital.

Westalia's eyes widened and she let out an involuntary noise of surprise as she approached the shop.

What is all this?! she thought. There was a long line of people stretching out in front of Daniel's shop, even though it had once been the butt of so many jokes. The store sold only unusual medicines, and Westalia wasn't even sure if they were effective. They included ones that supposedly made your eyes sparkle, or your breasts grow larger, or your nails grow faster, and so on. It was certainly not a shop that was so popular as to have this many people waiting in line for it.

As Westalia hurried into the store she found Daniel, looking suspicious as ever in his white lab coat, selling some kind of medicine to the customers.

"I'd like one of these!"

"Me too!"

It seemed like all the customers were looking for the same thing. As Westalia cocked her head to the side and wondered what they were all coming to the shady apothecary for, she spotted Remilena sitting in a chair in a corner of the shop.

"Hey, what's all this about?" Westalia asked the girl.

"That voice... Lady Westalia?"

"That's right."

"Well, I think this must be the reason," Remilena said, smiling gently and holding out both her hands. Her arms, which had been severely riddled with rashes and sores caused by Elizabeth Pink, had regained much of their original smoothness.

Elizabeth Pink was reported to be difficult to recover from once the toxin accumulated in the body, so for someone who had been so severely poisoned, Remilena's recovery was remarkable.

"It doesn't hurt anymore?" Westalia asked.

"Nope. I feel much better. It's all thanks to daddy's medicine."

Daniel had created a drug that, when consumed, expelled the poison that had accumulated in the body. When he tried it experimentally on Remilena, it had had a dramatic effect and her symptoms had eased day by day.

"Daddy named it the 'Super Miracle Detox Agent,'" Remilena said, raising her pointer finger and imitating her father.

"Sounds like he went a little wild with the name," Westalia remarked.

"I think it's cool," Remilena said with a little laugh.

The antidote had been approved by the government and was now in high demand. It was actually all thanks to Elizabeth's financial support for its development that it had been able to gain approval so quickly.

Elizabeth was distributing the antidote free of charge as recompense to the victims of the dye, and her sincere response had turned the criticisms against her into voices of sympathy. The Rias Corporation was just barely holding on after avoiding bankruptcy; Elizabeth intended to change its name and start over. There were many other ventures besides the dye, and it would be important for Elizabeth to manage them well as her livelihood, now that she'd lost her title.

Daniel walked over to Elizabeth and Remilena even as he continued to deal with customers. He wore his usual friendly smile.

"Welcome. I'm glad you came."

"I came to see how Remilena was doing and was surprised to see how prosperous you've become," Westalia said.

"You have my gratitude," Daniel said with a laugh. "Thanks to you, I now have enough money for my research."

Westalia was sure he would use the funds to order shady ingredients from all over the world for his shady experimental medicines again.

Now that Tiberio had been exiled, Daniel and Remilena were no longer being threatened, but they had still been placed under the protection of the Imperial Army and were constantly under guard. Daniel was now being praised by the public as a principled apothecary for having exposed the darkness of Elizabeth Pink.

"I'm not surprised you managed to come up with an antidote in such a short time," Westalia said.

"I've managed with the help of Lady Elizabeth, but it's really for my daughter's sake," Daniel said.

Westalia's brow furrowed as she imagined Daniel holed up in his laboratory, even going so far as to sleep there, all to help Remilena.

"I'm a little envious of you, Remilena. I didn't have a father who cared for me even half as much as yours cares for you," Westalia said, the words slipping out of her mouth without much thought. She smiled sadly and Daniel put his hand on her arm and looked at her hard.

"What are you talking about? You're like a daughter to me, Westalia."

Tears pricked at the corners of Westalia's eyes and she couldn't come up with anything to say in response.

Then, upon hearing the name "Westalia," the customers began to buzz and the murmuring spread to the line outside the shop.

"Is that Lady Westalia Lejainne?! The one who's participating in the empress selection?!"

"Y-Yeah, it seems like it!"

"Well, my goodness! What an honor to see her in such a place!"

A crowd began gathering around Westalia as word got out that the prospective empress was in the apothecary's shop. Westalia was not only a hero who had stood up against unimaginable trials in her home country and proven herself innocent, but she was also the person who had done the most to expose the true darkness of Elizabeth Pink. She had saved people from untold suffering and even death at the hands of Duke Reyn.

"Oh Lady Westalia, thank you so much!"

"I am sure you will become empress and make this country a better place!"

"We're rooting for you!"

Westalia's eyes grew even wetter as the words of support poured in one after another. The feeling of being needed and respected by people made her heart tremble. She was touched by the sparkling eyes of the people looking at her. It was completely different from when she'd been executed and people around had shown her nothing but contempt.

This is what I've kept on living for... she thought. Since the time she'd been forced to live in solitude in the royal villa in Lhumzia, doubts and fears that she might never be needed by anyone had been wrapped around her heart like chains. But at that moment, she felt those chains loosening.

I want to be empress, but... Would she really be able to surpass the number of artificial flowers in her rival's storeroom by the day of the final count? The uncertainty haunted her.

"Yes, I'm sure I'll succeed," Westalia replied to the crowd, if a little forlornly. Then, she caught a glimpse through the store window of the dead tree in the garden and she gasped. The tree had been completely withered and seemed to be beyond recovery, but at the very tips of its branches new leaves now sprouted.

"No way... There are leaves..." she whispered.

Then Daniel grinned mischievously and made a "don't tell" gesture with his index finger in front of his lips. He had been hiding that the tree was dead and couldn't bear fruit from Remilena her whole life.

"What's wrong with the peach tree?" Remilena asked, tilting her head.

Daniel's persistence in watering and tending to the dead tree must have finally brought it to life again.

Westalia smiled softly and patted Remilena on the shoulder. "Nothing's wrong. I'm sure you'll have delicious peaches again this year."

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The final tally of the flowers was still a little ways off, and

Westalia and Paige were on their way to the former Marquisate of Lanchester. The land wasn't particularly prosperous, but it was large and rich in natural resources.

"I've missed this. I used to come to this church for services a long time ago," Paige said. Her parents' graves were behind the church. Since they'd had no money for a proper burial, they typically would've ended up being buried in a public cemetery. However, two fine graves had been quietly dug here by those who still cared for Gasparo after the corruption case.

Paige crouched down on the spot to offer the bouquet of flowers she'd purchased on the way there and put her hands together in prayer. Westalia saw her shoulders trembling and could tell that her friend was crying. Exposing Tiberio's wrongdoings and exonerating Gasparo of the false accusations against him couldn't bring back the dead. Westalia could only pretend not to notice and said a prayer as well.

"Um, Westalia? Just where are you taking me?" Paige asked.

"Don't worry about it. Just come on!" Westalia said.

After visiting the graves, the two got back into their horse-drawn carriage and after a thirty-minute ride they arrived at a large mansion on a hillside.

"This is..." Paige whispered. The large mansion had been the estate's main residence of the Lanchester family. They'd usually spent their time at their townhouse in the imperial capital, but when the summer heat became too severe, they'd return here to wait it out.

After they got out of the carriage and walked to the front door, Westalia handed the key to Paige.

"Are we trespassing again? You even made a key for this place?" Paige asked suspiciously, looking down at the key in her hand.

"No. It's *your* key."

"What?"

"I got it back for you—the ownership of the house," Westalia said, a brilliant smile on her face. "And not just the house, actually. The townhouse in the capital, the Lanchester domain, your fortune, and

your peerage. They've all been processed and returned to you."

Once the state confiscated these items and they were given to another person or organization it would've been too complicated to get them back, but Leonardo had prepared everything even before the public trial and had moved quickly to ensure Paige would get back what her family had lost. The only thing Westalia had done was to negotiate, perhaps a little too aggressively, with the finance officials to pay Paige more compensation out of the newly confiscated properties of Duke Reyn.

Leonardo had asked Westalia to keep his name out of it, not letting Paige know that he was behind it, and to pretend that she had done it all herself. Westalia didn't think it was necessary to keep his name a secret, but she guessed he figured Paige wouldn't be too happy to accept his help.

"The peerage will be conferred soon, and you'll be the new head of House Lanchester," Westalia continued.

Paige flung her arms around Westalia, making her stumble a bit. Paige's embrace tightened in response, as if propping her up.

"Thank you," Paige muttered into Westalia's shoulder.

It's really Leo whom you should be thanking... Westalia thought. Besides, any work on Westalia's part would be modest compared to everything Paige had done up to this point. Westalia had the utmost respect for her and just wanted to thank her knight for her service.

Stepping back from Westalia, Paige said, "I've regretted my actions this whole time. I thought that if I had supported my parents back then, rather than leave them, then they wouldn't have died."

But then her expression changed—she looked relieved. "But since I can't change the past anyway, I want to cherish the present that my choices have brought me to. I am happiest now that I am serving you. Besides, it can be fun down here at rock bottom, can't it?"

Paige could now choose whatever future she wanted for herself. She could join the Imperial Army and make it as far as her father once had. But she still wanted to remain at Westalia's side.

"With people like you and Leo around, it's never a dull moment," Westalia said.

Then Paige knelt down on the spot and took Westalia's hand to show her knightly allegiance. "I am sure that you are just unaware of your own charms. For me, there is no greater honor than to serve you, my future empress."

Westalia was silent. Paige's straightforwardness brought tears to her eyes. But soon Westalia's usual bold expression returned. "I will be counting on you to do your part, my most trusted knight, Paige Lanchester."

They looked at each other and smiled.

"By the way," Paige said, standing up. "I heard through the grapevine that Tiberio was being transferred from prison to his exile this morning. However, when his attendants went to fetch him from the dungeon, they found that someone had beaten him about the face until he was unrecognizable. His teeth were broken, and his cheeks and eyelids were swollen. Apparently, there had also been poison applied to the wounds to amplify the pain. It was such a terrifying sight that it allegedly made the attendants scream."

Paige's gaze fell on Westalia's ringed hand. Her fingers were bruised and scratched, as though she had repeatedly punched something. Westalia looked away, hiding her hand behind her back.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sure he was used as an outlet for the guards' or someone else's resentment," she said, remembering how she'd snuck down into the dungeon on the eve of Tiberio's exile to do as she pleased with the man.

"I see..." Paige said.

Westalia would take it to her grave that the culprit was a certain candidate for empress. Paige would surely see that said culprit was her own master. Knowing this, Westalia dared not point it out but instead just smiled. The two of them look like a couple of children in cahoots, acting innocent so that the adults wouldn't find out about their misdeeds.

Westalia quickly took the key from Paige's hand and turned away. "Come on, let's get inside. I want to see what kind of place you used to live in."

"Hey, wait! You can't go in before the owner!" Paige said, happily chasing after Westalia. She clearly had no manners, but Paige wasn't

really complaining.

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There were only two weeks left until the final tallying of the flowers. That morning, a curtain had been lowered over the doors of the two candidates' storerooms so that the interiors were hidden, ensuring that the results would be unpredictable until the day of the final count.

The winner will be decided in just two weeks... Westalia thought. She'd come to the storeroom quietly, early that morning. Many knights and servants came and went during the day, but this early in the morning, the only people around were the storeroom guards.

Surrounding the storeroom were well-kept flowerbeds, and the flowers, wet with morning dew, looked fresh and shiny. The smell from the trees and damp soil tickled Westalia's nose.

Despite the freshness of the morning, Westalia looked at the two buildings with a grim expression and bit her nails. Although she tried not to appear too nervous when people were looking at her, she was actually incredibly anxious as the day drew nearer.

"You'll catch a cold dressed like that." A familiar voice came from above her, and Leonardo put the jacket he was wearing over her shoulders.

"Oh!"

Westalia had left her room clad only in her thin nightdress, but the morning was quite chilly. The jacket was still warm from Leonardo's body heat.

Leo always appears exactly when I need him, she thought.

"You're up early this morning. What brings you here?" Westalia asked, holding the jacket with one hand to keep it from slipping from her shoulders.

"I happened to wake up early and decided to go for a walk. I was thinking about you as I walked and ended up here," Leonardo replied.

He'd always been considerate of Westalia, and she found his presence reassuring. He put his hand on her shoulder as he looked

around the storeroom.

"Nervous?"

"A little..."

"Well, all you can do is your best. The rest is up to fate," Leonardo said.

"Fate... Sometimes I wonder if there is a god. Some people have smooth sailing while others suffer unimaginable hardships, and it makes me wonder at how unfair the world is. I wish only happy things could happen," Westalia replied.

"It may not be equal, but those who live diligently will be given aid fairly. If I were God..."

"What an assumption!"

"Just listen," Leonardo said, looking her in the eye. "If I were God, and I saw how hard you're working, I wouldn't be able to turn my eyes from you. I would thrust you through every wall until they fell, fan your back to give you a tailwind as you ran, and cheer you on until sweat dripped from my brow."

"You're an awfully overbearing god."

"That's what it means to be fair, not equal."

At that moment, a strong breeze blew at their backs, though there had been no wind this morning. The strong wind ruffled Westalia's silver hair and skirt. She felt like someone was cheering her on, as Leonardo had said, and she looked down.

"I'm not God, but I'll be there for you anytime you're feeling down. Everything that you've overcome so far hasn't been in vain. So this will be okay too," Leonardo said.

Westalia suddenly pulled out an Elizabeth Pink artificial flower from her pocket. It was the one she'd purchased at a stall on a previous outing with Leonardo. Slowly she walked up to the storeroom and threw it in from outside the curtain.

"May Elizabeth Pink bring me victory. All that's left is to pray."

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The day of the final artificial flower tally finally arrived. For the last two weeks, the heavy curtains had remained over the

storerooms, making it impossible to see the number of artificial flowers from the outside.

So who's won? Westalia wondered. Not even the empress candidates themselves were allowed to look behind the curtains, so neither of them knew who'd won or lost yet either.

"Oh my, what a frightening expression!" Elizabeth said, coming over with a few attendants to stand in front of Westalia. "If you keep furrowing your brow like that, you'll get wrinkles!"

Westalia drew in close to her and smiled. "Shouldn't you be the one to fix your unfortunate disposition? It's twisting your personality."

"What?! I don't want to hear that from you!" Elizabeth blushed and glared at Westalia. She was as expressive as ever and her emotions were easy to read.

"Westalia, Miss Elizabeth." Leonardo appeared, interrupting. "You two seem to be having a lot of fun. When did you two become friends?"

"We are *not* friends!" Elizabeth said.

"We're not friends," Westalia said simultaneously.

Leonardo laughed at their overlapping rebuttal. Then he looked up at the curtained storerooms.

"So it's going to be decided today," he said.

Both women were silent. Westalia wondered what Leonardo was feeling now as he stared at the two candidates' storehouses. She couldn't read anything in his face. He would have to accept Elizabeth as his wife if she became empress, regardless of his own feelings. Of course, that would mean that he and Westalia couldn't be together. He wasn't given a choice in such a huge life event.

"Why did you help me?" Elizabeth asked Leonardo suddenly.

"What are you talking about?" Leonardo asked.

"Don't play dumb. You ordered Dion to protect me and sent people to help me rebuild the Rias Corporation," Elizabeth said. She had assisted Daniel in developing an antidote for Elizabeth Pink and, in an effort to regain some of the trust in the Rias Corporation, had offered compensation and an apology to the victims of the poisoning. However, it was all because Leonardo had sent the best

and brightest to advise her to do so. Elizabeth alone wouldn't have been able to come up with that whole plan. "I am Tiberio's daughter and you hate him more than anything. So why...?"

"You had nothing to do with what your father was doing. I only gave you a little help at the end. I'm not sure what the future holds for the Rias Corporation, but it's up to you to make the best of it. And I'm sorry I've been so hard on you..." Leonardo said.

"That's not fair, Leonardo!" Elizabeth said with a bitter smile, her eyes growing watery. "I'm sure that my path will be difficult whether I become empress or not. I have to live with the guilt of what my father did. But now I think it's a necessary test for my growth," Elizabeth said. She used to despise herself and give up on anything challenging quickly, but she'd changed a lot.

"You've already grown up and are working hard. I'm sure you'll be able to make a good future as the person you are now," Leonardo replied.

"That's the most encouraging thing anyone's ever said to me. Once again, thank you both for reaching out to me. I really, truly mean it."

Westalia and Leonardo smiled back at Elizabeth.

At that moment, Emperor Augusto appeared in front of the storerooms with several knights and attendants. A large crowd of spectators had gathered in the special audience area that had been set up and they began to murmur at the sight. They were excited to be able to witness the historic moment when the new empress would be chosen.

Emperor Augusto stood one step higher than the crowd and accepted the scroll presented by an attendant. With a slow, fluid motion he unrolled the scroll and the air grew tense. However, most of the people present probably thought that Westalia didn't stand a chance because up until the two weeks that the curtains had covered the rooms, Westalia's had been nearly empty.

Dion approached Paige in the crowd and whispered in her ear. "Does your lady truly think she can win?"

"I've prepared a shovel," Paige replied.

"A shovel?"

"If she doesn't become empress, she promised we're going to go mine for gold."

"That's some backup plan!" Dion said, laughing.

"Shut it. Whatever will be, will be," Paige replied. *But is everything really okay, Westalia?* she added to herself. Though she was verbally sparring with Dion, she was still fidgeting and feeling restless as she waited for the results to be announced. And she wasn't alone. Only one of the two candidates would be the next empress. Westalia, Elizabeth, and everyone else waited with bated breath for the announcement.

I have done all I can do. Whatever will be, will be. No matter what the outcome, I won't have any regrets, Westalia thought over and over again, but her heart was beating fast and her fingers were trembling. She was so nervous her perception of everything around her was getting fuzzy. Leonardo, standing next to her, noticed her trembling hands and raised his eyebrows in concern.

The emperor slowly opened his mouth, his face expressionless. "It's been a great six months for both of you. The experience of competing against each other and what you have learned during this period will surely be a great source of inspiration for the rest of your lives."

The emperor's long-winded preamble went in one ear and out the other for Westalia, who swore inwardly, wishing that he would just hurry up and tell everyone the results.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, was genuinely moved to tears after hearing what the emperor had to say. How pure she was.

"Now, I will announce the results. After a strict tally, the woman who collected the most artificial flowers and will be crowned empress is..." The emperor paused for a beat and then continued, "Westalia Lejainne!"

Immediately, the curtains surrounding the storerooms were lowered, exposing their contents to view. Elizabeth's storeroom was full of artificial flowers. However, Westalia's storeroom was not only full of flowers but had several carriages lined up around the outside too, all containing flowers that didn't fit inside. Each flower was dyed Elizabeth Pink. They were all the discarded artificial flowers that had

been collected from all over the empire.

There was now an overwhelming difference in the number of artificial flowers in the storerooms of the two women. The Archaites Empire was large, and Westalia had been worried about whether she'd be able to collect all the flowers by the day of the tally, but somehow she'd made it in time.

People were shocked by the announcement of the new empress, and silence prevailed.

"Yes! I did it!" The first one to let out a squeal of delight was Westalia herself.

Everyone was taken aback by the sight of Westalia, usually calm and collected, bouncing around with a big smile on her face like a flower bursting into bloom.

"No way, just the other day it was clear she was at a disadvantage," someone said.

"There's... There's no way!" added someone else.

Other exclamations of surprise burst out from here and there within the audience. A tremendous quantity of artificial flowers had been brought into Westalia's storeroom, which, until a few days ago, had been almost completely bare.

Among the spectators who had come to hear the announcement of the results stood Elizabeth, equally as surprised as everyone else. "How did you get so many Elizabeth Pink...?"

"The most common product in which Elizabeth Pink dye is used is in dresses. Do you know what the second most common one is?" Westalia asked.

"Artificial flowers..."

"That's right! I would expect nothing less of the new head of the Rias Corporation."

Many of the Elizabeth Pink dresses that the Rias company had made were intended for the nobility. Because a large amount of cloth was used, the amount of poison absorbed through the skin was high, and symptoms of the poisoning were more likely to occur. In contrast, the common people could only afford to buy small accessories because of the price of the dye. However, because the small articles used less cloth and had less contact with the skin, the

common people suffered only minor injuries.

Many people in the country had owned artificial flowers dyed with Elizabeth Pink, as they were quite fashionable to own, but they had been discarded en masse after the recent imperial edict. Therefore, Westalia had arranged for wagons and coach drivers to collect the cast-off artificial flowers from all over the country, paying for them with the budget she'd received for the empress selection, which up until now she'd hardly touched.

"I'd been trying to figure out how to beat Duke Reyn, who could mass-produce artificial flowers in factories on a very low budget. I was trying to figure out how to get them more cheaply, or, rather, for free, and I realized I could make the whole country throw away their artificial flowers as garbage," Westalia said.

"What an outlandish idea... And yet you succeeded," Elizabeth said. She'd helped Westalia expose the truth behind the dye, and yet the tables had still been turned on her. She looked at Westalia half in frustration and half in admiration. Elizabeth had said herself that her budget was running out, so she wouldn't have been able to collect the discarded flowers anyway. In other words, the moment the edict was issued was the moment of her doom.

Elizabeth looked at the storerooms for a moment before whispering, "I'm completely defeated." She left the site with a refreshed look on her face.

"Congratulations, Westalia."

Westalia whirled around at the sound of Leonardo's voice and stumbled over to him. "I'm to be empress? This isn't a dream?"

"It's not a dream. You did it."

"Really?"

"Really."

"What should I do? I can't stop shaking. I can't believe this is real. I'm so happy I don't know what to do!" Westalia still found it hard to believe, no matter how much Leonardo confirmed it for her. She still felt like she was floating through a dream.

It's been so long, but my hard work has finally paid off. It wasn't for nothing... she thought. Ever since she was a little girl, Westalia had dreamed of being queen. She'd 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. That was the kind of queen she'd wanted to be. The dream of a little girl from the Kingdom of Lhumzia was about to become a reality—in a different form and an even bigger way.

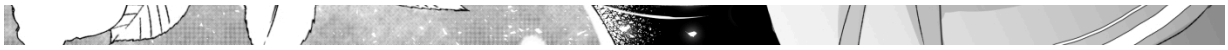
Westalia had been chosen as empress by the Archaites Empire, the most powerful country on the continent. Although she knew that being chosen as empress wasn't the end of the story, and that the hard part was yet to come, she felt joy welling up from the depths of her heart.

"Leo!" she cried and jumped at him.

"Wha—?!" He caught her in his arms and they spun around.

Westalia, still in his arms, put her hands up to his cheeks and beamed. "I gotcha!"





"You're totally over the moon," Leonardo said with a laugh.

"Well, I've been dreaming about this day for forever!"

"Yeah, I know. Congratulations," he replied, nodding.

"And that means you're mine now," Westalia added.

"I'm not some possession to be had. But...my heart has been yours and yours alone from the very beginning."

Westalia smiled with satisfaction, put her arms around the back of Leonardo's neck, and hugged him tightly.

"I love you, Leo. I'm never going to let you go. So you better be prepared."

"I'm ready for anything."

Paige and Dion watched the couple from a distance. Paige was in the same buoyant mood as Westalia, although she didn't show it.

"I'd expect nothing else from your lady. When she does something, she does it with determination. I always believed she'd win!" Dion said.

"Huh. How can you say that? Your heart was racing just now."

"Shut up," Dion said with a grimace. Paige had hit the nail on the head.

"I've never seen my lady look so excited," Paige said as she looked at Leonardo with a disapproving expression. "I hate to say it, but that man does bring out the cutest expressions on her face."

"She really is cute. Just like a normal girl her age," Dion said warmly. Westalia looked totally different than she did when she was laughing maniacally and waving poisoned needles around.

Paige looked sharply at the man and clicked her tongue. "Don't look at her like that. You'll infect her."

"What am I, a germ?!"

Westalia, completely unaware of the knights' private conversation, smiled innocently as Leonardo held her in his arms.

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A few days later, Westalia was painting by herself in the imperial garden. The artificial flowers that she had collected so desperately would soon all be destroyed because of the toxin they contained.

But before that happened, she had decided to record them on canvas. Westalia had set an easel, chair, and table on the lawn and was absorbed in her work. Unfortunately, there was no paint to reproduce Elizabeth Pink, so she had no choice but to paint the artificial flowers in a less vivid color.

"You're quite skilled."

Westalia was intently focused on her painting, but the voice poured directly into her ears and she saw a shadow form on the canvas. Standing behind Westalia was her fiancé, Leonardo Orencia.

"Leo..." To be honest, the realization that he was really her fiancé had yet to sink in. The days since their strange encounter on the border of the Archaites Empire had passed in a blur. While she'd been struggling during the empress selection, he had always been helping her out as if it were nothing, and now Westalia would be supporting him as his fiancée.

Leonardo grabbed another chair and sat down next to Westalia. He sighed, the act full of emotion, as he looked at the mountain of Elizabeth Pink artificial flowers in the storeroom.

"They really are beautiful. To gather up all the discarded Elizabeth Pink flowers was almost against both the law and the rules of the selection," he said.

Westalia was silent, her eyes half closed. During the announcement of the final challenge, strict restrictions had been placed on the two candidates. They'd been forbidden from using any funds outside of their budgets and from receiving things from others.

"There was no rule against collecting garbage," Westalia said.

"But there was against the transfer of items without payment."

"No, it can't be called a transfer, because they gave up ownership when they threw it away."

"I don't know about that. In any case, you're right on the line of something that needs to be deliberated. You were, after all, the one who made the emperor issue the edict to destroy all items made with Elizabeth Pink. It's a gray area."

"It may be a gray area, but nobody ever accused me of anything, so it's fine." With a sniff, she dipped the tip of her brush in red paint

and placed it on the canvas, layering light to dark colors to create the delicate shading of the petals. Westalia had just done what she could within the rules. A win was a win, even if she was accused of being on the edge of cheating.

"What, you don't like that I won?" she asked, with a pout. Leonardo shook his head.

"No. I just thought you were better than Tiberio. He, too, was very good at playing fast and loose with the rules." Leonardo went on to explain that Tiberio had been mass-producing artificial flowers on a low budget, but it was because he'd been blackmailing his suppliers to purchase materials at low prices and forcing factory workers to work for exorbitantly low wages. It seemed that this had only just been discovered, but behind the low-budget mass production lurked a number of dark secrets. Westalia wrinkled her brow at what Leonardo had told her.

"He was a horrible man! Everything he did was dirty. If you're going to fight, fight fair. Fair and square," Westalia said.

"You're one to talk. Sheesh..."

Seeing him chuckle happily, Westalia found herself laughing as well. His facial expressions were quite subtle, but when he smiled, he had a certain innocence about him that didn't suit his age. After a short laugh, a yawn escaped his thin lips.

"Not enough sleep?"

"I was up until late last night dealing with governmental affairs."

"Then you should stay here and get some sleep," Westalia said, patting her shoulder.

"I think I'll do that," Leonardo replied, moving in closer to her and resting his cheek against her proffered shoulder. "I feel at home when I'm around you."

"Me too."

Before long, calm and regular sleeping breaths begin to leak out from between his lips. Feeling a lovely weight on her shoulder, Westalia put her brush on the canvas again.

Then she glanced up at the sky above the storeroom. It was clear and cloudless. She squinted against the dazzling sunlight. A fresh breeze traced the outline of the pair and rustled the trees in the

garden. No matter how wicked she was, no matter how low she had to go, if she wanted to be pure, she would always be able to catch the light someday. It was not that Westalia was special but that everyone had such underlying strength. The rain of happiness fell fairly on everyone.

Even if things don't always go the way you want them to, sometimes, just sometimes, there are extraordinary rewards. Maybe the world isn't so hopeless after all, Westalia thought. She was sure that she would continue to hope and dream of many things in the future.

And so, at last, the executed villainess had taken her place as the next empress of a great country.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Tsuta Sonehara.

Thank you for reading *The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress! Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End Volume 2*!

In this volume, we learned about the painful pasts of both Paige and Elizabeth. The two of them, as well as Westalia, really fought hard. I love pure people who reach out desperately to grasp the light even in the face of adversity.

Days filled with pain, suffering, and prayer finally pass and will never return. Day by day, we are steadily approaching the end of our ordeal, and there will surely come a moment when things will turn for the better. I believe that every experience will become part of our flesh and blood and will be useful for the rest of our lives. It might not be all good, but it won't be all bad either.

I've experienced many things that have been difficult for me, and I would be happy if I could send a small bit of encouragement to even one person through my story.

Like in the first volume, I would like to thank Qumoya for the beautiful and inspiring drawings, my editor, and all those who have helped me in the publication of this book.

Finally, I would like to thank all the readers who have taken the time to read this book.

I wish you all the best of luck.

















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The Villainess Is Dead! Long Live the Empress! Redoing the Story After a Poisonous End: Volume 2
by Tsuta Sonehara

Translated by Mac B. Gill Edited by Diana Taylor

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